The Baby Game

by andlat

When Mom said she wanted him to meet her new boyfriend, Alex never expected him to come with a new brother. He'd always heard brothers could be nuisances, but nothing could've prepared him for Mark.

The Costume Box
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Chapter 1

The Baby Game - Chapter 1: The Restaurant

“Alex,” Mom said, poking her head into the living room. “Please go get dressed. I put your clothes on your bed.”

“You gotta stop picking my clothes for me, mom.”

“If I let you choose, I'd be back from the restaurant before you even had pants on.” Alex snorted, but part of him knew mom was right. It was easier to have her set clothes out for him, but he still felt an obligation to complain loudly about it.

“I look like a dweeb!” He announced as soon as he was dressed. At least this time, it was a polo instead of a dorky sweater or something.

"It's a nice restaurant. Go brush your hair, shaggy.” He stomped toward the bathroom. “Besides, I'm sure Mark will be dressed the same." She called after him.

Mark was the primary reason Alex was so concerned about how he looked. Mark was his age, according to Mom, and the last thing he wanted was to look like a nerd or something in front of him. He sloppily brushed his hair and then returned to the living room for Mom’s inspection.

"You look handsome." She kissed the top of his head, as if to remind him that he was still waiting on that growth spurt Dr. Harwell had promised him. "Let's go. We don't want to be

late."

They beat Mark and Mom's date to the restaurant. Is Mark my date? Alex wondered. It was odd for him to go with Mom on a date. Normally he stayed home with a babysitter. He wondered what it meant as they stood outside the restaurant.

"There they are." Mom said, touching Alex's head unnecessarily. Why did he bother to brush his hair if she was going to muss it up before they even got to the table? "Be polite."

"I know." Alex muttered, sizing up Mom's date -- and, more importantly, Mark.

He was tall for thirteen and had wide shoulders. Clearly he was not waiting on a growth spurt. His sweater seemed immediately more mature than Alex's polo. Alex abruptly felt self-conscious about sizing him up when he noticed Mark was doing the same thing.

Determined to show how mature he was, he walked up to Mom's date, extending his hand for a handshake.

"Hello, I'm Alex." He said, trying to sound mature.

"Nice to meet you, Alex." Mom's date said. So far, so good. Alex moved on to Mark, but instead of taking his outstretched hand, Mark scooped him up in a big bear hug!

“Sorry, I'm a hugger!” Mark said, planting a kiss on each of Alex's cheeks as Alex made a startled sound like a kitten's meek mew.

Mark was, in a word, thrilled. He had been nervous when Dad had told him that Alex was his age, but he had never dreamed that Alex was a chubby cheeked little cherub whose deodorant, cologne, whatever it was couldn't quite cover up his baby smell. He set Alex down with a chuckle. “Nice to meet you, Alex. I'm Mark.” He realized in that moment that he naturally thought of his cousin Alex whenever he heard that name. That Alex was tall and skinny, despite being only eleven. This Alex was small, chubby, and adorable. How could two Alexes be so different?

In all honesty, Alex – this Alex – wasn't super tiny, but the ten inch difference was noticeable at their age. He had picked him up mostly to confirm his suspicion that he could. Well, this would be very interesting.

“Let's head in.” Mark's dad suggested.

“Good, cuz I need to” Alex looked at Mom. “I need the restroom.” For a split second, Alex thought Mom would insist on going with him. She was always so nervous about public bathrooms, as if someone was going to carry him off.

“I should go too.” Mark said. Mom relaxed and Alex breathed a sigh of relief. “Whoops, boys’ room is on the right, Alex.” Mark said, reaching out and grabbing Alex's hand as he almost walked into the women's room.

“Oh, thought they were the opposite. I've been here before.”

“Mistakes happen.” Mark shrugged with a friendly smile.

The pair crossed the empty bathroom to the urinals. Mark

took the lowest one, much to Alex's mild irritation. He could use any of them now, but he still would have gone up on his toes if he had been alone. I would've used the low one, actually. He thought.

“Do you even know how cute you are?” The question, though quiet, echoed in the empty space.

“What?”

“I know you heard me.”

“I'm not cute.”

“You definitely are.”

“Don't be weird, man.” He glared at Mark, who fell silent until they finished peeing.

“How old are you?”

“Same as you.”

“I'm thirteen.”

“Duh.”

“There's no way you're really thirteen. My dad probably misheard.”

“I am.” They washed their hands in silence long enough that Alex let himself believe Mark had dropped it.

“But I've got peach fuzz and you've got chipmunk cheeks.”

“What?”

“Chipmunk cheeks. It's something a lady at church said about her toddler.” Alex glowered at him. “Y'know, pudgy, chubby baby cheeks?”

“Shut up.” Alex said. Mark pounced, grabbing the smaller boy and squishing his cheeks with a hand. They were every bit as soft as he had imagined that toddler's cheeks to feel, so squishy, so wonderful. “Get off me!”

“Chubby cheeks like these, there's no way you're anything other than a silly little boy.” he said softly. “And I bet you're wearing cartoon undies, right?”

“I wear boxers!” It sounded whiny as it echoed in the bathroom, Mark playing with his cheeks, undeterred

“What's a silly little boy doing in boxers?”

“What? I” he sputtered, slapping Mark's hand away only for it to come back and squish his cheeks again. “We're the same age!”

“I'm a young man, you're a silly little boy.”

“Quit!”

“Then again, with how adorable you are, you might be a baby.”

“Quit!” This guy was crazy!

“Which is it? Are you a baby or a silly little boy?”

“Neither.” Mark nodded sagely.

“Figured. You're too little to even know. Guess I better scoop you up, put you on the changing table, and-” he leaned in close. “And treat you like the baby you are.”

“I am not a baby!”

“Then what are you?”

“A-” Mark covered his mouth with his hand.

“If you say anything other than baby or silly little boy, I'm taking your pants.” He looked Alex right in the eye, wondering if he knew how downright adorable he was. He could feel his cheeks under his hand. How did a boy make it to thirteen and still have such perfectly babyish cheeks? He pictured a dictionary with a pouting photo of Alex under the entry for baby faced. “Well?” He said, trying to hide his amusement at the mental image.

“I'm… a silly little boy.” Alex mumbled into his hand.

“Good. Now let's get back to the table before our parents wonder where we are.” He smiled disarmingly. “Oh, and don't bother tattling. They'll never believe a silly little boy.” Alex looked like he wanted to put that to the test. “Now a good little boy would ask me to carry him back to the table. It's a busy night for the restaurant and we'll need to find where your mom and my dad are sitting, won't we?”

“Stop it.” Alex snarled. “I am not”

“The options were silly little boy or baby.” Mark reminded him. “So maybe be careful what you're denying, dude.”

“I'm neither! I'm a teenager!”

“Alright, pants are coming off.” Mark said, spinning Alex around with every intention of tugging his khakis down. The change in Alex was near-instantaneous.

“I'm a silly little boy! And… and I think you should carry me to the table.” His pants stayed down.

“How silly are you?”

“What? Uh, really silly?”

“And how little are you?”

“Uh, um.”

“Itty bitty.” Mark whispered helpfully.

“Itty bitty.” Alex stumbled over the words.

“So you're a really silly itty bitty little boy?” Alex could not believe that this was happening, but he nodded. Mom would have to hear about how her date's son was a total psycho! “That's better. Up come your pants and up comes little Alex!”

Mom was waiting right outside the bathroom for them, but Alex stayed in Mark's arms. It bothered him that Mom didn't think it was strange that he was being carried. She even smiled a bit, as if she approved!

“Now that everyone's here.” The server said. “Since you two are thirteen, do we want kid menus or adult menus?” She looked at them, a bit unsure if both of them were really thirteen.

“Adult.” Alex said at once.

“I'll take the kid menu.” Mark said, glancing at Alex. “I like the maze or whatever, so bring the crayons too.” Alex eyed him cautiously, expecting a trick, but Mark soon was immersed in solving the kid puzzles on the paper placemat.

Alex tried to relax and focus on the menu. What did he want to eat? Mom had made him order from the kid menu last time they were here, so he was

“Check this out!” Mark exclaimed, shoving the kid menu in front of the menu Alex's held.

“Wow, you solved the maze.” Alex rolled his eyes. Mark might be bigger, but he seemed like a little kid.

“No, dude. Look!” Alex took the kid menu from Mark, confused about what he was supposed to be looking at.

“What?”

“Are we ready to order?” Alex looked up and saw the server standing there, watching him studying the kid menu while Mark held the regular menu.

“I think so.” Mark's dad said. “I'll have the cobb salad.”

“I'll have the chicken sandwich.”

“Give me that back.” Alex said, realizing what Mark's game was.

“We're ordering.” Mark replied. “Can I have the rodeo burger please?” He handed the menu to Alex's mom.

“I need that!” Alex whined.

“Just order from the menu you have, Alex.” Mom said. “It's time to order.”

“Want me to help you?” Mark asked.

“No.” Alex glared at him. Mark smiled.

“He'll have the chicken drummies, applesauce, and milk.” Mark said. “Oh, and plenty of ketchup!”

“No!” Alex protested, but no one paid him much mind, other than Mark, who covered his mouth and smiled sheepishly at the server.

“Sorry, he wanted to order for himself.” He relished feeling Alex's impossibly soft cheeks under his hand again. Pouting and whining had only made him even cuter.

“What was that?” Alex yanked Mark's hand away from his mouth.

“Oh, you're not a vegetarian, are you?”

“No, but-”

“Then what I ordered you is perfect for a silly little boy.” He reached over and patted Alex's leg. “Let's get to know each other a little better. You ask a question, I ask one?” Alex shrugged, but did not say no. “You go first.”

“I dunno. Who's your favorite streamer?”

“I used to watch ShinoBen, but not so much anymore. He

stopped being funny." Mark replied. Alex straightened up a bit. "My turn. Would you rather… hop like a bunny or waddle like a duck?"

"What?"

"That's my question." Alex knew there had to be some trick, but what could it be? He shrugged.

"Bunny, I guess." He pushed forward to his next question. "When's your birthday?" Mark seemed like he might push back, but then he replied.

"October 19th." Alex realized that meant he was older than Mark. Perfect. "Who's your favorite superhero? And don't you deny it. Everyone likes at least one."

"I guess I used to like-" he remembered seeing a display for a Spider-Man show for preschoolers and quickly pivoted. "I guess Batman's my favorite." Once again, he had a feeling he shouldn't let the bigger boy dwell on his answers, but what could he ask next?

"Your turn, little guy." Mark said.

"I'm older than you, you know."

"But you're shorter. Therefore, little." He leaned over to Alex's chair. "Itty bitty, teeny tiny."

"Are you always this annoying?"

"Yep." Mark said at once. "My teacher calls me a nuisance like once a week."

“That's true.” Dad said, giving Mark a look. “Thought you were working on that.”

“I am, I am.” Mark chuckled. Dad smirked and went back to talking quietly with Alex's mom. “Guess that means it's my question again.” Mark said. Alex was staring down at his hands with a frown, so Mark grabbed his chin and turned his face so that their eyes met. “Alright, Alex the silly little boy.” Alex grunted in frustration. “You admitted it, not me. Where are you most ticklish?”

“I don't know.” Alex said. It was such a weird question. He noticed Mark's expression and quickly added “I used to be ticklish on my,” he almost said tummy, but instead gestured to his abdomen, unable to think of a mature word for it that didn't sound awkward.

“We'd better find out.” Mark said.

“What?” Mark reached over and pulled Alex's shirt up. As soon as his fingers brushed the exposed flesh of Alex's belly, the smaller boy bucked in his chair.

"Oh, that's promising." Mark murmured to himself, immediately switching tactics. No point going slowly with such a ticklish little boy, he thought, grabbing Alex and tugging him into his lap.

"Hey!" Alex exclaimed, but his startled giggle was far louder as Mark began to tickle all around his navel, feet kicking. No thirteen year old could be reduced to giggly little boy so quickly, Mark thought, though he had doubted that Alex was

really his age this whole time. He tickled and tickled, delighting in how much nicer, cuter, better Alex's round face looked when it was giggling rather than glowering at him.

With Alex sprawled across his lap, panting for breath, Mark figured he might as well go for broke. He bent over and blew a raspberry into Alex's soft tummy, grinning as Alex squealed and kicked so hard, one of his shoes fell off.

“Told you they'd get along.” Mark heard his dad murmur to Alex's mom.

“Gotta balance you out.” Mark said, pulling off Alex's other shoe.

“What? No, let me-” Blpppppt! Mark silenced Alex with another raspberry before pulling off his socks and starting in on his feet. Alex was only slightly less ticklish on the bottoms of his feet, so all he could do was squirm and giggle helplessly on Mark's lap, any pretense of maturity all but gone, not even allowed to catch his breath until their food arrived.

“Ooh, doesn't that look yummy?” Mark said, returning Alex to his chair in front of the chicken drummies and a bright yellow plastic cup of milk. Alex looked covetously at Mark's rodeo burger, but knew he had no choice but to eat what was in front of him.

Mark focused on his own food, fighting the urge to feed Alex. He glanced over at him and smiled as he saw ketchup around his lips. I guess with a baby face like that you can't help but

be a messy eater. He thought as he noticed not only that Alex chewed with his mouth open, but he had gotten ketchup on his shirt. A quick glance around the table told him that everyone was further along than Alex, which gave him an idea.

“They're gonna close before you finish eating, buddy!” He reached over, dipped a few fries into the ketchup, and pushed them into Alex's mouth.

"Get away from me." Alex knocked the fries out of Mark's hand. They landed on his shirt, leaving a trail of ketchup.

"Oopsie!" Mark retrieved them and pushed them into Alex's mouth.

"I can do it myself!"

"Don't talk with your mouth full." Mark said, preparing some more food.

Alex tried his best to push away anything Mark tried to feed him, but the bigger boy could not be deterred. Once the fries were gone, he moved on to the applesauce. By the time Alex's plate was clean, he was not. His face and shirt were splattered with ketchup and applesauce. Even his pants had not escaped completely unscathed. "What a messy little boy!" Mark said, grabbing the plastic cup of milk. "Can you drink your-" Alex, now in full pout, batted at the cup, only succeeding in knocking it out of Mark's hand and onto his lap.

"Oh, no!" Mark said as Alex was soaked in milk. "Guess it's not as secure as your sippy cups." Alex was too shocked to

really process what Mark had said.

"Oops!" Alex's mom said, looking over at him in concern, not missing the disaster area that was his face and outfit.

"Don't worry." Mark was already on his feet. "I'll get him cleaned up." He pulled Alex's chair out and lifted him up, holding him at an arm's length as milk dripped down his legs.

"I need my shoes."

"You've gotten enough dirty." Mark chuckled. "Do you want me to carry you to keep your feet safe?"

"No." Mark smiled and set him down, dropping down in a squat to look right into Alex's hazel eyes. "Then you better hop like a bunny."

"What?" Alex was getting sick of this guy. He just wanted to go get cleaned up.

"Those are your choices, little boy. Hop like a bunny or have me carry you."

"Let me" Alex could not get around him even before Mark grabbed his wrist.

"Or do I strip you right here and now? Maybe your mom has some baby wipes in her purse?" Mark watched Alex make up his mind and nodded approvingly. “Paws up at your chest.” He demonstrated. “And hop, hop, hop!”

“I need my shoes.”

“We've been over this.” Mark said. “What you need to do is

listen.” Alex looked over at Mom, who seemed to have forgotten he existed as she chatted with Mark's dad. Why had she even dragged him along on this date? Mark was a bully! “Hop, little bunny, hop hop hop!” Mark said, patting his arm. “Over to the potty, do not stop!”

