

# The Treatment

*by HallowsEveWrite*

David has been through a lot. After the loss of his parents and trouble through the foster system his older brother finally steps up to take care of him through his teens. His rough childhood has left him an angry, broken teenager. Now Dr Bellamy offers a new treatment to help him through this tough time. Little does he know that reversing the damage to his mind and body will do more than just erase the trauma. Hopefully his big brother will stick around this time.

The Costume Box

2024

*Chapter 1*

## The Treatment - Chapter One

David looked out the window with his foot up on the dashboard, it's not like he didn't like his weekly trips to the therapist but it was getting a little repetitive. This time however his doctor said that his guardian, his older brother, should accompany him. He didn't really understand why but she said it was due to the new therapy they wanted to try. He was pretty annoyed. Going a whole two weeks without his medication had left him feeling a little drained, plus he didn't really see the point. He had his foot propped up on the dashboard, he knew it would bother Aaron but he was in the mood to push his buttons, he could always blame his mood on the medication shift if he thought he was going to get into trouble, not that Aaron ever really punished him for anything.

Aaron glanced at the long haired sixteen year old, he knew he only kept his hair long so he could keep the scar on his cheek from being seen all the time. It was for a similar reason he was wearing a hoodie in the hot summer weather.

"David put your foot down." Aaron instructed from the driver side of the car as they pulled into the university parking lot. "It's not safe." His brother David always was doing something to get on his nerves, he tried to shrug it off but he was more concerned about the security guards telling him off.

"Okay DAD!" David hissed at his older brother. He lifted up his injured leg with his hand and set it carefully down on the

car floor.

Aaron just rolled his eyes at his younger brother, he was just trying to annoy him. David always seemed to have something to say to get on his nerves, who could blame him? “Dave, I’m not trying to be your father.” Aaron told him. He knew it was hard for David being under the guardianship of his older brother of ten years, although it’s not like Aaron had made it easy for him.

“Yeah.” David agreed icily and shrugged as they pulled into the parking lot.

Aaron winced. Why did he even say that? He knew it got on his nerves. David glared at him and remembered the day Aaron arrived at the hospital a couple years ago, police officers inside his room asking him all sorts of questions. When David saw Aaron that day the look of terror melted from his face, he wished he was still like that. Happy to see him that is. The truth is he should have been there much earlier.

As they pulled into the space David reached back to collect his cane, it wasn’t anything fancy, just a metal adjustable height cane that he had put a bunch of stickers on after his fall when he was fourteen. When he was first handed it he was just happy to finally be out of a wheelchair but now it was a constant reminder that he wasn’t an average sixteen year old. Still he needed it if he was going to make it across campus to his doctor’s office.

David’s Doctor was assigned to him by the state while he was

still their ward, it almost comforted him to know that his brother wouldn't need to pay for this treatment and one of the reasons he didn't actually mind meeting with her. One of the caveats though is that she was paid for through a grant and worked out of the University so every week he needed a ride up. His brother wouldn't allow him to take the bus on his own, he didn't really blame him but this was one of the few times he had been invited to the meeting.

David limped through the parking lot as Aaron locked up the car, he knew he would catch up. It's not like he could go very fast. He used his cane with practice elegance, at least he thought so. The appendage had a throbbing pain to it, broken in too many places to ever heal properly. After a few beeps just like clockwork Aaron caught up. "So why does Dr Bellamy need to see me today?" Aaron asked David, even though David had already explained.

"It's the new treatment I guess." David explained again and poked the handicap button near the door. One good thing about the cane is that they never needed to park too far away from the building.

Aaron waited for the door to slowly open with David. He had no problem holding it open for him but knew that it would annoy David if he did that, so he allowed him the concession of using the button for both of them. "The old one wasn't working?" Aaron asked.

"I guess not the way she wanted." David conceded, which was actually more information than Aaron was usually

allowed.

“Okay.” Aaron said and eventually they landed at a nondescript office in the middle of the medical research area of the university, the only thing marking it was the black name placard, ‘DR CLARA BELLAMY’. It wasn’t like a regular doctor’s visit. No waitrooms, receptionists or calling ahead. It reminded Aaron of visiting his own professor’s at his old university.