“I-” he saw no choice, though quickly realized that being carried would probably have been less noticeable than a teenage boy bunny-hopping through the restaurant, face and clothes covered in ketchup, applesauce, and milk.

“Wasn't that fun?” Mark asked as they entered the bathroom for the second time. “Now we gotta get down to business.” He lowered the changing table.

“No!”

“What? It's just a place to put your messy shirt and pants.” Mark said. “I'm not putting them on the floor of a public bathroom!” Alex thought about pointing out that he was barefoot, but knew it would not end well for him. It was bad enough that Mark descended on him with a wet paper towel, holding both his wrists with one hand while scrubbing his face with the other. What really unnerved him was Mark's expression of pure love as he worked, as if he cared more for Alex than anything else in the world. He stared back at him, unsure how to react as Mark wiped his face clean. “Alright, little boy.” Mark said more softly. “Let's get those pants and shirt off.”

“What?”

“Oh, right. You're a silly little boy to the core.” Mark said with a knowing smile. He got to his feet, slipping his hands under Alex's arms in the same motion to deposit him on the changing table.

“Hey! What?”

“I told you this is for your messy clothes and you're still in them.” He noticed that Alex's khakis had a snap rather than a button as he undid them, removing his pants. He had been expecting Alex's boxers to be brightly colored and boyish, but they were the same brand and color as some of his, albeit clearly much smaller.

“Let me” Alex was reduced to squealing giggles once again as Mark's hand brushed his foot as he pulled his pants off his legs.

“What a ticklish little baby.” He cooed as he ran into the same issue pulling Alex's polo shirt over his head.

“I am not a baby!”

“That's right.” Mark said. “Remind me what you are, little guy.” With Alex on the changing table in nothing but his underwear, the need to tickle him was impossible to resist.

“Hehehe I'm, I'm heeheehee” Alex tried to get the words out, but there was no way to even form a coherent thought as Mark tickled him all over. If he had had more to drink before Mark had spilled all over him, he might have run the risk of peeing himself. “I'm a silly little boy!”

“Yes, you are.” Mark said, loving every inch of Alex more than ever, though those black boxers looked horribly incongruous when Alex looked like a baby doll come to life. Granted, he was taller than a baby, but his body seemed to want to keep him looking as babyish as possible despite his height. “We'd better get you dressed, but your clothes are filthy dirty!”

“Hope they're not having too much fun.” Mark's dad remarked as the sound of giggles finally faded from the bathroom.

“I'm just so glad they're getting along.” Alex's mom replied, squeezing his hand before sneaking a kiss. She smiled as Alex and Mark emerged from the bathroom.

“We had to improvise.” Mark said. He now wore a white t-shirt and his khakis while Alex had on his sweater, which covered him from neck to knees even in Mark's arms.

“I've got his shoes.” Alex's mom said. “Would you mind carrying him to the car?”

“Not at all.” Mark said, almost more to Alex than to his mom.

“I can walk!’

“I know you can.” Mark said. “You can walk, you can bunny hop, I bet you can even skip and gallop, but that's all awfully hard without shoes.” He kissed Alex's cheek. “No shoes, no socks, no pants. You've had quite an exciting dinner, huh?”

“Shut up.” Alex muttered.

“Don't make me tickle that frown off your face.”

Mark ambled along, the adults much too focused on each other to notice him lagging behind them, enjoying holding Alex for as long as possible. Dad had to have seen photos, so how had he kept such an adorable little boy secret? If he had only had some time to plan… then again, look at what had happened without any sort of warning. Alex had gone from trying to be a big boy to being carried in his arms in nothing but a borrowed sweater in less than two hours.

“Here's the car!” Mark said, making a beeline for the back seat.

“I sit up front.” Alex objected, but Mark ignored hiring him, depositing him right behind the seat he wanted to sit in.

“Buckle up, little boy.” He said, grabbing the seatbelt and fully expecting Alex to snatch it away. He did, turning away to buckle it. Once he heard the click, Mark took his chin and turned his face back toward him. "I'll get my sweater back next time we see each other." Mark meant it innocently, but to Alex, it sounded like a threat. He had to see him again? "But bye-bye for now, little guy."

"Bye." Alex was barely even audible.

"Come on." Mark chuckled. "Do it right."

"Bye."

"Nope." Mark leaned over him. "Give me a bye-bye hug and kiss." His hand covered Alex's objections. "I've kissed you a

lot today. You can give me at least one kiss, Alex. Not on the lips, silly!"

"Fine." Whatever it took to make this all end. He would never see Mark again, after all. He stretched out his arms, trying his best to wrap them around Mark from his place in the car, and then pecked his cheek. "Ew!" He whined as Mark kissed his cheek one last time.

"See you next time." Mark said. "I'll get my sweater back and you keep these pouty little chipmunk cheeks." He smiled and stepped away, wishing more than anything that Dad would let him have a phone so he could get photos of Alex. If things are as serious as Dad made them sound, I'll be seeing a ton of Alex though. He thought.

Chapter 2

The Baby Game - Chapter 2: A Dose of Reality

“Alex, are you ready? Mark will be here soon.”

“I know!” Alex called from the hall.

“Oh, there you are.”

“Yeah, I was coming al-”

“Mark'll be here soon.”

“I know.” He sighed. “Are you sure we can't cancel?”

“Absolutely not!” Mom said. “We're going out dancing.” Her eyes seemed to sparkle at the very thought. “And you and Mark will have fun here.”

“But why?” He had not had the heart to tell her half of what Mark had done to him. She didn't even seem to care all that much about what she had seen Mark do, saying again and again how nice it was that they were getting along.

“It's only a few hours. We'll be back before nine. And, more importantly, it'll be good for you to spend time with a boy your age.”

“I have friends, mom!” Alex protested. “You said I couldn't go over to Sam's house or Devin's or anyone's.”

“Because Mark is nearly here.” She said. “His sweater is on

the coffee table. I hope you thank him for bailing you out."

"That's not what happened." Alex muttered, but Mom had already moved on.

"And don't forget to empty the dishwasher."

"Already did." He felt the corners of his mouth twitch as he realized he had surprised her for once, following her to the kitchen to confirm that he had, in fact, done it.

"Thank you." She said, leaving unspoken the implicit 'without being told?'. "This isn't where the stool goes though." She returned it to the corner as Alex heard the sound of a car pulling up. The world seemed sharper as Mom herded him back toward the living room. This was it.

Mark arrived and Alex wished he had hidden. He realized it was ridiculous, but he half-expected Mark to sweep him into his arms the moment he and his dad arrived. Even though he was cheerfully chatting with Alex's mom, Alex watched him warily.

"It's no big deal." Mark said. "I'm not even the only one in my grade that got it."

"Humble." His dad said, patting his arm. "Alright, we'd better hit the dusty trail." He chuckled, but Alex didn't hear what he said next because Mark looked over at him. He squirmed and Mark turned his attention back to the parents.

"We're good to order pizza, right?"

"Sure. There's coupons on the fridge that might not be

expired.” Mom said. “Alex, how about you go check?”

“Ok.” He left the room, glad of something to do. It's only a few hours. He reminded himself. We'll play games, eat pizza, then it'll be done. He grabbed the coupons and took a calming breath. He's your age, just talk to him like he's Sam or Devin or anyone.

“Did you bring any cool games?” He called as he began to head back for the living room.

“No need to yell.” Mark said, immediately scooping him up and cradling him in his arms as he walked toward the living room.

“Hey! Let me-”

“No yelling.” Mark repeated. “Or are you just that excited to see me?’

"No!”

“But I've been looking forward to seeing you!” He said with a laugh, rocking Alex a bit. “I know what this is. You're back to pretending to be big.” He tossed Alex onto the couch. “Well, guess I gotta remind you what you are.”

“No, stop!”

“Then you tell me what you are.”

“A… I'm a silly little boy.”

“What was that?”

“Ugh.”

“I didn't hear you.”

“I'm a silly little boy.”

“You sure are. I saw you wiggle when I just thought the word tickle at you.”

“Did no- Eeee, eeee, ee!” Mark tickled his sides.

“Chipmunk cheeks, marshmallow tum, cutie patootie tootsies.” Alex bucked as Mark cupped one of his feet in his hand. “Looks like you're the silliest itty bittiest little boy!” Alex thought that suddenly lunging would catch Mark by surprise, but instead, he caught Alex in his arms. “And silly little boys are oh so ticklish!”

Alex had no idea how long the tickling lasted. Mark would pause just long enough to let him catch his breath before sending him back into a world of soprano squeals, helpless giggling, and so, so much tickling. He could barely see Mark through his tear-filled eyes, though even while laughing uproariously, he still could hear his near-constant stream of comments about what a little boy he was and how he just couldn't believe how ticklish Alex was, often punctuated by just saying 'tickle, tickle, tickle’ in goofy voices.

By the time Mark finally relented, Alex realized he had lost his shirt and shorts. He had vague memories of them coming off, but it was still startling to realize he was in front of Mark in nothing but his underwear once again.

“Where are my” he spied his clothes out of reach.

“What are you looking for?”

“My clothes. I can't-” Mark's hand covered his mouth.

“Shh.” Mark said. “We need to talk about these first.” He snapped Alex's waistband.

“What about them?”

“You're so cute.” Mark said. “I suppose silly little boys don't know these things, even silly little boys who need to pretend to be big because it's just you and momma, huh?”

“I-”

“Shh.” Mark repeated. He sat down on the couch and put Alex on his lap. “Here's what we're gonna do. No more talking for now. If you need to say something, you'll nod-nod for yes.” He demonstrated. “Or shake-shake for no.” Again, he demonstrated. “Understand?” Alex nodded. “Very good.” Mark smiled. “Now, you're an itty bitty little boy, right?” Alex groaned. He knew this was a trick! He shook his head. “Oops, it's nod-nod for yes, Alex.” He gently took Alex’s chin and nodded his head for him. “And very little boys, especially silly little boys like you, love being in their undies, don't they?” He chuckled as if Alex had nodded himself instead of Mark making him nod. “Yep! But silly little boys don't wear boxer briefs, do they?”

“I'm not a silly little boy!”

“You are. You admitted it. Plus, only a silly little boy would

bunny hop through a restaurant with food all over his face." He tickled Alex's sides to make a smile burst across his face. "And you're proud of it! But back to no talking, little boy. Now, be honest. Do you have any undies in your room" his room! Mark had to see his room! But no getting distracted, not when they were so close to a breakthrough. "That aren't boxer briefs?" He let Alex answer himself, disappointed when he shook his head. "No briefs?" Headshake. "No pull-ups?" An outraged headshake. "No diapers?" That was too far for Alex.

"I'm the same age as you!"

"But remember, I'm a young man and you're a" he paused, hoping Alex would fill in the blank. "A silly little boy! You gotta start saying it or we'll have to go back to tickles and then we won't even get to order pizza!" He leaned down close. "What are you, Alex?"

"A silly little boy."

"Silly little boys don't wear boxers!" Mark's tone made it sound like that was the goofiest thing he had ever seen. Granted, the white boxer briefs were brightly colored stripes in every color of the rainbow seemed more childish than the boxers Alex had had on last time, but still not appropriate for a little boy barely out of toddlerhood. There was only one reasonable solution. "Guess you'll just have to be a naked little boy!" Even in his exhausted state, Alex tried to stop Mark from pulling down his underwear, but it was too late.

"Give those back!" Mark resorted to old tricks, once again

tickling Alex into submission.

“Nope, you're a naked little boy until I say otherwise.”

“Why?’

“Why not?” Mark shrugged. “It's your house.”

“But I still don't walk around naked! Especially with someone else here!”

“Well,” Mark kept his voice calm and matter-of-fact. “You're going to stay naked until you learn that you are a little boy and you need to listen.”

“I listen.” Alex said a bit sullenly.

“You hear, but do you obey?”

“What's that even mean?”

“Probably means no then.” Mark said. He lifted Alex off his lap and put him on the floor. “Sit criss-cross apple sauce for me.” Alex complied, hands all but welded over his crotch. “That was a better job at listening, though I don't think your weiner's gonna fall off.”

“I-”

“Shh, you're listening right now, Alex. In fact, we're gonna go back to nods and head shakes for now so you can really, really focus," He scrunched his face up. “On listening. Understand?”

“Fine.” Alex muttered softly.

“Now, I'm going to keep you naked for a little while, but we'll still have fun, okay?” It was better not to let him dwell on his new situation. “I've got just the show for you to watch. I mentioned it at the restaurant. Do you remember? Just nod or shake.” Alex shook his head. “It's a Spider-Man show. Do you want to watch it?” Alex shook his head.

“No.” He said.

“I'll let you in on a big boy secret.” Mark leaned forward and whispered conspiratorially. “You should always try things before you decide you don't like them.” Just like that, he queued up an episode of Spidey and His Amazing Friends. “Do you want to sit in my lap while you watch?”

“No.” Alex said, shaking his head. It was an acceptable compromise for Mark, he decided.

“Okay, you can stand up and watch it then.” Mark reached down to help Alex to his feet so that the smaller boy stood between him and the impressively sized TV. I'll have to ask about watching the game here sometime. An afternoon of sports and a silly little boy to play with sounded perfect. “And here we go. But make sure you watch the whole thing!”

The episode was eleven minutes long, but for Alex, it seemed to stretch on and on. It was clearly designed for preschoolers. Mark sat behind him though and the slightest attempt to turn away was met by him cheerfully asking if he wanted to sit in his lap.

“All done!” Mark said as the episode ended. “Wasn't that

great?”

“No.”

“Ok.” Just as quickly as Alex had said no, Mark started another episode. “We'll give it one more try before we order food.” He grinned at Alex. “Wanna watch it there or in my lap?” He reached for him and the naked teen quickly turned away. “Silly little boy.”

As soon as the episode ended, Mark lunged and pulled Alex into his lap, heart melting at the high pitched noises of protest he made. He squirmed at first, but a few tickles of warning got him to sit still on Mark's lap, his back resting up against Mark's chest.

“Did you like the show?” He asked.

“Yeah.” Alex had a feeling he would have to keep watching the show if he didn't say he liked it. And it wasn't even that bad, for a show for babies.

“Good. I think it'll be your favorite before long.” Mark smiled down at him. “Why are you so grouchy? Was the show scary?”

“What? No. You're just being weird and, y'know, I'm naked!”

“So? You think I care about you being naked?” Mark laughed and he knew Alex could feel his chest vibrate. “When I was a little boy, I boycotted pants for like a whole summer!”

“I'm older than you.”

“You're so focused on numbers.”

“What? That's not the point.”

“Do we really need to do this again?” Mark asked. “I wanted to order food, but you're still not listening, Alex.” With surprising skill, he lifted Alex off of his lap, spun him around, and stood him on the floor between his legs. “You are a little boy. No ifs, ands, or buts about it. You are a little boy and that's that.”

“I'm not that much-” Mark covered Alex's mouth with his hand.

“It's not about age or physical size or anything like that. It's just how things are. When you first saw me at the restaurant, I know you thought I was bigger than you. You thought 'that's a young man and I'm still a little boy'.”

“I did not.” Alex protested through Mark's hand, but he could hear his voice waver.

“How about this? You go grab us something to drink, little boy.” Alex stared up at him. The way he was talking, there should have been some sign of cruelty, but he was entirely matter-of-fact as if discussing the weather or telling him what time it was.

“Can I get dressed first?” Alex realized he didn't need to ask permission, so he bent over to grab his shirt, the closest article of clothing to him. Mark grabbed his wrist and then grabbed him by the hips.

“You're staying just as you are.” He said. “Go on, get us some drinks.”

“Mark, no.”

"Alex!” Mark's voice was only a little bit louder, but it still made Alex stop in his tracks. “You can walk if you go right now. Otherwise, you'll be hopping like a bunny.” He smirked. “Or maybe crawling like a baby.”

“This is so dumb.” Alex muttered as he stamped toward the kitchen. Mark smiled. Grumpiness was okay by him, as long as the little boy was obeying. He jumped to his feet, however, when Alex suddenly swerved toward the stairs.

“Oh, no you don't.” Mark said, quickly closing the distance between them. Alex panicked and tried to run up the stairs, but slipped and landed on the stairs. Before he could recover, Mark was upon him, lifting him up to his shoulder. “That was very naughty.” He said, smacking Alex's bottom with each word. “We're playing down here, Al- little guy.”

“Let me go!” Alex yelled.

“Do you promise to be a good little boy?”

“Yes.” Alex said after a moment's hesitation.

“Good.” Mark gave his bottom another spank. “Where were you trying to go?”

“My room.”

“Is it your bedtime already?” Mark asked in fake surprise,

wondering just what Alex's bedroom looked like. It couldn't be the way he pictured it, he knew.

“No.”

“Were you going to get your favoritest toy?”

“No.”

“Were you going to try to hide from me?” Alex stayed quiet and Mark chuckled, rubbing his back. “Guess I'll just have to keep a very close eye on you, won't I, bunny?” Alex grunted. “Oh, don't pout. Let's get something to drink.”

Mark set Alex down in front of the well stocked fridge, debating making him drink a glass of milk rather than the soft drinks he reached for. He smiled as Alex turned away from the fridge only to realize he was trapped by Mark.

“Remember what sort of cheeks you have?” Mark asked, admiring his chubby face. “From the restaurant?” Alex tried to push past him. “Can't get out until you say. It's the secret password.”

“Chipmunk cheeks.”

“What about them?”

“ “You said that's-” Alex sighed. “I have them?” He had studied his face in the mirror after they had gotten home from the restaurant and still had no idea what Mark was talking about.

“So grumpy.” Mark mused, but let Alex through. “We're

going back to the couch, little boy.”

“I know.”

“And I'm gonna tickle you once we're there!” Sure enough, Alex was once again reduced to a giggling, squirming little boy.

“I need clothes.” Alex said once Mark finally relented. “That's the real reason I was going to my room.”

“I have clothes for you.” Mark said, though Alex couldn't tell if he was nodding toward his clothes strewn on the floor or his backpack. “Don't you want to order food first? I'm starving and I'm not even the one who's been a giggly little wiggle worm all day.” Just like that, Mark returned to tickling Alex, cooing ‘giggly little wiggle worm’ down to him over and over again.

“Food!” Alex yelled, face red and tear-stained from laughing uncontrollably.

“Alright, alright.” Mark shifted Alex into a sitting position on his lap. “What are we gonna eat?”

“Mom said pizza.”

“That's right.”

“But I need to get dressed.” Alex tried to slide off of Mark's lap, but he grabbed him.

“What do you want to wear?”

“Clothes?” Alex pushed on Mark's chest to try to get free.

“Well, I noticed you're kinda lacking in the appropriate clothes for a silly little boy department.” Mark turned Alex's face toward him.”And we know you're a silly little boy.” He set Alex on the couch, keeping an eye on him while he grabbed his backpack. “So you get to choose.”

“I have clothes right there.”

“Boxer briefs are not for silly little boys.” Mark said firmly. “But like I said, you can pick undies.” He pulled out a package of briefs with Spidey and his Amazing Friends logo on the plastic. Alex's face told him everything he thought about that. “Or a diaper.” He pulled out the white rectangle, grinning at how startled Alex looked. “Undies or diaper, little guy?” Alex smirked as inspiration struck. He'd call his bluff.

“Diaper.” The delight on Mark's face told him he had messed up, especially once a packet of wipes and baby powder emerged from the bag. Had the underwear just been a decoy? He knew there was no chance of escape, but he needed to try. He lunged off the couch, hoping a sudden burst of speed would save him. Mark was ready and bigger, catching Alex and pulling him in.

“No, no, no!” Alex protested, kicking and swinging his fists.

“Ow! That hurts!” Mark said.

“Let me go! Stop!”

“Hold still!” Mark grunted. This was not going the way he had expected.

“No! You are not- No!” Catching one of Alex's feet, he immediately began to tickle it. It was like flipping a reset switch.

It took longer than Mark had expected, but his strategy of alternating between tickling and preparing Alex for his diaper got things moving. He wished he could have taken photos of a squirming, helplessly laughing Alex wearing nothing but powder, the single most adorable thing he had seen, at least until he had the diaper taped around the slim waist of a panting Alex.

“There we go.” Mark said softly. “Baby's all snug in his diaper.”

“I am not a baby.” Alex hissed with the little energy he still had.

“Oh, I know.” Mark said. “But you chose this.” Alex sputtered. “We're just playing pretend, aren't we?” He lifted Alex up to his feet, kissing his cheeks. “You're a silly little boy playing the baby game, okay?” Alex glared at him. “It's comfy, isn't it?”

“I don't need diapers.”

“That's not what I asked. I asked you if it's comfy?” Alex only shrugged. Mark smiled and hugged him. “We're just playing a game. I know you aren't a baby, okay?” He took a deep breath, inhaling Alex's scent and the smells of baby powder and a diaper, as well as his own deodorant. He'd worked up a sweat getting little Alex into a diaper, but that

was okay. It was perfect.

“I want to take it off.”

“But then you'll be naked when the pizza gets here.” Mark brought a hand to his head in feigned surprise. “We still need to order! It'll be midnight before we even eat at this rate.”

He got to his feet and gathered up the powder and wipes. Alex was frozen in place, so Mark grabbed his boxer briefs too, stuffing them deep into his backpack to throw away later. He had gotten Alex in a diaper and even if he didn't get him to keep it on, he was determined to keep him out of big boy undies from now on. As if to remind himself, he set the package of Spidey briefs on the table, wheels and gears turning in his head. Everything was going so well.

“So is there an app? A website?”

“No, you call.” Alex mumbled, still afraid to move. Mark's face changed, panic flashing across it.

“Uh, that's the only way?”

“Yeah.” Mark chuckled in nervous disbelief.

“Can you call then?”

“What?” Alex turned, wincing as if he only just now realized the diaper moved with him.

“I don't like talking on phones. Can you call?” Alex couldn't believe what he was hearing.

“You put me in a diaper, call me a baby, and now you want

me to call for you?”

“You can either call or I'll put you to bed right now.”

“You think I want the delivery guy to see me in a diaper?” Mark didn't like the way Alex spat out the word diaper, but he would deal with that later.

“Course not. And if you call, I promise you he won't see you.” Mark smiled sheepishly, revealing slight dimples that made him look younger. He really does normally look a lot older than me, Alex realized. “Can you just do it for me?” He held the phone out.

“Fine.” Alex stood up and grabbed the phone as Mark admired how his nose looked even more babyish wrinkled in annoyance. “What kinda pizza do you even like?”

The sight of Alex in nothing but a diaper, talking to the pizza place, was almost breathtaking. I need those glasses that take photos, Mark thought.

“There.” Alex slammed the phone down on the endtable and Mark tried to look innocent. “Now.”

“Taking charge, little boy?”

“Stop it. I” he seemed to suddenly remember what he was wearing and stammered. “I… I'm getting dressed.”

“Oh, no, you don't!” Alex hissed and squealed as Mark grabbed him, the smaller boy's diaper pressing up against the both of them. Focus, Mark reminded himself as he tamed Alex. “If you don't want the pizza guy to see you just like

this, you can't get dressed. You have to play the baby game."

"What does that- but you promised already!" Mark made a soothing sound.

"I know, it's hard being a little boy when bigger people do things that don't seem fair, even when they're really what's best for you."

"Quit talking like that!"

"If you play the baby game until the pizza gets here, I promise the delivery guy won't see you. And I'll even let you eat your pizza without me interfering like at the restaurant." He gave Alex a squeeze, wishing he had come up with an excuse to give him a bath and get his hair smelling like Baby Fresh shampoo. "Do you want to know how to play or are we gonna let you answer the door in your diaper?" He kissed the top of Alex's head as he grunted. "It is your house, after all."

"I'll play."

"Don't sound so miserable. It's a game, not a big plate of broccoli!"

"I like broccoli." Alex said. Mark only smiled as he lifted Alex off of his lap and set him down on the floor.

"Now, we're playing pretend that you're a baby. Obviously we both know you're too big to be a baby, isn't that right?" Alex nodded. "But this is pretend."

For the next half hour, Alex didn't feel like it was pretend. Mark would go to various places around the house and then

call for him to crawl to him. Once Alex reached him, he would pull him into his arms and smother his tummy with kisses and raspberries until he was a 'squealy little baby boo'. Thankfully, he let Alex stop once he complained enough about his knees hurting.

When the car arrived with the pizza logo lit up on top, Alex was doing his best to clap along with some video for babies that Mark had found on the TV. His panicked gasp made Mark's heart skip a beat, it was so cute.

“Don't worry. I promised you and you've been a very good little boy.” He scooped Alex up, giving his bottom a pat.

“No!” Alex knew Mark was about to go back on their deal.

“You're too heavy to juggle you and the pizza.” Mark reassured him. “But I also don't want you to go scampering off and getting into trouble.” He set Alex down right by the front door. “There! Now I'll be able to see you, but the pizza guy won't.”

“Mark.”

“It'll be fine. Unless you want to stand right here in front of me. You seem to have gotten used to your diaper, after all.” Alex glared at him. “Alright, you stand right there then.”

Alex shivered as the cool evening air hit his bare skin the entire time the door was open, but he was too scared that the sounds of his diaper would be audible over Mark and the delivery guy's small talk to move even a step away.

“That took forever.”

“Someone must be hungry.” Mark said with a smile. “Smells good, doesn't it?”

True to his word, he did not touch Alex, much as he wanted to. He contented himself with watching him eat in nothing but a diaper. He had dreamed of swaddling him up in a blanket, but the more he looked at Alex, the more he realized he had been imagining him as smaller than he was. The boy, cute as he was in his diaper with his cheeks, was lanky! Not thin enough to be properly lanky,he supposed, but still long, too long. He half-remembered something his teacher had said about reality and fiction with disappointment, though he knew he could still have plenty of fun with Alex.

“Quit staring.” Alex mumbled.

“Done eating?” Mark asked, wondering if wiping Alex's face was allowed if he had finished eating. “Al- I asked you a question, little guy.”

“We're not still playing.” Alex said. “I'm getting dressed.” Mark liked that he had gone this long before demanding it, but that did not mean he was going to let him. Now that they were full, it was time to address what had really been bothering him: Alex.

“Come here, buddy.”

“No tickling!” Alex protested as Mark once again pulled him into his lap.

“Not even a little one?”

“No.”

“Not even an itty-”

“No!”

“Ok, then you need to hold still. Fighting or grouching will be met with the fullest extent of tickle law.” Alex rolled his eyes, but remained still as Mark moved him into a cradling position. “I've been thinking.”

“Prolly pretty rare for a dummy like you.” Mark couldn't help but laugh. That felt like the sort of thing a brother would say and, well, he liked thinking of them as brothers.

“Did you know I have a cousin named Alex?”

“I have two other Alexes in my class.”

“Good to know.” Mark said. All the more reason, he thought. “My cousin Alex, he's a few years younger than me.”

“Ok?”

“But he's almost as tall as me and lanky and good at basketball.”

“So?”

“So, I don't want to get confused. Especially since our parents are getting pretty serious.”

“They are?”

"Shh, that's enough interrupting. Remember, little boys listen. They hear, that's the part we're on now, and they obey."

"Well, get to the point."

"If you can't listen quietly, I might have to get you a nookie to suck on like a baby. You're not a baby, are you?" He hoped Alex would say no just so he could call him a baby for not listening quietly, but the boy wisely shook his head. "Alright. So, there's cousin Alex. Al sounds like an old man name and you're not an old man. Well, not yet. Lex and Xander? Those are like comic book names." He felt his heart start to pick up as he realized this was it. He had known Alex's new nickname -- was it a nickname when you never wanted him called anything else? -- for a few days now, rolling it around on his tongue every time he thought about Alex. It had taken a lot of willpower not to blurt it out until the exact right moment. This was the exact right moment. "So, I hereby dub you." He leaned down and kissed the perplexed boy's forehead, right below his adorable slight curls. "Baby Lexie." Whatever Alex had been expecting, that was not it. His eyes widened, but he found himself lost for words. "See? You're already responding to it."

"What? But... that's" Alex sputtered. "A girl name!"

"It is not. Lexie is the cute form of Alex." He rocked Alex slightly. "Alex is a big boy name. Lexie is a name for a silly little boy who's the cutest little baby!”

“No. My name is Alex.”

“You'll get used to it the more I say it. Besides, it's Baby Lexie."

"But I'm not a baby."

"I know. You're a little boy who happens to be named Baby Lexie."

"That doesn't make any sense!" He rolled out of Mark's arms.

"Like I said, you'll get used to it the more I say it."

"Well," Alex ripped at the sides of the diaper, grinning triumphantly as it fell off, even if it meant being completely nude. "There!"

"Changing your clothes doesn't change your name, goofball." Mark said. "I'm Mark in jeans or shorts, you're Baby Lexie in undies or diapers or even nakee!" He smiled as he noticed that the newly named little boy still had baby powder on his thigh. "But let's get you decent again, Baby Lexie."

"That is not my name!" Alex protested as he tried to get away from Mark. He was only barely out of the living room before Mark was on him and dragging him back to the discarded diaper.

"Come on, Baby Lexie." Mark said. "I know you don't want more tickles, so let's behave." He pushed Alex down to his back. "Oho!" He said as he felt Alex's foot hit his upper thigh. "That was close!" He grabbed both of his feet and lifted them high enough that Alex's bottom left the carpet. "Kick me there and it'll be a spanking for sure, Baby Lexie."

Alex glared up at him, but he remembered Mom's advice once: ignore a bully and he'll go away. Mark definitely counted as a bully, even if a tickling one. He made fun of Alex, called him names, typical bully things, but something felt off. Mark didn't sound like a bully. Even now, as he taped the diaper around Alex's waist again, he spoke to him with a warm, kind tone. It made his newest game even more annoying though.

"There we go, Baby Lexie."

"I thought we were only playing until dinner."

"What? The baby game? Do you want to play it some more?"

"No. But"

"You're the one who picked a diaper." Mark said matter-of-factly. "So that's what your undies are for the night." He patted Alex's thigh as if to signal that it was settled as far as he was concerned. "Alright then, Baby Lexie. What do you want to do?"

"Call me my name."

"I told you," Mark said with a sigh. "Maybe it is confusing to do the baby game tonight, huh?"

"Huh?"

"You'll get used to it, little guy. Baby Lexie is your name."

"It isn't!" I guess ignoring him is all I've got. You just can't reason with a bully.

Alex was a bit surprised that Mark let him get to his feet and walk over to the other side of the living room. He had a feeling Mark would intervene if he tried to leave the room, so he busied himself with something as far away as he could be, rolling his eyes as Mark pulled a tablet out of his bag and began to busy himself with something. Alex wondered what it was as he noticed Mark quietly chuckling to himself. Did that thing have a camera? He grabbed a throw blanket and pulled it over himself, gazing covetously at his shorts and shirt near Mark.

"Oh! Look at the time!" Mark's voice was so loud, Alex jumped. "Baby Lexie." Alex furrowed his brow and clenched his jaw and stayed put. Mark shook his head. "Make all the faces you want, but that only proves you heard your name." He lifted Alex out of the chair he had been sprawled in. "It's bedtime."

"It is not!" Alex exclaimed, but Mark held him tight against his chest.

"We need to go up the stairs, Baby Lexie." He said. "So hold still or we might both fall."