David knocked on the door loudly, he had been visiting her for almost two years now so was quite used to the dishevelled doctor. The unorganised nature worked well with him, he preferred it to the stuffy hospitals he spent a lot of his pre-teens in and out of.

The door opened to reveal a middle aged woman wearing a brown cardigan with a lanyard around her neck. “Dave and Aaron, thank you for coming.” She enthused and motioned for them to sit.

David didn’t need to be told twice and collapsed with a sigh on the simple sofa that sat in front of two cosy looking chairs. Aaron opted to sit in one of the free single chairs while the doctor took the free one. “So.” David said practically expecting her to start the meeting. “When do I start the new treatment, a week without my meds is torture.”

“Is it that bad?” Dr Bellamy said, more concerned than surprised.

“Well...” David trailed off and looked at Aaron. “You took

me off... Well everything.”

“Has it been difficult?” She asked again, wanting more clarity.

“Like the mood stabilisers too?” Aaron asked, he had let David follow the doctors orders on the amount and when to take his medication. The question ticked David off.

“Yes.” David hissed at his older brother. Now things began to click why he had been so crabby the last couple weeks.

Aaron clearly felt bad for some of the comments he had made earlier. It’s not like David couldn’t survive without medication. Everyone had just agreed that after all the stress he had been under the last few years sometimes he needed a little extra help, David included.

Clara nodded and jotted some notes in a notebook. “How has Aaron been, Dave?” She asked the teenager.

David winced a little, he knew in the last few sessions he had almost made a breakthrough trying to get through his trauma but kept halting everytime his brother came up. This is obviously what prompted this new treatment. He thought for a moment that she just took him off everything to feel vulnerable. “He’s fine.” He grumbled to her.

Dr Bellamy flipped to a previous page in her book. “Can we talk about fall?” She asked again, getting right to the point.

Aaron looked surprised. This didn’t feel like a meeting a guardian needed to be at and felt more like a regular session. “Should I come back?” He asked the two of them. “I could

get coffee.”

“Please stay.” The doctor reassured him. David on the other hand just clicked his tongue.

“I guess.” David finally agreed. “You already know everything.”

“I know the details.” Clara agreed. “Your foster Dad pushed you through the railing.” She recounted. Aaron sucked in a deep breath.

David on the other hand leaned back, grabbed the side of his face and looked out the window. It was sunny out and university students were playing frisbee in the commons. “Yeah.” He agreed with her, it was all in the police report and the court case. It wasn’t exactly a secret to anybody.

“Why did that happen?” Clara asked him.

David shrugged. “I broke... Something...” He said not able to recall the exact decoration in the house. “He was an asshole, an angry one and pushed me. Hard.”

Aaron hadn’t really heard a personal recount of the events since the court case, even then his lawyer barely had the boy speak. It was an open and shut case, and didn’t even last a week. “Dave-” Aaron tried to speak but the doctor put up a warning hand, wanting the teenager to continue instead.

David kept thinking about it and sucked in a deep breath, then again. Clearly holding back an emotion. “I wasn’t the easiest kid in the system.” He admitted.

“Are you still mad at Mr Dollin?” Clara asked him.

“Yeah.” David agreed. “Of course I am.” He motioned to his leg. “Wouldn’t you be?”

Clara nodded along sagely. “You told me you’ve been mad for a while in the last session, since before the fall.” She added. This conversation is clearly what prompted Aaron’s invitation and he knew it was coming. Aaron failed David way before he was even in the foster system.

David, seeing right through the doctor, looked at Aaron and scoffed. “It’s not like that.” He told her.

“When we first started seeing each other was right before Aaron took you in.” Clara asked. “You seemed happy at the prospect.”

“I was... I mean. I still am.” David said not liking where this was going.

Clara now turned to Aaron. “Mr Gray.” She started. “Why do you think I asked you to come?”

Aaron gulped like he was being interrogated by a school teacher. “I don’t know...” He said, even though he already knew. “You think I know why Dave is angry.”

“I’M NOT ANGRY!” David yelled, which surprised even him. Aaron was unphased and more than used to his outbursts, the doctor was all professionalism and didn’t react either. David seeing the non reaction got embarrassed and his face flushed. “I’m sorry.” He said much quieter.

Clara took some more notes, always looking for more data. “Why do you think Dave is angry?” She asked him.