"I can do it myself."

"But will you?" Mark asked. Alex grunted. "That's what I thought."

Alex was relieved when Mark took the diaper off him, but soon learned it was only a small victory as Mark supervised him closely as he peed, brushed his teeth, and then led the

way to his bedroom, completely naked and called Baby Lexie what felt like a hundred times.

"It's your name." Alex muttered mockingly.

"No, it's yours, Baby Lexie." Mark said, looking around Alex's room critically. This wasn't right at all. It looked like any one of his friend's rooms and hardly reflected the cute little boy who stood naked in the middle of it. "You don't even have any plushies?"

"I'm thirteen."

"And clearly an overtired little boy." He picked Alex up and tossed him onto his bed. "Let's get that diaper on before you fall asleep, Baby Lexie!"

"No. No!"

"Yes. You picked a diaper, so a diaper it is." He smiled and kissed Alex's tummy. "And you made the cutest choice."

Once Alex had his diaper on, Mark tucked him snugly into bed, squeezing in to sit next to him as he held up his tablet.

"I think you'll like tonight's bedtime story, Baby Lexie. It stars a silly little boy you might know."

"It's not bedtime."

"Sure it is. Baby Lexie's got clean teeth and he's tucked into bed, aren't you?" Alex grunted as he tried to get free, but the added weight of Mark on the covers made it impossible. "So, bedtime story or straight to beddy byes?"

"Neither."

"Alright, Baby Lexie. I'll pick for you." Mark said, unlocking his tablet. "Tonight's bedtime story is called Baby Lexie On the Farm."

Trapped as he was, all Alex could do was lie there and groan as Mark flipped through page after page of barnyard animals, each and every one accompanied by a cartoon farmer with Alex's most recent school photo for a face. It seemed to stretch on and on and on, but Mark's enthusiasm for which animal Baby Lexie saw next never flagged.

“The end.” Mark said at last, locking the tablet again. “Wasn't that nice, Baby Lexie?” Alex had heard that name so many times, it hardly even registered that Mark was talking to him. Mark wasn't looking for an answer though, getting up and turning off the light before coming back to Alex's side. “Alright, off to sleep, little boy.” He whispered, kissing Alex's forehead. “Sweet dreams.” Alex suddenly realized this was his chance! Mark would leave him to sleep and he could- “I'll stay right here until you're off to dreamland.” Mark whispered, sitting down on the bed again. “Close your eyes, Baby Lexie.”

“Go away.”

“Not until you’re asleep.” Mark said. It took some effort, but Alex managed to roll onto his side so that Mark was out of his sight, but Mark began to rub his back. It was soothing and Alex realized he was going to fall asleep. He tried to fight it, but the stress of the last few hours seemed to win out and he

drifted off to sleep.

The next thing Alex knew, it was morning. For a second, he wondered if last night had been a horrible nightmare, but he knew it had been all too real, especially once he saw the diaper.

“This is a nightmare.” He whispered in stunned disbelief when he opened his underwear drawer and saw the Spidey and His Amazing Friends underwear had replaced every pair of his old underwear.

Their parents went on date after date, which meant Alex saw a lot of Mark. Mark noticed that Alex no longer fought being cuddled, picked up or whatever Mark had in mind, though he still muttered and grumbled when Mark would pull on his waistband to see Spidey on his butt. He took it as a sign that, like it or not, baby Lexie was starting to accept his lot in life. Little did he know, Alex was trying to figure out some way to make it stop.

The problem was, Mark treated him the same in front of their parents as he did when they were alone and neither Mark's dad or Alex's mom objected. Sometimes Mark would diaper him. Sometimes he would almost act as if they were equals, though he never failed to call Alex baby Lexie. Worse, both Mark's dad and his own mom had started calling him Lexie. He still remembered the grin on Mark's face when Mom couldn't find her purse and had said ‘Have either of you seen it? Mark? Lexie?”

“Mom! My name's Alex.”

“Oh, don't be like that. I've seen the way you respond when Mark calls you Lexie. I know you don't mind it.”

“It's better for everyone to call you it.” Mark reasoned, holding Alex in his lap as he half-heartedly played a counting game on Mark's tablet. “No more pretending to be big boy Alex. You're a silly little boy named Baby Lexie and always will be.”

Alex pouted to such a melodramatic extent that Mark blew a dozen raspberries into his tummy and then set him to work drawing a picture. Mark had to tickle him into signing it, but by the time their parents returned, right there on the fridge was a piece of art with the name Baby Lexie written at the bottom.

“Lexie's in bed?”

“Yeah, he got all tuckered out.” Mark said, figuring that was easier than explaining his insistence on bedtime for Baby Lexie.

“We have news.” Dad said. Mark noticed the sparkling diamond on Alex's mom's hand, but didn't say anything.

“Guess it'll have to wait until morning.”

“You're still making your famous waffles, right, Dad? I was raving about them to baby Lexie.”

“Sure am! That's right, it'll be Lexie's first time with them.” Dad chuckled. “But you should get to bed, bud.” Mark went upstairs and brushed his teeth before sneaking into the guest

room where Alex slept. Mark tiptoed over and brushed a curl out of the sleeping boy's face. He smiled as he wondered if the little boy had any idea how much his life was about to change in the morning.

“Looks like we'll be a family soon. Mommy, Daddy, brother, and baby Lexie.” He snuck to his own room, where he looked at photo after photo of little boy wedding outfits. As he pictured Baby Lexie in each of them, he couldn't resist the urge even a moment longer, so he snuck back to the guest room, returning to his own room a moment later with the still sleeping Baby Lexie in his arms. He had been so angry about the red footies he wore, but now he seemed so peaceful in them, mumbling softly as Mark put him down in his bed. Turning out his bedside lamp, he realized he was already looking forward to Baby Lexie – his new brother – being the first thing he saw the next morning.

Chapter 3

The Baby Game - Chapter 3: The Secret

“You're really not gonna say good morning?” Mark asked as Alex tried to calm down from the scare that he had gotten: waking up in Mark's bed.

“Good morning.” Alex grunted, knowing that Mark would not let it go until he said something.

“Dad's making breakfast, so do you want to go down in your jammies or get dressed first?” Alex saw his overnight bag by the door.

“Get dressed.”

“Let’s work on full sentences, Baby Lexie.” Mark grabbed the boy and unzipped his pajamas. The red onesie had been a compromise and he hoped Alex did not ever work out how little they made him look. Somehow, he thought having bare feet instead of footies magically made him look mature. Now Mister Mature sat on his floor in nothing but a diaper. “We had a lot of fun playing the Baby Game last night, didn't we?” Alex curtly nodded. “You're really not a morning person, are you?” Mark kissed Alex's forehead before ripping off his diaper. He smiled as Alex hurried over to the dresser, hoping that now that they would officially be brothers, he would finally get over his bashfulness and accept what Mark had told him a few nights ago: once he stops looking cute

naked, he would no longer be a silly little boy. Mark wasn't sure yet if that would prove true.

Mark let Alex dress himself, liking the stark contrast between his dark blue t-shirt and the white and yellow Spidey briefs with Miles, Spidey, and Gwen on the butt.

“No, no pants, Baby Lexie.” Mark said, intervening and shoving the shorts back into his bag.

“What? But-”

“No buts. Come on, out you go.” Mark pushed Alex toward the door. “I need to get dressed too and it's courteous to give me privacy.” He nudged Alex out into the hall. “You can either sit down and wait for me so I can carry you or you can head down and get a headstart on breakfast.”

Alex headed for the stairs, refusing to let Mark even have the opportunity to carry him down or worse, make him slide down the stairs on his bottom like he had done last night. He knew he had to hurry because Mark surely wouldn't take that long to get dressed.

“I don't hear a whole herd of rhinos coming down the stairs, so that must be Lexie!” Mark's dad said, all but pulling Alex off the bottom step and into his arms. “Good morning, buddy!” Alex wasn't sure if he had said buddy or bunny as they spun around and Alex found himself handed off to his mom.

“Morning, mom.” He mumbled as he landed in her lap.

“Just one little rhino calf.”

“Huh?”

“Nothing. Good morning, Lexie.” She kissed his forehead. “Do you want to wait for Mark or should I start?”

“Start wha-” a forkful of pancake plunged into his mouth. “Mom!”

“Mmm is right! Can you say ‘thank you, da- Mark’s dad’?”

“I made them.” He said as if that needed explanation.

“And Lexie loves them!”

They continued like this for an eternity that could not have been longer than five minutes, with Mom keeping Alex’s mouth full in between bits of banter with her boyfriend, until Mark came downstairs.

“You started without me!” Mark said as Alex was immediately passed to him. “You should’ve told me you were starving, Baby Lexie!” He kissed Alex’s cheek as he went over to his chair. “Tummy all grumbly?”

“He ate half of a pancake.” Mom reported.

“Not helping.” Alex muttered. Why was everyone so okay with this? He was pantsless and being talked to like he was the littlest kid on earth.

“Get him fed,” Mark's dad said, placing a plate in front of Mark. “And then, we’ve got our news to share.” News? Alex looked at the faces around him, abruptly struck with the sense

that the news, whatever it might be, was only news to him.

“What's the news?” He asked, but Mom mimed zipping her lips, while Mark began to feed him.

Mark never really tried to aim for Alex's mouth and even when he tried to move his head to catch forkfuls, his face still got covered with food. No matter what though, Mark would insist that his face was nowhere near as messy as that time in the restaurant, so it was best to be fed. Alex had even been coerced into confessing to his mom a few days ago ‘I play with my food cuz I'm a silly little boy, so it's good to have a young man like Mark to help me stay focused'.

“Both hands.” Mark murmured as Alex reached for the milk. He pushed a bit of pancake into Alex's mouth so he had to hold onto the bright yellow and green sippy cup while he chewed. “Cups are a privilege, Baby Lexie.” Mark said. “So we use both hands and always have a lid on top!” Alex had learned the hard way that there were worse things than a toddler sippy cup.

Finally, Mark put the fork aside, but even then, Mom and Dad's news had to wait while Mark fastidiously cleaned his hands and face.

“Probably too much to ask for this to make it through a pancake breakfast unscathed.” Mark said, pulling Alex's shirt over his head. Now he was in nothing but his underwear, his stupid little boy underwear, while everyone else was fully clothed!

“All full?” Mom asked Alex as if he had been the one holding things up.

“Yeah.”

“Full sentence, Baby Lexie.” Mark whispered, still holding him in his lap. “Remember?” That ‘remember’ had more than one meaning to it, Alex knew.

“Yes, mama.” Alex mumbled. He felt Mark's breath on his ear, but apparently that was enough for now.

“Alright. Mark, well, you already figured it out, so” Mom smiled and leaned forward slightly to be more on Alex's level. “Lexie, Mark's daddy asked me to marry him!”

“What?!” Alex exclaimed. This couldn't be happening! He… no!

“I think what Baby Lexie means,” Mark said, looking at his dad and soon-to-be mom. “Is congratulations.” He enjoyed how neither of them seemed all that bothered by him openly calling Alex Baby Lexie. It just meant it was his name now.

“And we'll of course want you both involved.” Mom said. “It'll be a small ceremony. Just the four of us, a friend or two, and…” she shrugged. “We'll get it figured out!”

“Go congratulate them, Baby Lexie.” Mark whispered, kissing the top of his soon-to-be baby brother's head. “Give them a big hug and say ‘congratulations Mama and Dada!”

“I'd love a hug, Lexie.” Mom said, overhearing them. Alex looked up at Mark, who kissed his cheek.

“He'll be your dada, so you better get in the habit now.” Mark stood up and Alex suddenly wished he had gotten dressed. Whatever Mark had wanted to make him wear had to be better than being in nothing but underwear as he hugged first Mom and then Mark's dad. Soon he'll be my dad, Alex thought as he dutifully called him dada. This was all too new to really know what to think of that.

“I better get going.” Mom said once Alex was done congratulating the pair. “Once I pick you up, we can discuss the wedding more.” She kissed Alex's cheek before handing him off to Mark, then kissed Mark's dad. I'm not ready to call him dad, let alone dada, Alex thought as Mark wiped his face unnecessarily. “What are you boys planning today?”

“Baby Lexie and I-” Mark began, dread immediately flooding Alex, but Mark's dad interrupted.

“I've got plenty of projects and twice as many helpers.”

“But Dad!” Alex snickered at Mark's whiny tone as he felt relief.

“Where do you need help?”

“That's the spirit!” Mark's dad said. “I don't want to hear it, Mark. The three of us are getting some projects around the house done. Mark, you're gonna be mowing the lawn” he looked expectantly at Mark. “And you and me, Lexie, we're gonna tackle the garbage disposal in the kitchen.”

“Sounds good.” Alex said, seizing his opportunity to get out of Mark's lap. “Let me just go get dressed-” Mark's dad

clearly had everything planned out and was not taking suggestions.

“Don't worry. We'll get you dressed before you need to go.” He placed a hand on Alex's head to steer him toward the kitchen. “Mark, lawn. Lexie and I'll handle things in the kitchen.”

“Make sure you let dada do some of it, Baby Lexie.” Mark called after him, loving the image of the smaller boy being led into the kitchen in just his underwear. If only he had had a little tool belt with play tools, it would have been too cute for words.

"So, what do we need to do?" Alex asked, wishing he could have gotten dressed. It annoyed him that this wasn't the first time Mark's dad had seen him in his underwear, but it felt really strange to be alone with him like this.

"You've got a very important job." He said. "You're gonna hold this for me and make sure to keep it aimed right here." He pointed at the large light grey disposal unit under the sink. "Think you can do that for me?" Alex looked at the flashlight in his hand.

"Uh, I thought you needed help." He took it. This had to be a joke.

"I do. My headlamp's busted, not that it ever worked right." He reached over and turned the flashlight on. "Keep the light right here."

"But"

"It's tight down here, so we'd just be in each other's way."

"I guess so." Alex felt ridiculous until he realized this could be a blessing in disguise. "Uh, while you're getting set, d'you" why was he asking for permission? "I'm gonna go get dressed."

"I need the light, Lexie."

"You can just call me Alex." He reached out and adjusted the flashlight again.

"Keep it right there where I'm working, kay, Lexie?" Alex sighed and nodded. "I'm gonna be looking over here, not at you, bud. If we're gonna be working together, we gotta work on communication. Communication. Do you know what that word means?"

"Yes!" He chuckled as if he found Alex's growing frustration adorable.

"I knew you were smart. So, I'll ask you a question and I want you to use your words." So this is where Mark gets it from, Alex thought. "Understand?"

"Yes." Once again, he moved the flashlight right where he wanted it.

"There. Still like a statue, Lexie."

I almost wish I was with Mark, Alex thought, though he had a sudden horrible image of him pushing a bubble mower around in just a diaper. It was so horrifying, he shuddered and Mark's dad had to reach over to readjust the light.

“Alright!” Mark's dad got to his feet with a theatrical groan before washing and drying his hands. “All that's left now is to give her a test!” He grinned. “Wanna do the honors, Lexie?”

“Uh” was all he got out before his feet left the tiled floor of the kitchen. Mark at least had to exert some effort to lift Alex; his dad made it seem as if Alex weighed nothing, slipping a hand under his bottom.

“Mwah! Mwah! Mwah! Mwah!” Four kisses landed on the defenseless boy's cheeks, Mark's dad chuckling as he scrubbed at his cheeks in disgust. “Sorry, Mark's right. Your cheeks are adorable and irresistible.” He bounced Alex slightly on his arm. “He used to be cute like you, but he's an icky teenager, isn't he?”

“I'm thirteen too.” Alex reminded him.

“Do you wanna help,” his brow furrowed slightly. “What was it you called me earlier?”