“Well... I... Uh...” Aaron stammered and looked at David.

“Just tell her.” David demanded. “She’ll just ask again.”

A small smirk twitched on the doctor’s lip, almost breaking his facade. “Go on.” She also insisted.

“Well I would be angry too.” Aaron said diplomatically. “He got hurt by someone who should have been looking out for him.”

David looked at him, his eyes almost piercing his soul like he was so close to the truth. “Yeah.” David agreed. “That.”

The doctor nodded and took more notes and finally shut her notebook. “Perhaps we should move onto what I think might actually help.” She decided.

“Thank god.” David agreed, not being able to take Aaron’s stares anymore. “I thought you were going to ask him about Mom and Dad.”

Clara and Aaron shot each other a look, the doctor’s hand almost reaching back for the notebook. “Do you want to talk about that?” She asked him.

“No.” David said firmly.

Clara nodded. The two of them had talked at deep length about their late parents and that wasn’t really what today’s session was meant to be about. “I can invite Aaron back

another day to discuss if that helps.”

David paused for a long time. “Maybe.” The troubled teen finally admitted.

Aaron was more shocked than David was though. Having lost his parents six years ago at the age of ten David had actually received a fair amount of counselling. From his school, from the foster system and even Clara. David looked at how uncomfortable Aaron looked, he had obviously not had as much support states away at his university.

“So the purpose of the new treatment is to try and erase past trauma.” Dr Bellamy started and took out a small pill bottle. “The goal is to fix the issues, not just cope with them.”

David looked at the new treatment sceptically. “How is a little pill going to fix my leg?” He demanded sarcastically and motioned to it again. “This doesn’t make sense.”

The doctor expected his response and kept explaining. “This isn’t a chemical cocktail, these are an experimental form of nanomedicine that will reverse the damage done to your cells.” She held up the bottle that contained only a few pills. “The research grant that funds this is the same that funds your therapy.”

David’s expression softened from the hardened scowl of the rebellious teenager to that of a curious kid. “Can it like...” He started. “Fix me?”

Aaron sucked in a breath. David had been to so many doctors and surgeons who all seemed to have a miracle treatment to

get him back to full use of his leg, none of those seemed to work. “Is it safe?” Aaron asked the doctor.

“It’s been approved.” She said a little deflective.

David picked up the pill bottle. “So how does it work?” He asked her.

“Well each pill is roughly three years.” She told him. “Restoring your body back to that state.”

“So it’ll fix my leg.” David said with wide eyes.

The doctor nodded but then took the bottle from him. “It will and everything else.”

David already knew where this was going. “What are the side effects?” He asked.

“Initially, dizziness, confusion and tiredness.” She started. “Those are only the temporary ones. The treatment will revert all of your cells to the previous state.”

David nodded along. “How long.”

“We will keep you until you wake up, then you should already see the effects.” Clara explained.

“But is it safe?” Aaron asked again, more concerned.

“It’s been well tested.” Clara said.

“So it’s safe.”

“Mr Gray the treatment is still in an experimental state, you would need to approve it for Dave to use it.” She finally

relented, still not answering his questions.

“I don’t know.” Aaron admitted not really wanting to subject his little brother to the doctor’s experimental treatment.

“Aaron!” David yelled at him getting upset. “This could fix everything!” He was scowling now and stood up. He wobbled a bit and stumbled into the coffee table and ultimately on the ground, his crippled leg doing nothing to help him. “FOR FUCKS SAKE.” He screamed.

“Dave!” Aaron exclaimed and hurried over to help him up. He lifted him under his arms and was able to situate the red faced teenager back onto the sofa.

David scowled at Aaron. Aaron sighed. “You really want to do this?” He asked him, knowing after everything David had been through was more than capable of making his own medical decisions.

“Yes.” David decided, clearly placing his trust in his doctor. “I just want to be normal!” He said getting angry again. He was always angry.

“Okay then.” Aaron agreed and looked at the doctor who had taken up the notebook again. “What do you need from us?”

The doctor moved to her desk where she presented a prepared set of paperwork. Authorizations, liabilities and even a few parental waivers that Aaron sat there reading.

“You a lawyer or something now?” David said in a ticked off tone after about half an hour of various legal terms. David

knew his brother wasn't, he was an 'IT Specialist'. Just a fancy term for someone who spent all his time working on a computer for some huge company.

"Just let me read it." Aaron said getting annoyed with his brother.

"It's pretty standard." The doctor said but didn't stop the older brother from checking over everything. The paperwork didn't really divulge anything specific about the process and just absolved the university of any wrongdoing.

Aaron finally put down the pen and the doctor smiled. "Let's begin." She announced.

The two of them followed the doctor to a lab, it was only a few doors down. Inside were a couple hospital beds, cameras and other monitoring equipment. Clara patted one of the beds indicating that David should lie down on it. Which he did so, letting his sneakers slap on the ground beside the bed.

"Now this shouldn't take too long to start." She told him. "But we added a sedative, it'll only feel like a short nap.

David nodded and finally the doctor opened the pill bottle and handed him a bottle of water. "Let's see if it works then." He told her and expertly took the pill.

It didn't take long for David to feel light headed, in fact he was fast asleep much faster than Aaron expected.

"Let's talk in my office while David sleeps." Dr Bellamy told Aaron.

*Chapter 2*

## The Treatment - Chapter Two

Aaron followed the doctor back to her office, she motioned for him to sit on the sofa this time. “How long will Dave be out?” He asked her.

“Not as long as you might think, the procedure is fairly quick.” She told him and picked up the notebook, opening it to a fresh page. “So Mr Gray, how is David doing?”

“His grades are alright, given everything.” Aaron told her. He had a feeling she wasn’t actually worried about David’s grades.

“That’s good.” The doctor placated him. “But I meant at home.”

“Aren’t you supposed to already know that?” Aaron asked directly.

“I know what David has told me.” She countered and scribbled something in her notebook.

Aaron crossed his arms. It’s not like he was against the idea of therapy, more that he was against the idea of finding a therapist. With one presented right in front of him he may as well take advantage. “I personally think he’s still angry, with no way of burning off some energy.” He decided to say.

Clara nodded. “He was in a pretty bad situation, even before the fall.” She told him. Aaron swallowed, gulped really. “It

happens a lot with older kids in the system.” She went on. “Maybe what happened was for the best.”

“How can you say that?” Aaron asked a little disgusted in his little brother’s therapist. “He was just a kid.”

“He seems to be in a better situation now.” She agreed, then looked at him with her piercing brown eyes. “Which brings me to my next point, your parents.”

“Hey, I’ll come back and we can talk about it.” Aaron said now defensive.

“They died.” She stated. Aaron was getting uncomfortable. “Six years ago. How old was David then?”

“T-ten.” Aaron stammered knowing how impossibly young that sounded. But she knew that already, it was just a trick.

“How old were you Mr Gray?” Dr Bellamy interrogated.

“I was twenty.” Aaron said he was actually getting a little emotional. “I was in college.”

Clara nodded again. “Why was David in foster care?” She asked him. This was what she actually wanted to talk about.

Aaron’s chest started beating quickly, like a caged rabbit wanting free. “Our parents died.” He stammered.

“Did his social worker not talk to you about options?” She went on.

“I was in college.” He said now getting a little angry with her himself. It’s not like he was one of her patients. “My parents

had also just died.” He spat.

Clara nodded again, scribbling away in her notebook. “Yes. I suppose those things are true.” She agreed diplomatically.

“Look, it’s not like I didn’t want to do something for him.” He added, unprompted. “I tried to visit as often as I could and it’s not like we had a place to stay due to the fire.”

“You do now, your current house.” Clara agreed. “The new one.”

“The insurance company really dragged their feet, but it’s the same house, same rooms, same layout, same place.” Aaron told her.

This time Clara flipped through the book, looking for something. “Right. The house was rebuilt according to the original plan.” She told him.

“David spoke about it?” Aaron asked her, still reeling from the interrogation and would much rather talk about the four year long construction project he managed from college.

“Mostly that neither of you sleep in the master bedroom.” Clara noted.

“Oh. Yeah.” Aaron told her. Obviously she didn’t care about countertop finishes. “Didn’t feel right.” She nodded along.

“With this treatment you will need to be there for David, he’ll be confused.” Clara told him, switching subjects as if she hadn’t just pissed him off.