“Dad.” Alex said, hoping he really didn't remember.

“No, that's what- that's not it.” He pretended to think really hard. “I can't remember what it was.” Alex was getting tired of being in his arms. Should I just say it to get this, whatever it is, over with? “Maybe we need to shake it loose!” Alex gasped as, quicker than he would have ever thought possible, he was upside down with Mark's dad holding his ankles. “Mark used to love this when he was little.” He said. “Do you remember, Lexie?”

“Dada!” Alex exclaimed. Immediately, he was set right again

and Mark's dad peppered his cheeks with kisses.

“Oh, that's right.” He hugged him to his chest. “Did I scare you? I guess Mark was a bit older when I'd do that with him.”

“I'm older than Mark!” Alex protested.

“Okie dokie. Do you wanna help Dada test the garbage disposal, Lexie?” He turned Alex away from him and pointed at the faucet. “We turn on the water.” Alex reached out and did just that. “And then we flip that switch all the way back there!” He held Alex out so he could reach the switch on the far side of the counter. The garbage disposal snarled to life. “We did it!” Shifting Alex to one arm, he flipped the switch off. “It's not a toy, is it?”

“Uh, no.” Alex said. Who would even think it was a toy?

“Lawn's done!” Mark's voice came only a second before he did. His hair was plastered against his head by sweat and he was shirtless. His navy blue boxer briefs peeked out of his shorts, completely different from the white and yellow Spider-Man undies Alex wore. “Did you two get your plumbing done?”

“Sure did, Lexie's a whiz at this.”

“I bet!” Mark smiled at Alex. “I'm a little too sweaty to play with you right now, but I'm gonna shower and then we can do something fun, Baby Lexie, okay?” He came over and squished Alex's face. “You keep dada out of trouble, okie dokie?” Alex watched Mark walk away, wondering if he would have been better off going with him or not.

“Do you want to watch Spidey?” Mark's dad asked as he carried Alex into the living room.

“Mark is the one who likes that show.” Alex said, still hoping that he could somehow get through to Mark's dad.

“Alright, maybe later.” He set Alex down on the floor and then sat there himself. There was a brief second where neither of them seemed to know what to do but he lunged forward and pulled Alex into his lap. “Tickle little Lexie! Tickle little Lexie!” His tickles felt different than Mark's, but Alex was just as much at his mercy as he squealed and squirmed.

“Stop! Stop!” Alex protested, kicking and swinging his hands.

“Only if you tell me what game you want to play, Lexie!” He renewed his tickles. “Lexie Wexie, wiggle worm! Loves to giggle, squeal and squirm!”

“Stop! I wanna… wanna-”

PBBBT! Mark's dad blew a raspberry into Alex's tummy.

“Only one way to make me stop!” He said in sing-song. PBBBT! “What's the magic word?” Alex had no idea, not that he could even form a coherent thought with the nonstop tickles. “What's the magic word?” How was he able to ask that while tickling and blowing raspberries? He seemed to be everywhere at once! Alex tried desperately to roll away, but there was no escape. What was the magic word though? He had to make this stop! And soon, he thought as he realized he hadn't used the bathroom all morning. “What's the magic word, Lexie Wexie?”

“Stop! I need… I gotta-” His desperate mind worked over time and he suddenly knew what Mark's dad was looking for. “Dada!” The tickles stopped as if it really was a magic word, but it was too late. “Dada…” he whimpered as the front of his underwear grew warm and wet.

“Aww, what's wrong, kiddo? Oh.”

“I didn't mean to!” Alex protested shrilly. “I… I…”

“It's okay, Lexie.” He said gently. “We were having fun and I got carried away. We should've gone potty after we were done with our project.” Alex sniffled, refusing to let the tears that filled his eyes fall. “Don't worry. We'll get you all cleaned up and no one will know what happen, ok? Not even Mark.”

By the time they stood in the downstairs bathroom, the tub filling up, Alex was almost certain he had gotten the tears under control. This wasn't fair! He hadn't wet his pants in so long! At least Mark hadn't been there, but he knew he would hear about it, no matter what his dad said.

“Alright, off come the soggy pants.” Mark's dad said. “And into the tub you go!” Alex's legs kicked out of habit as Mark's dad lifted him up and into the bubble-filled tub. “Bubbles will make you feel better, I bet.” Mark's dad said. “Here, there's even some cups for you to play with.”

“I normally take showers.” Alex said softly, wishing he had mentioned it before the tub was completely full.

“Maybe we can pour a cup of water over your head to give you the full experience.” Mark's dad said, reaching into the

tub to give his side just one last tickle. “Is the water warm?”

“Yeah.”

“And it smells a lot better than pee, I bet.” Alex nodded, unsure of what to do.

Obviously, this was better than being in wet underwear, but Mark's dad seemed like he was only barely fighting the urge to bathe him or touch him or something. And he hadn't even gotten a chance to really process the shocking news of earlier today. Mom was engaged. Mark, who seemed to think he was a baby and had even stolen his name, was going to be his brother!

“You're a real cute kid, you know that?” Mark's dad said, pulling Alex out of his thoughts. Alex slapped the water in frustration.

“Seriously! I am older than Mark!” He insisted, wishing his voice sounded more authoritative as it echoed in the bathroom. “I am not some little kid!”

“I know thirteen feels like you're practically an adult, but trust me, Lexie. You shouldn't be in any hurry to grow up.”

“Preferring showers to bubble baths isn't-”

“Oh, I hear Mark!” Alex snorted. Mark's dad's feigned excitement over the sounds of Mark coming down the stairs – actually a lot like a whole herd of rhinos, Alex realized – made it sound like he was irrationally jazzed about his son. “Don't worry. It's our secret, kay?”

“We're in here!”

“Baby Lexie! Why are you in the tub?” Alex had spent enough time with Mark to know that his question was mostly because he was disappointed that he hadn't gotten to be the one to put him in the bubbles.

“Look at him smile! Someone missed you!” Mark's dad said before launching into a tale about how Alex had worked up a sweat and had asked to take a bath. Sure, it still made him sound little, but it was better than the truth and gave Alex a moment of peace to figure out why he genuinely had smiled when Mark walked into the bathroom.

“Baby Lexie, getting all nice and clean?”

“Oh, we haven't gotten to the actual bath yet.” That was all Mark needed to hear.

“No!” Alex whined, trying to find somewhere in the tub where Mark couldn't get him with the washcloth that practically manifested in his hand. Mark's dad slipped away without Alex even noticing as he devoted his full attention to fruitlessly fending off Mark.

“We gotta get you clean, Baby Lexie.” Mark said, scooping up a handful of bubbles and bringing it to Alex's chin. “You've been in here so long, you've grown a beard!”

“Stop!”

“Rub a dub dub, Baby Lexie's in the tub, getting so nice and clean.” Mark said in sing-song, grabbing a kicking foot and

giving it a wash.

It felt like an eternity for Alex, but the water was still warm by the time Mark lifted him out of it, Alex's bottom lip trembling as he stood on the bath mat, waiting for a towel. Mark dried him off and gave him a hug, wrapping the towel over his head and around his shoulders.

“We'll need to get you one of those super cool hooded towels, huh?” Alex only shrugged. “What animal would you want? A dinosaur? A froggy? Froggies hop, you know.”

“I know.”

“So gloomy. Did I wash off every bit of your silliness?”

“Yeah.” Alex said.

“Oh!” Mark laughed. “That's just silly, which means…” He poked at Alex's exposed belly. “Baby Lexie's still silly, yes he is! Silly little boy! Silly little-” Alex jerked away to avoid this turning into another tickling. He would just have to give in, just this once.

“I'm a silly little boy!” He said. Mark grinned and Alex felt a sudden warmth as he realized he liked making Mark happy.

“That's right. Ready to go get dressed, silly little boy?”

“Yeah.” His overnight bag still waited upstairs and normal clothes were all he wanted. He stumbled as Mark pulled the towel, landing yet again in a hug.

“Or do you want to play the baby game?” Mark murmured

into his hair.

“No.”

“Then I wanna hear you tell me what you are, nice and loud.”

“I'm a silly little boy!” Alex declared.

“You wanna know what would be very, very silly?” Better not be playing the baby game, Alex thought. “Running to my bedroom nakee!” The towel came off so fast, Alex spun.

“But”

“Go on.” Mark got to his feet. “Run! But only to the stairs. We gotta be careful on the stairs!”

Mark watched the little boy run as fast as he could with his hands all but plastered between his legs. It was funny to him that, even with all the times he had been naked in front of Mark, he was still so shy about it.

“How should we go up?” Mark asked.

“Safely and carefully.” Alex said as if this was a boring class and the teacher insisted that the room answer in unison.

“That's right.” Mark chuckled. “But I meant it a little more practically. Do you wanna do hands and knees again?” Alex shook his head. “Alright, two hands, two feet then.” Two hands, Alex had learned, meant he held Mark's hand with one of his and the other held the railing. Two feet meant he had to bring both feet onto the same step before going up to the next one. The whole process took forever, but it was better than

being carried and kissed the whole way. “We did it, Baby Lexie!” Mark declared when they reached the top. His hands free, Alex was ready to get dressed, so he ran toward Mark's open door. “Red light, red light, find your seat!”

“Stop!” Alex had stopped, but he refused to sit down in the middle of the hallway.

“Baby Lexie.” Mark said, still standing at the top of the stairs. “Come back here so we can do it right.” Alex rolled his eyes and turned to go to Mark's room. Turning his back was a mistake and he shrieked as Mark grabbed him, having caught up to him far more quickly than he had thought possible. “You need to listen to me, Baby Lexie.” He said, his voice soft, but firm. “You are cute and silly, I won't let you be a brat.”

“I want to get dressed!”

“I know you do. You know how I know? I listen and I would like you to do the same, okay?”

“Okay.”

“Now what do we do when we do something wrong? Even when we don't think it was really our fault?”

“I'm sorry.”

“Thank you, Baby Lexie.” He kissed Alex's cheeks, loving how nice he smelled freshly bathed. “You're gonna be a great little brother.”

“I'm older than you.” Mark sighed.

“Baby Lexie, I just asked you to listen. I didn't say younger brother, I said little brother.” Alex felt the frustration rising again and wondered if Mark could feel him getting warmer from it.

“I know, but you know they mean the same thing.”

“I think,” Mark rocked Alex until their eyes met. “I think we get to decide what it means. When I say you're my little brother, I mean you're my brother who I'm going to love and protect and care for, every single day until the day I die.” Alex was so struck by how genuine Mark sounded, he settled into his arms as Mark carried him into his room.

When did he have time to make his bed? I don't remember his dad telling him to. Alex wondered as Mark deposited him on the floor. Even his pajamas and Mark's sweaty clothes from mowing seemed to be nowhere to be found. He groaned as he realized that another missing was his overnight bag.

"Now, Baby Lexie, we can either do undies or a diaper."

"Underwear."

"You didn't let me finish, silly!" Mark said. "With the diaper, you'll get pants, well shorts, and a shirt."

"And with underwear?"

"Undies will mean a shirt and a Baby Lexie dance party."

"Better not be any of the songs from last time." Mark smiled.

"Cross my heart, kiss your cheek."

"Underwear."

"Naked Baby Lexie's forgetting to use full sentences."

"I want underwear, please." He immediately regretted it when he saw briefs with brightly colored bunnies in Mark's hands.

Thinking back to the restaurant, Mark had been unable to resist buying Baby Lexie a pack of Bunnydale briefs. He made him watch the show, but after only an episode, he took pity on the little boy and admitted it was too childish. That did not change the fact that Baby Lexie had Bunnydale undies and now had to choose between toddler superheroes or pastel bunnies every morning, with Mark making the choice for him when he could.

The first time Alex had actually put them on himself willingly – though why he had, Mark had never found out – Mark decided to go easy on him, setting aside his plans to watch baseball with Baby Lexie diapered and cuddling in his arms to let the silly little boy play tablet games, albeit in nothing but his bunny undies.

Alex typed out his name, rolling his eyes as he had to wait after each letter for it to announce the letter in the cutesy voice.

"Is your name Alex?" The tablet asked. Mark grabbed his hand before he could confirm.

"No." He whispered, kissing Alex's head. "Try again, little guy."

"But that is my name."

"Do we need to go back to that Bunnydale number game?" Mark's finger hovered over the red x to close this game. “It would match your undies!”

"No." Alex sighed and went through the ordeal of listening to the cheery voice announce every letter of Baby Lexie.

"Is your name Baby Lexie?" Alex had to be imagining the tone of disbelief in the app's voice.

"Yes, it is!" Mark said in just as cheerful a voice. “That was a very good job spelling!” He smiled as Alex started playing the game, thrilled he hadn't tried to get away with Lexie. His name was Baby Lexie. “My silly little boy.” Mark murmured lovingly.

“On goes your undies!” Mark said back in the present. “Now we just need a shirt and then the Baby Lexie dance party can begin!” He had just the shirt in mind, a faded old Disney t-shirt that he had gotten as a handmedown from some relative, so he felt like it was right to hand it down now to his soon-to-be little brother. “Baby Lexie, there's cookies on the hiiiigh shelf! We gotta reach!”

“You can just say 'put your arms up'.” Alex muttered.

“Oh, right. We're still working on getting our silly levels back up.” Mark slipped the shirt down over Alex's reluctantly raised arms, grinning as the shirt fell down to nearly his knees. It was big on Mark and not that nice, so it worked perfectly as a playtime shirt. “There, no one will even know

you've got a bunny bum." He squished Alex's face. "Maybe we should talk to Mama and Dada."

"About what?" Alex hated how he sounded with squished cheeks, but he knew Mark loved it.

"They're doing big important adult paperwork for the wedding. Marriage certificate, right?"

"Sure?"

"So we'll pick up a name change form to make your last name Bunnybum!"

"That is so dumb."

"Alright, let's get ready for your dance party!"

How does he know so many baby songs? Alex thought as Mark made him dance to song after song, each sung by some overly peppy adult or, worse, a cheery chorus of children. Each and every song was so repetitive, Alex felt like he might never get them out of his head. When the dance party finally ended and Mark took Alex downstairs to play with his toddler toys while Mark and his dad watched sports, Alex realized he was humming Boom, Boom and making the toys move in tune.

Lunchtime came and Alex was moved into the kitchen to play under Mark's watchful eye as he made him chicken nuggets and french fries. Alex had flashbacks to the restaurant as ketchup was smeared all over his face and hands as Mark sloppily fed him.

“This is a familiar sight.” Mom said as she walked in.

“His clothes are clean though.” Mark said as if Alex's mess wasn't his fault. “Are you ready to go bye-bye with Mama, Baby Lexie?”

“I need my-”

“Let's finish your milk.” Mark pushed the spout of the sippy cup into Alex's mouth and he could only drink down the rest of it in silence as everyone chatted around him. Once the cup was drained, Alex's face was wiped, his overnight bag all but forgotten as they all headed toward the front door. Didn't anyone else care that he was only wearing a t-shirt?

“Bye-bye, Dada.” Alex said, giving him a hug from Mark's arms.

“Thanks for all your help, kiddo!” He said with a grin. Alex knew that wasn't true, but he squirmed around to face Mark.

“Bye-bye, Mark.” He said.

“I'm gonna get you buckled in safe and snug before we say bye-bye.” Mark explained, handing Alex off to his mom as if it was the most natural thing in the world before slipping his shoes on.

“You're not saying bye-bye to me, Lexie, but I'll still take a hug and kiss.” Alex blushed, but complied, though he was unsure what to say to accompany it.

“Mama.” He mumbled, hoping that Mark wouldn't come up with some embarrassing full sentence.

“I'll take Baby Lexie back.” Mark said. “Did you miss me, little bro?”

“It was like five seconds.”

Mark carried Alex out to the car, making a beeline for the back seat diagonal from the driver's seat. Alex hoped that he might get put in the front seat, but he knew Mark would never do such a thing.

“Alright, Baby Lexie's in the seat, now for your seatbelt.” He reached over and buckled Alex in, adjusting his shirt to make sure it wasn't all bunched up. “All set for your trip home!” He announced before adding under his breath. “And you know what to call me.” He smiled down at Alex and raised his voice again as Alex's mom got in the car. “See you, Baby Lexie.”

“Bye-bye, big brother.” Alex hugged him and kissed his cheek, knowing Mark would probably like that. His grin told him he did and he waved as the car backed up and took Alex away.

“Did you have fun even though Mark's daddy set you to work?” Mom asked as they reached the end of the block.

“I guess.”

“Did he ask you about the wedding?”

“Huh? Uh, no.” He wondered if he should tell Mom about his thoughts regarding the wedding. He wanted her to be happy, but how could she actually love a guy whose son was so…

weird? No, maybe not.

“Well,” she smiled at him in the rearview mirror. “We obviously want you and Mark to be a part of it.”

“Uh-huh.”

“Mark's role is still up in the air.”

“It is.”

“Well, yeah. Gr- Mark's Da-” she laughed. “I guess we'll say Dada since that's what you say. Dada isn't sure if he's gonna ask his friend to be Best Man or have Mark be Best Man. He'll definitely be a groomsman though.”

“And me?” Alex asked, his voice wavering.

“Oh, that was easy. You're gonna be the ringbearer.”

Chapter 4

The Baby Game - Chapter 4: Suit Up!

“Ma- mom, I've got it!” After weeks of careful negotiations – and even a little begging – Alex was still the ringbearer. Now he had a perfect plan: present Mom with an alternative in the form of his cousin.

“This better not be another attempt to ruin my wedding.” Mom teased. “Aren't you supposed to be getting ready anyway?”

“I’m ready.” Alex said dismissively. “Why can't Lucas be the ringbearer? He's seven.” She sighed.

“One, I'm not even sure his family is coming. They live half a continent away, you know. Two, I made my choice and that choice is my son.” She pulled him in as he groaned and kissed the top of his head. “Besides, you're much more responsible than he would be. Lucas the ringbearer would lose the rings. Lexie the ringbearer will make the day perfect.’

“Well, Mark has a cousin. He's named Alex too.”

“Go get ready for baseball.” She gave his bottom a swat to tell him the conversation was over and he was still the ringbearer.

“It's not even really baseball.” Alex muttered as he climbed into the backseat of the car. Mark's dad had insisted that Alex should have some sort of sport he was a part of and somehow, the only team he had found was the Lil Legends, a teeball

team. Alex had sought commiseration in Mark, who had shown him that there wasn't an age limit for the team, though the speed at which he found the team website all but proved that he was behind it.

“Ready to give it your all, Lexie?”

“Yes, Dada.” He forced a meek smile at Mark's dad smiling from the driver's seat before grabbing his baseball mitt. Mark's was a dark brown that seemed to Alex to be serious baseball gear. His was bright red and blue and though he had examined it thoroughly and found no proof, he suspected it was Spidey and His Amazing Friends themed.

“Good hustle, Lexie!” Alex raised his mitt in an approximation of a wave. He did like when he made Mark's dad proud, but praise for only almost beating a kid probably ten years younger than him to a ball the coach all but rolled gently to them was not his favorite type. This is hardly even the same sport as baseball, Alex thought, but everyone in the family called it baseball as if he and Mark were playing in the same league, just different teams.

“My batting average is probably better than yours.” Alex had told Mark once, trying to play along. Mark, like always, laughed and called him a silly little boy.

With teeball over, Alex wanted nothing more than to go home, but he was in the backseat, not behind the wheel, so he went wherever the car went. He rolled his eyes as the car pulled into the driveway and he saw Mark peeking out the window.

“The invitations came from the printer, you know.”

“I know.” Alex replied. “Mom showed me.” He really did not care much about the wedding invitations beyond a sense of relief that his role wasn't mentioned anywhere on them. His car door opened. Somehow, in those few seconds, Mark had come out of the house and had opened Alex's door.

“Baby Lexie! Did you have fun at teeball?”

“He hustled!”

“Oh, wow!” Mark said in mock amazement. He picked Alex up, hugging him to his chest to muffle his irritated comments about teeball. He rubbed his back as they headed inside. “You must be ready to hit the showers after your practice, huh?”

“It's teeball.” Alex said derisively. “I didn't even sweat.”

“Now, Baby Lexie. Team sports are about more than getting all sweaty.” He kissed Alex's cheeks with what felt like every step until they were inside and Mark got to work stripping Alex down. “And really, you didn't get sweaty anywhere? Dad said you hustled!”

“It's teeball.”

“I hope you're not calling Dada a liar, Baby Lexie.” Mark gasped and grabbed a card from the table. “I almost forgot! Baby Lexie Little!” He held up the invitation. “That's so cute.”

“Your last name's not much better.” Alex muttered.

“Mark Darling has nothing on Baby Lexie Little.” Mark said.

“It's Alexander Little.” Alex muttered.

“They really should have put you on the save the dates or something.” Mark snickered. “Baby Lexie requests the honor of your presence…”

“It would've been both of you.” Dad said, coming in. “Mark and Lexie does have a nice ring to it.”

“Oh, well. I like the invitations. Don't you, Baby Lexie?’

“Yeah.” Alex said. Most of the questions to him seemed to be rhetorical.

“And if the invitations are going out, what do you think that means?”

“Dunno.”

“Come on, guess.” Mark chuckled, more than happy to keep his little brother sitting there in nothing but his undies. It was a clue, in a way.

Alex searched his memory. Mom had been talking about something earlier today, but he had tuned her out as revenge for calling him Lexie instead of his name. She had told him something, but what? Finally, he shrugged.

“Don't know.”

“We need to go get our suits!” Mark said. “Good thing you've got me to remember for you!”

“Is that today?”

“Nope. Not until Saturday.”

*** L ***

Bright and early Saturday morning, Alex came thumping down the stairs, still rubbing sleep from his eyes. Mom's surprise was written all across her face.

“You're up early.”

“Uh, yeah. I'm… excited.” Alex winced. He didn't know how to tell her he was terrified of Mark getting there while he was still in bed. Even now, he wanted to be done with breakfast before he got there.

“There's nothing wrong with liking to dress up.” Mom said. “Though some of those things Mark has you wear…” her voice trailed off, her smile making it unclear if she approved or not.

Alex poured himself a bowl of cereal and began to eat, watching Mom closely even as he tried to act natural. She usually let him feed himself, but with Mark being mentioned, he was a little worried she might try to intervene.

“I think Mark should be here soon.” She remarked, looking at her phone on the counter. I thought I had more time! Alex immediately began to shovel cereal into his mouth. “Alex!” She exclaimed as he coughed sharply, some cereal trying to go down the wrong pipe. “This is why we don't think you should be feeding yourself, Lexie.” She said gently, taking the spoon from him and noticed the dribbles of milk on the table. “That and the mess.”

“I coughed that up.” He muttered.

“Mm.”

With her help, he had finished eating by the time Mark arrived. He hoped he was disappointed that Alex was totally ready to go, but still found himself in Mark's arms, getting peppered with both questions and kisses.

“Baby Lexie! You got dressed all by yourself?”

“Stop!” Alex whined as Mark pulled on the waistband of his shorts to see his underwear.

“What about breakfast?”

“Already ate.”

“Wow!” Mark exclaimed. “Good on Mama!”

“I fed myself.”

“He tried.” Mom added, smiling as Mark kissed Alex again and again.

“So responsible! No wonder why Mama and Dada are trusting you with the rings!” He chuckled and bounced Alex in his arms. “Speaking of, we’d better get going. Dad’s waiting in the car.”

“Remember, both of you.” Mom called after them. “Navy blue and handsome.”

“Best we can do is adorable for you, Baby Lexie.” Mark whispered as if it was a secret between them. “I've got lots of

ideas for your outfit.”

“I’m not wearing shoes!” Alex protested, squirming in Mark’s arms.

“I’ve got your clogs in the car.” Mark said. “Aren’t you lucky I think of these things?” Lucky wasn’t the word Alex would have used.

“Lexie!” Mom called. “You promised to take the garbage out, remember?” He groaned. Last night, he had wanted to play Capricorn, so he had swore up and down that he would take care of the trash the next morning.

“We always need to keep our promises.” Mark said, setting Alex down so he could trudge back to the kitchen and take the white garbage bag from his mom. Mark watched as Alex walked out of the house, nose wrinkled from the stench of the garbage. “What a big boy!” Mark praised as he picked Alex up. “We'd better go wash our hands.”

As Alex washed his hands in the bathroom, Mark continued to watch him.

“Such a big boy, washing his hands all by himself. Though I did have to remind you, didn't I?”

“Shut it.”

“Grouchy. You were up late last night, huh?”

“Not really.”

“Baby Lexie. I saw you on the server.” Alex rolled his eyes.

“I won't tell on you, as long as you do something for me.” Mark picked him up and kissed both of his cheeks. “I'm gonna praise you for being a big boy in the car with Dad and I want you to correct me, nice and loud. No, I'm a silly little boy! Okay?”

“No.”

“Then I'm going to have to tell Mama you were naughty and playing games much too late last night.” Alex wanted to say that she didn't care, but he knew Mark knew the truth.

“Fine.”

*** L ***

“Quit touching me!” Alex pushed Mark away as they reached the mall parking lot. He almost wished Mark had sat up front rather than sliding in next to him and 'helping’ him with his seatbelt.

“You two, no fighting like brothers until you actually are brothers.” Mark's dad teased.

“And don't yell.” Mark added. “We don't want to distract the driver, do we?”

“Remember, boys, navy blue.” Mark's dad said, getting things back on topic.

“I know.” Mark groaned. “You told me this like ten times. Go to Suit Up, tell them your name and that you talked to-”

“James.”

“I know! You talked to James on Thursday and got it all set. I just need to get measured and they'll take care of the rest.” Alex listened, surprised how much more Mark seemed to know about the plan than he did.

“Looks like a busy day at the mall.” Mark seized the opportunity to lean in and whisper to Alex.

“Remember what we talked about, Baby Lexie.”

“I don't want to-”

“You better or I'm going to rent a stroller. Rolling up to get your big boy suit in a stroller? How embarrassing.”

“Fine.” He knew Mark would find some way to humiliate him, no matter what, but it still made sense to try to cut off his options when possible.

The car came to a stop right in front of the entrance. Dad turned around and looked at Mark and Alex before looking beyond them at the car behind them.

“Better hurry. That guy looks impatient.”

“Baby Lexie!” Mark exclaimed. “Where are your shoes?” Alex glared at him. Mark had been the one to refuse to let him grab his sneakers, plus he had been tickling his feet off and on for the entire trip. Funny how his loud laughs had not distracted the driver, but standing up for himself had. “Good thing I remembered your clogs, huh?” He poked Alex’s side. “Say it.”

“I’m glad you’re with me!” He said in a loud, performative

voice. “I’d be scared to walk around the mall alone because I’m just a silly little boy.”

“Very sweet, but get a move on, Mark.”

“Out on this side.” Mark said, nodding his head toward his door as he unbuckled Alex’s seatbelt.

“They’re on the wrong feet!”

“We’re in a rush, but I promise, I’ll fix it.” Mark said, grabbing Alex’s hand and pulling him. “Say bye to Dad.” A squeeze of his hand was all Alex needed to translate it.

“Bye-bye, Dada.” Even though they were hurrying out, he knew Mark would make him say it again and again until he got it right.

“I’ll pick you two up in a few hours.”

“All on our own!” Mark said, kissing Alex’s cheek. “Are you excited?”

“Isn’t this just glorified clothes shopping?”

“Oh, no.” Mark went over to a bench and set Alex down to put his shoes on the right feet, unsure if the little guy still even remembered that they were allegedly on the wrong feet. “Basically, we’ll go into Suit Up! and I’ll give them my name, tell them who Dad talked to, and then they’ll make sure the suit fits.” Alex nodded. That didn’t sound so bad.

“Do they have my measurements already?” He asked. Were measurements even a thing they needed? He remembered

hearing things about tailored suits, but were they doing those for the wedding? Mama's dress had apparently taken all day, a day that he had spent – where else? – in Mark's lap, growing increasingly frustrated that Bix Taj'cal was the character that Mark insisted he play since he had a baby skin.

"He coos like you, Baby Lexie!" He had said. "It's super cute."

"He's trash!" Alex spat.

"Don't get fussy."

"OS to Baby Lexie!" In the present, Mark squeezed his cheeks. "You're adorable, but we have an appointment, so up you come!" He lifted Alex up, spun him around, and then thankfully set him on the ground. "Ready?" Alex was ready, but Mark was now digging in a backpack he had not seen him grab.

"Are you?"

"Gotta be safe."

"No!" Alex stared at the contraption in Mark's hands.

"Now, Baby Lexie,"

"Do not call me that!" Alex grunted. "We're here to get our suits."

"And we need to be safe while we do it. Now, I know you like choices, so do you want to go the silly little boy route." Alex huffed, but he continued. "And wear your harness or are

we feeling like a baby today and it's off to the bathroom for a diaper?" He saw the hint of a defiant spark in Alex's eye. "We're at a mall, I can and will buy you a whole pack of diapers if you don't behave." He patted his cheek. “So, are you a baby today?” Secretly, he looked forward to the day when Baby Lexie was a baby all the time, except maybe at school.

“No.” Alex knew Mark expected more. “I'm a silly little boy.” He mumbled.

“Right. And silly little boys might run off, so let's get your harness on lickety-split!”

Alex fumed as they walked through the mall. The bright green dinosaur backpack alone looked childish, but to have Mark holding the leash that was attached to it? He wondered how far he could get if he escaped. He could unbuckle the strap across his chest, shrug out of the backpack, and then what?

“Where are we even going?” Alex asked after what seemed like an entire lap of the mall.

“I thought you knew. That’s why you’re leading!” Alex groaned.

“I thought we had to be there at a certain-”

“Come here.” Mark pulled Alex over to him. “We’re looking for Suit Up!, so we need to find a sign with a big S. Do you remember what-”

“Yes!”

“S looks like?”

“It’s right there.” Alex said, pointing at a sign a short distance away.

“Oh, that’s Suit Up! Kid, that’s not where we’re – aha!” Seizing his opportunity, he picked Alex up to carry him. “I see it!”

“Put me down!”

“I know it’s not as stylish as a stroller, but I know where we’re going and you were just worrying that we’re lost.” Mark explained, already starting to walk.

“Hello there.” The man wore a suit as immaculately tailored as his hair, his salesman’s smile not even moving an inch as he saw Alex being carried by Mark. “What can I do for you?”

“My name’s Mark Darling, I need to try on my suit.” Alex snorted. Why was Mark talking like that, all deep and fake?

“Sounds good. Your bodyguard can wait outside.” He chuckled flatly as both boys stared at him blankly. For a second, Alex wondered if he was a robot. “I’m talking about you, buddy. I know you’re not really a bodyguard. I bet you’re a tough guy though, huh?”

“Oh, let’s get your harness off, Baby Lexie.” Mark unbuckled it and shoved it back in his backpack before grabbing Alex’s hand. “Now let’s follow the nice man.”

“Did someone call about this earlier?”

“Yeah, my dad did. Should be under Darling.” He held tightly to Alex’s hand, but neither Mark nor the salesman paid him much attention. Alex looked around the store, but was immediately bored. It was nothing but mirrors and racks of suits. Plus it smelled overpoweringly of cologne.