“I will be, he’s my responsibility now.” Aaron assured her.

“Even after he turns eighteen?” She asked which caught him off guard.

“What? Of course!” He again reaffirmed. “We are brothers, I’ll be there, no matter what, no matter how long he needs my help. I won’t leave him alone again.” Aaron’s eyes went a little wide at his own admission.

Dr Bellamy was writing quickly and nodded along to what he was saying. “Good.” She said firmly, as if he had completed some assignment for her. She reached over to her desk and picked up a small card. “If you want to chat some more or have any questions about the treatment after today, please call me.”

“Okay. Thanks.” Aaron said, although he was pretty sure he could find her number online he took the card anyway and placed it into his wallet.

The doctor noticed something on her monitor. “Your brother is awake, faster than I thought.” She told him.

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David happily giggled as his Dad pushed him on the swing. “HIGHER!” He screamed. “I WANNA GO HIGHER!” He could feel every time he swung forward his Dad’s strong hand pushed firmly against his back as the chain of the swings rattled and creaked.

“Careful Davey” His Dad told him.

“I’m going to jump!” David announced and without warning at the top of his swing let go of the chains and slipped off the seat, the momentum propelling him forward.

The sandy ground beneath him disappeared and what appeared in its place was a staircase, hard, firm and broken. His childlike cheer vanished in a moment when he realised he was falling down them again, his Dad no longer there.

David’s eyes open up as if he had been sleeping an entire night, they practically burst open with energy. This wasn’t his room though, it was some hospital. Had he been back to treat his burns? No, that didn’t sound right. He hadn’t done that in years. He looked to his left at the empty bed, then his right. It felt like he had a weight on the back of his head and collapsed back down onto the pillow. “Hello.” He called out, perhaps one of the hospital nurses could tell him what’s going on.

David laid there for a few minutes as his world became a little more clear. He remembered he was at the university and tried Dr Bellamy’s new treatment. He shrugged his dizziness to whatever treatment he was on. Then a thought struck him, his leg! He hadn’t even been able to feel the pain of the injuries from before. David pulled away the covers. His jeans sat loosely on his legs. That confused him. “What the.” He said out loud and finally managed to sit up. His hoodie had always been a little baggy but now it enveloped him like he was wearing his Dad’s clothes.

The thought of his Dad sent a twisting feeling in his stomach,

prickles crawled over his skin as he thought about him. He hadn't felt like this in years, he could already feel his involuntary tears filling his eyes as his vision blurred.

That's when the door opened to reveal Dr Bellamy and his Dad! "Dad!" David cried out in an unbelievable shout. "What's going on!"

"What happened to him!" Aaron said in a worried tone and hurried over to his brother. "He's... Smaller."

"Daddy!" David cried and reached out with both arms. The teary needy look on David's face couldn't help but invite Aaron into one of the first hugs he had received from his brother since they reunited in the hospital over two years ago.

"Dave, it's me... Aaron." He corrected him as he held him in a longer than comfortable embrace.

Realisation struck David's face. "Right..." He said as if a thousand miles away. "Mom and Dad are..."

"Yeah..." Aaron said uneasily at the vulnerable state of his brother.

Dr Bellamy was busy filling in a clip board of information observing the two. Eventually she put the clipboard down to address the brothers directly. "You have probably noticed some changes." She said vaguely.

David pushed himself away from Aaron. "You thINK!" David exclaimed with a crack in his voice causing him to clear his throat with a forced cough.

“What happened?” Aaron asked again, still shocked.

“His cells have reverted to a previous state, about three years ago.” Dr Bellamy stated in her matter-of-fact tone as if the two brothers had known this was the result of the treatment.

David gasped as he pulled back the covers, his hand grasped his injured leg and it truly hit him that he no longer felt the pain from his injury a couple years ago. “It worked!” He exclaimed, the fear and surprise in his voice changing into disbelief.

He swung his legs off the bed and practically fell down onto the floor. He caught himself and steadied himself by holding onto the bed.

“Careful.” Aaron told him.

“Like you care.” David spat out with renewed contempt, then winced. “Sorry...” He looked a little concerned then let it pass. He and Aaron weren’t incredibly close but it had been years since he snapped at him like that. David steadied himself, his clothes hung loose on his frame. His jeans extended well past his ankles and his sweater looked downright oversized. “This might be a problem.”