“Just gotta figure out where James put it. Oh, I’m Kerby, by the way. Kerby Farrell.”

“Oh, do you play first base?”

“Naw, my granddad was a fan and I got stuck with the junior.” Alex rolled his eyes as Kerby and Mark launched into spirited baseball talk as Kerby found his suit. “Alright, so now we’ll go back, I’ll put you in room 2, you’ll try it on, do the fashion walk, all that stuff.” His gaze moved back to Alex. “Are you gonna help him tie his tie, buddy?” Alex glared up at him.

“Baby Lexie, hope ‘bout you sit right over here?” Even though he worded it like a suggestion, Mark scooped Alex up and carried him over to the chair. “I don’t want you to go running off, so you need to sit right here, still as a statue, okie dokie?” Alex nodded. It was his turn next, so why would he run off? They needed suits and even Mark wasn’t crazy enough to sabotage the wedding! He’ll probably make me ride one of those baby rides after, Alex thought sullenly before he realized he really was left alone for the first time since… he couldn’t even think of another time when Mark had left him by himself!

He grinned, but when he saw his smile in one of the many mirrors, he immediately sobered. You're not a little kid, dude. He reminded himself. But how to prove that, both to Mark and increasingly, to himself? What could he do though? He knew the mature thing was to patiently wait his turn. That was what these chairs were for, after all.

All the same, Alex felt himself sliding down in the chair over time. No one interesting was walking by and there wasn't even anything interesting to explore in the store. It was just mirrors and suits, suits and mirrors. What was taking so long?

As his boredom grew more and more impossible to ignore, Alex swung his legs back and forth. As long as he sat all the way back and sat straight-backed, his feet cleared the floor. He was just getting a good rhythm going when he accidentally kicked one of his shoes off. They always did that! They fit fine; mom was always buying him shoes a size or so bigger so he could grow into them, but these might not have even been a half size too big. All the same, they flew off with the slightest kick. He got up, retrieved the wayward clog, and had a game in mind by the time he was back in the seat.

Alex kicked his shoe higher and higher, trying each time to beat his last record. He was certain he would be able to hit the ceiling with just the right kick. He wouldn't admit it to Mark, but there was something extra fun about Spider-Man – the real Spider-Man – looking at him from the top of the foam clog as it tumbled through the air.

“Baby Lexie!” He froze, almost certain he audibly yelped as he heard Mark’s voice. “This is what I get for not leaving toys with you, huh?” As Mark came over, Alex felt ashamed that he had been caught playing such a childish game, especially since Mark wore a navy blue suit, a tie, and even freshly shined black dress shoes. He looked so mature while Alex was slouched down in the chair, leg sticking out, one shoe on the floor by him, the other a short distance away where it had landed. “Silly, silly little boy.” Alex stammered an explanation, but Mark only shook his head. “What do you think?”

“Looks good.” For a moment, he thought Mark would push him to say more, but he only smiled and, picking Alex up, kissed him over and over again.

“Missed you.”

“You too.”

“I could tell.” Mark ignored how insincere Alex had sounded. “I was gone for ten minutes and you were kicking your shoes everywhere!”

“It was longer than ten minutes.”

“But I look good, right? Handsome like a groomsman?” Alex nodded. “Perfect! Let me just get out of this and then you know what time it is.”

“My turn?”

“Yep!” Mark's grin unnerved him. “Don’t get into any trouble

while I’m gone. Sit right there, keep your shoes off, and count how many blue suits there are!” He had disappeared back into the changing area before Alex realized he had told him to keep his shoes off, not on.

“How many were there?” Mark asked when he returned a moment later.

“Why’s it smell funny in here?” Alex asked, not wanting to admit he had gotten into the thirties before deciding it was dumb.

“It’s sandalwood.” Mark said. “Right?”

“Sandalwood and leather, I think.” Kerby said as he tapped the screen of the POS unit. “Send the bill to this guy?” He asked, nodding to Alex, who Mark had set on the counter.

“Yep!” Mark chuckled, tucking Alex’s foam clogs into his backpack.

“We’re done?”

“Sure are. You were very patient.” Mark said.

“But what about me?”

“What about you?” Alex knew Mark would never give him a straight answer, so he looked at Kerby.

“I need a suit too.”

“Your brother mentioned.” Kerby said seriously. “He’ll be taking you to a specialist colleague of mine.”

“What’s that mean?” Alex asked desperately as Mark lifted him off the counter. “What’s that mean?”

“Shh, inside voice.” Mark patted Alex’s bottom as he carried him out of the store.

“Put me down!”

“You’re not wearing shoes.”

“Well, stop at that bench and then put them on – I’ll put them on.” Pressed against Mark’s chest, he felt and heard him chuckle.

“We’re almost there.” Alex swung his head over his shoulder and groaned. He should have known.

*** L ***

Suit Up! had seemed mature and sophisticated, nothing but mirrors, suits, and leather. Suit Up! Kid was brightly colored with larger than life photos of smiling boys in suits on the walls, not a single one looking older than eight or ten. The stark difference even carried over the salesperson who came hurrying over to them the moment Mark set the still bare-footed Alex down. She looked more like a kindergarten teacher in her long, comfortable skirt and blouse with a beach ball print.

“Well, hi there!” She bent over and in Alex’s face before he even knew what was happening. “What can we do for you, handsome?” He fought the urge to step back just to get Mark between him and her eager smile.

“I need a suit.” Alex said, trying to stay stone faced.

“Ah! What’s the occasion?”

“My mom’s wedding.” Alex said at the same time as Mark mouthed ‘ringbearer’. “I saw that!”

“Well, it’s true, isn’t it?” He said with a smile.

“Oh! Isn’t that exciting?”

“He’s taking it very seriously.” Mark said.

“Well, my name is Mallory and I bet we’ll find you the perfect outfit to boogie in!”

“Not outfit, suit.” Alex insisted.

“Oh, of course.” She nodded, eyes wide. Alex sighed.

“Let’s go, Mark.” He muttered, trying to walk past her.

“Very serious.” She smiled knowingly at Mark. “So, where should we start?”

“Be polite.” Mark said before Alex could bark ‘navy blue and handsome’ at her.

“A… navy blue suit please.” Alex said.

“Aha! Must be the theme.”

“He wants to look just like Dada.” Mark said with a chuckle. “Or is that Bubba?”

“Who’s Bubba?”

“We’ll talk about that later.” Mark whispered as Mallory dug

into a rack of suits that looked mostly unobjectionable.

“Alright, why don’t we start here?” Alex felt a wave of relief wash over him. The suit she held up looked almost identical to Mark’s!

“Sure!” She smiled, noticing that he seemed much more enthusiastic all of a sudden. Mark, however, looked displeased as Alex disappeared into the changing room. Mallory seemed determined to make the experience a full-fledged production, knocking on the closed door.

“Do you want a drum roll before you come out… Oh, what’s his name?”

“Lexie.” Mark grinned.

“Oh, cute! Do you want me to do a drum roll before you come out, Lexie?”

“Uh, no.”

“Okie dokie, just let us know when you’re all ready!”

The one difference that Alex could find was Mark’s suit had a long tie. His came with a clip on bow tie stored in a little plastic packet inside the suit jacket. It wasn’t the end of the world, he thought. Maybe he would just keep it in his pocket.

“Ready?” Mallory said in sing-song through the door. He rolled his eyes. Why did they have to come to this weird place for his suit? It was barely even smaller than Mark’s! He gave himself one last look-over in the mirror, tossing his head to get his shaggy hair out of his eyes before giving his suit

jacket a little tug like he had seen secret agents do in the movies. He liked how he looked.

“Ready.” He heard her tap out a drum roll on her lap as he opened the door.

“Ooh!” Mallory said, but he ignored her, going over to the three part mirror. “How handsome!” She followed him over. Alex noticed Mark's frown, but who cared what he thought? This was turning out so much better than he had thought. “Well, give it a test, Lexie!”

“Huh?”

“Weddings involve dancing. Bust a move!” She did the disco finger until Alex followed suit. “So, what are we thinking?”

“I like it.” Alex said. “It will fit with the rest of the wedding group.”

“Why would you want to look like everyone else?” Mark asked, slightly sullen. Mallory looked at him in surprise and then brightened again.

“Your big brother makes a good point, Lexie. The ringbearer should stand out!” She chuckled. “We'll definitely keep this one, but what's the fun of trying on just one outfit, right?”

“I really like this one.” Alex tried to keep his voice steady, but he knew he was fighting a losing battle. “Alright, I’ll try on one other one.”

“Perfect!” Mark plucked an outfit off a rack and Alex realized he had been looking while he was getting changed.

“Let’s start with this one!” Alex looked at it on the hanger, not liking the shininess of the pants. His nose wrinkled when he saw the frills of the shirt. It was probably actually a blouse!

“This is for girls.”

“It’s a pageboy outfit.” Mallory said. “It’s what they call the ringbearer in other countries. How exotic!” Alex stared at her. Did she pound energy drinks when there weren’t customers?

“And it’s still navy blue.” Mark said. “Want me to help you?” Alex fumed, snatching the outfit from Mark. The shirt looked so delicate, he was amazed it didn’t tear right then and there. With my luck, we’d have to buy it then and get it fixed for me to wear to the wedding.

“Doubt I’ll like it more than this suit.”

“Try it anyway. Surprises are fun!” Mallory said cheerfully.

Once Alex got the suit off, he realized that the pageboy outfit didn’t even come with pants. At first he thought they were shorts, but they were too long for that, reaching down to his knees. He smiled as he realized that that worked well. They couldn’t get him an outfit where the pants were too short!

“What is this thing?” He held up a long slender piece of fabric that matched the pants. A tie? It seemed the wrong shape for that. A scarf?

“How’s it going in there?” Mallory’s sing-song came.

“Uh, almost ready.”

“Splendiferous!”

“Sure.” Alex muttered, deciding to just throw the whatever-it-was around his neck like a scarf. He knew it was wrong, but he refused to ask for help. After all, Mark was probably itching to come interfere. He grimaced at his reflection. “Whatever.” He told himself. This was just for fun, though he didn’t feel like he was having any. He would make sure they got the suit, he promised himself right then and there.

He opened the door and Mallory gasped. At first he thought it was because he hadn’t let her do another annoying drumroll, but then he remembered his dorky outfit. He shuffled over to the three-panel mirror, grimacing as the lace collar brushed under his chin every time he moved his head.

“That's not a scarf, Baby Lexie.” Mark said with a chuckle. Sure, he didn't know what it was either, but he knew it wasn't a scarf. “Silly little boy.”

“That is silly!” Mallory said, taking the sash off his neck. “Let's get you properly dressed. We all need help sometimes, don't we?” She wrapped the sash around his waist.

“Is it a cumberbund?” Mark asked.

“What's a cumberbund?”

“It's fancy.” Mallory said. That was not an answer, but Mallory insisted on making him do a whole verse of the Hokey Pokey rather than providing any more information. He decided a cumberbund was dumb, whatever it was.

“Can I take this off now?” He asked.

“So, not your favorite?”

“No.” Alex grunted.

“Second favorite it is.” He looked at her, confused. “Well, you’ve only tried on the two so far.”

“Nothing’s going to beat the regular suit.” He said, hoping Mallory would see reason. He saw the outfit in Mark’s hands. “Don’t we need to get going?” He asked nervously.

“We’ve got plenty of time, Baby Lexie.” He took his hand. “This one’s a two person job.” He declared, though Alex wasn’t sure if he was talking to him or Mallory.

“I am not wearing that!” He said again and again, but each time, it fell on deaf ears. “I’m not!” The door closed and it was just him and Mark in the changing room.

“It won’t fit me, Baby Lexie.” He teased.

“It might.” Why was there even such a babyish sailor suit in his size? “I’m really not that much shorter than you!”

“You give off a little vibe. I mean, wearing your cumberbund as a scarf?” He snickered. “Now Mallory knows you’re a silly little boy who belongs here.”

“You didn’t know what it was either.” Mark tutted and, sitting down on the little bench, pulled Alex toward him.

“Undress or tickles?”

“Let’s get this over with.” Alex felt around his waist for any way to undo the sash. Mark watched him for a moment before grabbing his face in both his hands.

“We’ve got important business, don’t we, Baby Lexie?”

“Yes, let me go.” He mumbled. Why did he spend so much time with his face squished whenever Mark was around?

“Shh. Remember Bubba?”

“No.” He knew Bubba was a name, so did Mark have some uncle he was going to meet at the wedding? A cheek pincher, maybe? Probably noogies, Alex thought.

“Well,” Mark seemed unsure how to explain. “Y'know how there's Mama and Dada?”

“Yes.”

“Bubba's like that. It's what you'll call me.”

“Why?”

“Bubba sounds kinda like brother, don't you think?” Alex considered it. He could see what Mark meant, but it didn't make any sense.

“Or I could just call you Mark. Y'know, your name?”

“Now, Baby Lexie-”

“And you can call me mine.”

“Baby Lexie is your name.” Mark said firmly. “And mine's Bubba, at least as far as you're concerned.”

“It's dumb.”

“But it'll make me happy.”

“What about me?”

“You're saying the thought of calling me Bubba stops you from being happy?”

“Well, no, but-”

“Then you'll do it.” Mark said with a nod. “Now, let's get moving before Mallory sends Spidey and all his friends to find us!”

“I can do it myself!” Alex protested as Mark set to undressing him.

“We need to be careful. These aren't our clothes. You tear it, you buy it!”

Alex was soon in nothing but his underwear. It wasn't Mark's favorite pair of Bunnydales, but they were still baby blue with the Bunnydale logo emblazoned across Alex's backside. With Alex facing him, he could only see it in the mirror on the back of the changing room door.

“Baby Lexie's bunny unnies.” He murmured to himself.

“I used to wear boxers.”

“I remember.” Mark replied. “You know why?” Alex knew it would be yet another callback to the restaurant where they had first met. “Cuz you somehow got ketchup on them that night we met each other.” He chuckled. “But these bunny

undies?” He corrected himself. “Bunny unnies. You keep them so pristine and clean, you must love them!”

“No.”

“Or maybe it's because you don't try to feed yourself anymore.” Mark said. “What are you supposed to do if I'm not around to feed you?”

“Ask Mama or Dada.” Alex recited, rolling his eyes.

“And what if Mama or Dada isn't around?”

“I need to find Mama, Dada, or you cuz I shouldn't be away from a grown-up.”

“Never ever.” He snapped Alex's waistband. “You know my favorite thing about your bunny unnies?”

“What?” Mark lifted his shirt to show his own waistband.

“See? Mine says Hanes, yours says Bunnydale.”

“So?”

“So someone might think it's a fashion brand. Bunnydalay or something.”

“It's a baby show.”

“Right, of course. Baby Lexie wears undies for baby shows because he's still a silly little boy.” He leaned forward and kissed the top of Alex's head. “You sure smell like a silly little boy.”

“Do not!” Alex fought the urge to ask what little boys even

smelled like. Probably farts.

“Wanna give me some fun little bunny hops?” Alex only grunted. Mark smiled, happy that he was growing more and more fluent in his little noises by the day. “Ok, let's get you dressed.”

Mallory walked over to the changing room door, smiling to herself about how it never failed: every time someone went in to 'help', getting dressed inevitably took longer. Sure enough, when she got close enough, she could hear the all-too familiar little ‘don't want to’ whines that she and her coworkers often joked about. It was what she loved about working at a boy's dress clothes store.

“I'm doing a drumroll!”

“That's my cue.” She murmured to herself as she came over by the door.

“Fine. I'll carry you then.”

“Or maybe that is.” The drumroll did not come, but a little sailor did in the arms of his big brother, pouting at the grave injustice of being carried.

“This'll be your number one favorite. No cap.” Mark said, setting Alex down just outside the view of the three-part mirror. “Go on, strut your stuff, little guy.” He took a step back, the better to see the Bunnydale logo showing through the thin white material of Alex's sailor shorts.

“No,” Alex said, looking away from the mirror. “I want this

off.”

“Hold on now.” Mallory said. “We've gotta test it out. Looks aren't ev- looks aren't the only important thing. Besides, you look adorable.”

“Handsome.” Mark added.

“I look like a total-” Alex didn't even want to say what he looked like.

“It's got navy blue.” Mark said diplomatically. “But maybe too much white?” Alex grunted and Mark kneeled down in front of him. Since Alex was standing on the raised platform in front of the three-part mirror, he had to look up at him, but it still felt like the right thing to do. “And you know who wears white, right?” Alex shrugged. “Come on, Baby Lexie. It's the most important part of a wedding.” He playfully poked his tummy, even that slight tickle enough to draw out the shadow of a smile from his outraged pout. “Here comes the who? All dressed in white?”

“Bride.”

“That's right. And who's the bride for our wedding?”

“It's not our wedding.” Mark sighed in acknowledgement. He had him there.

“Right. Whose is it?”

“Our parents’.”

“And aren't you excited for Mama and Dada?” Alex nodded.

He just wished someone would consider what it meant for him. “Then we have to make sure you look your absolute best, don't we?”

“It's not this though.” Mark nodded, chewing slightly on his bottom lip as if he was weighing a great many options. Alex was worried he was going to force him to wear this horrible, awful, terrible sailor suit all the way until Mark nodded.

“This is a lot of navy, but not much blue, isn't it?” He laughed. “Guess I'm silly too, huh?” Alex felt relief wash over him. “We'll find you something else. After you put it through its paces.”

Alex assumed that that meant dancing, but that was only the beginning. After Mallory made Alex do the Chicken Dance, Mark took him by the hand and walked leisurely around the store.

"I already know what I want."

"Yes, but we're going to do this democratically." Mark explained. "And I'll know what I want when I see it." Alex sighed. How could it get any worse than the sailor suit? He knew Mark would find it, whatever it was.

"It's all the same." Alex remarked as Mark pretended to examine a rack of vests. "You've seen one suit, you've seen them all."

"Says the silly little boy in the silly little sailor suit."

"The wedding's not on a cruise ship."

"You're right, but it is distinctive, isn't it?" Alex shrugged. "Remember? We agreed that the ringbearer should stick out." Alex had agreed to no such thing, but Mallory suddenly gasped and came over. She leaned in to whisper something in Mark’s ear, but the store was quiet enough and she wasn't really whispering, so Alex heard every word.

"What!?" He spun around in a circle, looking for all the world like a puppy chasing his tail as he confirmed what Mallory had said: his underwear was totally showing through the shorts! "Why didn't you tell me?"

"We didn't see it until now." Mallory said. "It's an honest oopsie."

"Don't worry, Baby Lexie." Mark said. "I've got your next outfit right here." He held up a vest and shorts set that Alex eyed warily. What was the catch? It looked normal enough

Alex still couldn't figure out what was so special about the outfit as Mark undressed him and had him step into the navy blue shorts. They looked a lot like the suit pants for what he had started to think of as his suit.

"Think of this as a compromise." Mark said softly as he buttoned the navy blue vest over Alex's white shirt.

"Compromise?"

"Well, think of it as being lucky."

"What do you mean?"

"Summer wedding. It'll be hot in a whole suit. You'll get

shorts."

"I-" Alex's brow furrowed as he tried to think. How does Mark do it? How does he make orders sound like suggestions? "I thought we decided the suit was number one."

"We did." Mark allowed. Alex smiled in spite of himself. It worked! "But" his voice trailed off. "A suit jacket would probably make it look like a school uniform." He muttered to himself, turning Alex by his shoulders. "Hmm."

"What?" Alex felt familiar irritation starting to boil in him.

"Look! A little pocket in your vest to keep the rings in." Mark stood up and shepherded Alex out to the mirrors.

"Oh, I think this is the one!" Mallory gushed.

"I agree." Mark said with a chuckle.

"What dance haven't we done yet?" Mallory said, looking adoringly at Alex. "Hokey Pokey, chicken dance, oh!" She began to hum an unfamiliar song and Alex rolled his eyes.

"It's the bunny hop!" Mark said with delight.

"Hop! Hop! Hop!" Mallory declared. Alex half-heartedly obeyed, though his chubby cheeks still bounced enough to make both Mallory and Mark coo. "What a handsome ringbearer!" Mallory said. Mark picked up Alex, pushing his face into his chest to stop the protests.

"I think it's perfect." He said, twirling the hair on the back of Alex's head with his fingers. "Though the shorts look a bit

like culottes, don't they?"

"We can discuss alterations." Alex finally got to pull his head away from Mark.

"I want to wear the suit!" He protested.

"Shh, Baby Lexie." Mark said, patting his bottom. "You go get changed and I'll get things squared away."

When Alex emerged back in his regular clothes, he figured they were done. He never expected to end up back in front of the mirrors as Mallory took what felt like a thousand measurements.

"We've gotta make sure your clothes fit!" She explained. "If it's too small, what would you do?" Alex only shrugged.

"That's finally done." Mark said as they left the store. "Now we can have some food!"

"What did you actually get me?" Alex asked as they walked.

"What do you mean?"

"What... what am I going to wear?"

"That last outfit. The rest was just for fun." Mark said, curious if Alex even realized how many photos he had gotten of him. "How 'bout pretzels?"

Mark got a cup of pretzel bites and, though Alex did not like the cheese sauce that came with them, Mark continued to dip the bites in it before pushing it into Alex's mouth.

“Ew! Stop! Mark, stop!” Alex protested between mouthfuls. He did not want to spit them out, but the cheese tasted like plastic. “Stop! Bubba!” Mark kissed the top of his head.

“Didn't realize you were talking to me, Baby Lexie.” He explained. “Lots of Marks at the mall today, I bet.”

“It's context.” Alex mumbled around yet another mouthful of pretzel, mercifully free of cheese. “When's our ride coming?”

“Ask me right.”

“When's… Dada coming?”

“Well, Baby Lexie. We've still got an errand or two to do.”

“What?” Mark pushed a pretzel into Alex's mouth.

“Y'know, we need to work on you introducing yourself. Mallory was all over you, so you really should've told her your name.”

“Why?”

“It's polite, little boy.” He chewed pensively. “You'll need to introduce yourself to people at the wedding after all.” He took Alex off his lap and set him on the table. “Let's practice.” He took Alex's hand in his own. “Hello, I'm Bubba. Who are you?”

“Alex Little.” Alex said at once. Mark snorted.

“Right, I forgot. That's gonna be fun.” He kissed Alex's cheek. “Baby Lexie Little, the silly little boy. Almost a tongue twister!”

“Darling's not much better.”

“Yeah, I guess.” He laughed. “Maybe Mom and Dad'll change it. Married couples do that sometimes.”

“To what?”

“Klanzuku!” His heart melted a little as Alex's face lit up.

“Did you see OSTransmissions's new video?” Capricorn talk kept Alex occupied as Mark carried him to the bathroom just off the food court, their next step in sight at the end of the corridor.

“I still don't think they're gonna drop the new skins and arena for free, no matter what he thinks he thought he heard at the announcement.” Alex was so distracted, he didn't even notice that Mark was taking his shirt off until it interfered with his steady stream of excited chatter.

“What are you doing?”

“Cleaning you up.” Mark said, pushing Alex onto his back on the broad counter to slide his pants down his legs. “I haven't gotten to give you a bath in so long!”

“It was last weekend.” Alex protested, still not totally over being bathed in the big kitchen sink.

“But you need to take baths more often than just once a week, Baby Lexie!”

“Not in the mall bathroom!”

"I'm leaving your bunny unnies on. And there's a reason we

went into the family restroom." Pushing Alex's shoes aside in his bag, he pulled out a big package of baby wipes. "Hold still!" He knew there was no chance of Alex holding still, but he actually preferred bathing a squirming little boy. It felt more authentic! If I wanted to bathe someone who stayed still, I'd buy a baby doll. Mark thought. Alex was much more fun than a doll though.

"Aren't we done yet?"

"Nope." Mark said, tossing a large handful of baby wipes into the garbage. "We gotta get you dressed first!"

*** L ***

"This isn't the way to da- to the car!" Alex protested as Mark carried him down the busy mall corridor. Everyone could see him being carried and Mark, loving that fact, was clearly taking the scenic route.

"So worried!" Mark said. "We've gotta do one last thing first."

"What?"

"We got our navy blue, right?" Alex nodded and Mark brushed his hair out of his face. "So now we gotta get handsome. And looking less like a feral wild boy." Alex groaned as he looked ahead and saw the unmistakable sign of Funky Monkey.

"You are not taking me to Funky Monkey."

"They put the fun in haircuts!" Mark said. "But, since we both need haircuts, we're actually going to the other place."

He turned Alex's chin toward a perfectly normal salon.

"Hello!" The stylist at the front counter said, smiling at Alex. Alex reflexively squirmed until Mark put him down though the cold tile on his bare feet almost made him regret it. "What can I help you two young men with?" Alex felt Mark nudge him.

"We need haircuts." He knew that wasn't what Mark wanted, but it was what they needed to do. How could he get in trouble for staying on task?

"What are we thinking?" The question was directed at Mark, who already had his phone out.

"For him, we're gonna do this!" Alex craned his neck, but he couldn't see the photo Mark showed her.

"Oh, how cute! But his hair looks like that already."

"Oh, sorry, that was from Baby Lexie trying on ringbearer outfits." Mark swiped to the next photo, giving Alex a glimpse of a toddler with a bowl cut! "This is what we're doing for him."

"Absolutely not!" Alex said. "That's... no!"

"Uh-oh!" She came around the counter and knelt down. "Don't worry, Lexie. I'll make sure you look perfect for the big day." She looked up at Mark. "Sonya'll take you at chair three. Me and Lexie will be right behind you." She smiled and whispered to Alex. "How 'bout you tell me what you want your hair to be like?" Alex's momentary relief was

quickly replaced by panic. He didn't know what he wanted!

"Um, I need it cleaned up. Mama says it's too shaggy." His panic grew. Had he just said Mama or Mom? It had to have been mom, right?

“Do you like it short? Medium? Looks like it's been a while, huh?” She reached out and played with his hair.

“Uh, medium, but like the shorter side of medium.”

"Alright, how about we do a trim and kinda tame it?" She continued to play with his hair. "Get it out of your eyes, hmm? You have very nice hair, Lexie."

"It's Alex." She gave no indication of having heard him, picking him up and carrying him over to the salon chair.

"Where are your shoes?" She asked, grabbing one of his feet with her manicured hand.

"He took 'em." Alex grunted. She nodded as if she had expected to hear that.

"Looks like this one's all ready for you, Lexie!" She said enthusiastically. He didn't know what made it different from any others until his bottom came into contact with the booster seat sitting on it. "Right next to big brother, huh?" Alex looked over at Mark, who waved a hand covered by the black salon cape. "Now, we know what we're doing with your hair, Lexie, but you've got another important decision to make. Dinos or racecars?"

"For what?"

"Oh, I think the dinos are in the wash." The blonde woman combing Mark's hair said.

"Racecars it is then!" A brightly colored salon cape came across Alex's body. Rather than racecars, it looked more like monster trucks, all being driven by smiling cartoon animals.

"Why can't I have a normal one?"

"This is so much more fun!" She said. "Now, can you sit still for your haircut?"

"Yes." Alex muttered.

"So serious." She cooed, combing Alex's hair. "You'll be so happy once you're done, I bet." You have no idea, Alex thought grumpily. "What's your favorite color?"

"Huh?"

"What's your favorite color? Everyone has one."

"Uh, green?" She smiled as if he had told her a great secret.

As she worked, Alex felt a growing sense of unease. No, it couldn't be, he thought. Haircuts just always kind of looked weird when you were in the middle of them. She couldn't be!

"No!" Alex exclaimed when he could no longer deny the obvious. "I don't want a bowl cut!"

"Baby Lexie!" Mark scolded.

"You did this!" Alex felt tears welling up in his eyes as the stylist, no stranger to tantrums, continued to work. What

could he do? It was so obviously a bowl cut and they couldn't glue the hair back on. Maybe Mom would let him shave it. "Couldn't we do like a crew cut?" He asked meekly.

"Your hair's much too nice to make it that short." The stylist said. "I'm a pro. I promise you'll look good!"

As soon as Mark finished, he was hovering right by Alex. Rubbing it in, Alex thought angrily. Mark's hair was short and clean, making him look older while Alex's hair was now almost a mushroom.

"Smile, Baby Lexie!" Mark said. Alex scowled, but his colorful cape with his bare feet peeking out and his babyish hairstyle only made it clear that this was a pouting little boy.

"Alrighty, big brother. He's all set." She whisked the cape off of Alex, brushing a bit of hair from his cheek. Mark swooped in and spun him around and around.

"Told you you'd end up adorable." He cooed, kissing Alex's cheek.

“This isn't fair! I… don't like it.” He knew better than to yell, but he didn’t like how wimpy he sounded all but whispering to Mark.

“New haircuts always take a bit to get used to.” Mark said. “I think you look perfect.”

“For being such a good boy,” Startled, Alex turned and saw the stylist coming toward him with a green balloon. “You get a balloon!”

“No thanks.” Alex said, even as she tied it around his wrist. Alex tried to untie it while Mark paid, but it was no use. It was stuck on his wrist as they left the salon.

"I can't believe you did this!"

"Think of it like playing the baby game."

"This isn't a game! My hair is actually like this!"

"Not my fault this is just what silly little boys' hair is supposed to look like." He chuckled as Alex glared. "It'll grow back. Besides, you got a balloon. I didn't." He looked back at the salon. "She didn't even offer me one."

"Mark!" Mark ignored him and shrugged away his disappointment.

"We'd better get going. You were so worried about Dada just a little bit ago, Baby Lexie!" Mark patted his cheek. "I bet he's gonna love our new 'dos."

*** L ***

Much as Alex hated to admit that a routine was developing, the evening unfolded exactly how he would have expected. Mark stripped him of everything except his shirt and underwear as soon as they got to Mark's house. Alex played with toys in the living room until it came time to be fed dinner in Mark's lap, their parents chatting cheerfully as if they all already were a happy family with Alex as the youngest member. But I'm older than Mark! He insisted as he returned to the toys in the living room following a dessert of

mint chip ice cream. Mark watched as Alex loaded Spidey into a helicopter and pretended to make it fly. He would have preferred he stand up and run around the room, but at least it was getting off the floor. He had a perfect little boy bowl cut now, so Mark felt satisfied, even as he wondered if Alex had pieced together that the wedding was still far enough away that he would need at least a trim between now and then. Maybe they'll think it's ironic when we start school in the fall, Mark thought idly.

"You two look so handsome." Alex's mom said, sitting on the couch and kissing Mark's dad's cheek. Between his bowl cut and the somehow even more babyish Bunnydale briefs, Alex felt the exact opposite of handsome. He almost wanted to tell her that, but Mark gave his bottom a gentle swat to remind him of what he was supposed to say.

"I'm not handsome, mama. I'm adorable." It sounded rehearsed, but Mark knew that getting him into the habit was only the first step.

“Speaking of,” Mark said. “You should see some of the cute outfits Baby Lexie tried on today.” He got out his phone. “He even tried out some dance moves!” Alex focused on the toys, trying to block out the sounds of adoration coming from the couch. At least, he thought, I didn't get my hair cut before I tried on all that stuff. Wonder if Mama and Dada will let me wear a hat for the wedding?