Dr Bellamy performed a full examination of David, even marvelling at the state of him. He had him remove his oversized clothes while she took notes, pictures and generally gave him a physical. “The treatment seems to be working as intended, based on your medical history you are physically the same as you were when you were thirteen.” She told him

with a little pride.

David held his now unnecessary cane in his hand and looked at the doctor, by now he had returned to his oversized clothes and was practically giddy. He was hopping up and down a little and even standing on one leg. “This is amazing!” He exclaimed.

“There are no side effects?” Aaron asked, still worried about how fast everything had changed, this whole procedure challenged his whole perception of how science worked.

David was eager to get going and Aaron didn’t really want to be left alone with Dr Bellamy. “We can meet every other day, but if something comes up give me a call.” She instructed.

David handed her his cane, thanked her again and the two went on their way.

*Chapter 3*

## The Treatment - Chapter Three

David was again looking out the car window, his pants had been rolled up to his ankles and his sleeves rolled up to his wrists. He looked like a kid playing dress up in his clothes. He wasn't concerned, he couldn't stop bouncing his leg up and down in the car - he was restless. As the two drove past a park he saw a playground with a swing. "Can we stop?" He blurted out.

"Here?" Aaron asked, totally confused. "What's wrong?"

David snapped back in focus. "Oh, uh nevermind. I want to run a bit." He told him truthfully. He was anxious to have his mobility granted to him that he barely even cared that he looked like a middle schooler.

Aaron smiled a little, it had been a while since he had seen David actually ask him for something. "Maybe we should go to the store first." He suggested. "I think you need some new clothes."

David's mood shifted quickly. "FINE!" He shouted. "WE'LL DO WHAT YOU WANT!"

Aaron was shocked and pulled the car into the park's parking lot. "Okay we'll stop." He said concerned about his brother's outburst.

David's face was red and his cheeks burned. He had lost control of his temper, as if all the therapy he had gotten

disappeared in an instance and the pained distaste for his brother resurfaced so easily. “No.” He said and took a deep breath, remembering all the techniques he had learned over the years. “You’re right we should go to the store first, sorry.”

“You, okay?” Aaron asked and placed a hand on David’s knee.

David shirked him off shifting away. “Let’s just go to the store.” He told him.

Aaron pulled his hand away quicker than he meant to and agreed.

The two eventually pulled into the local Target. David had to admit he was a little eager to get into some fitting clothes, he also wanted to get some new shoes.

Aaron on the other hand was a little apprehensive about the whole thing. The treatment had been a startling scientific marvel and David’s outbursts were causing him a lot of concern. Dr Bellamy just told him to monitor David and call if he was feeling sick. He followed his younger brother as he quickly led him towards the men’s department. Looking at his brother from behind he was sceptical he would fit into anything but the smallest outfits.

David looked around the shirts trying to find something he liked. He used the opportunity to dart quickly between the aisles.

“See anything you like?” Aaron asked him carefully.

David just shrugged and picked up a large black hoodie and tossed it into the cart Aaron was leaning against. Aaron looked down at it. “You should try on this stuff before we buy it. Do you even know your size?” He asked.

David let out a steamy breath from his nostrils. “That’ll take forever.” He said.

Aaron rolled his eyes. “It’s not like you got to show me, just pick what you like and try it on.” He told him.

David rolled his eyes and started putting more and more outfits into the cart, mostly black however some of them had logos and others had some colour.

Aaron waited on a bench outside the change room but only heard annoyed grunts from behind the door. “Everything okay?” He asked.

“It’s all too big.” David complained.

“Want me to find some other options?” Aaron offered.

“Whatever.” David lamented.

Aaron took the opportunity to head into the boys section of Target. Thinking there may be something closer to his current size there. He had noticed David’s taste for darker clothes and was able to find a couple things that might work with his style. A pair of dark sweatpants and a Batman t-shirt. It wasn’t perfect but atleast it’ll probably fit. He went back to the changing room and hung the new items over the door.

A loud groan from behind the door echoed into the Target.

“What’s wrong now?” Aaron asked his younger brother.

“Batman, REALLY?” David yelled.

Aaron noticed some of the other patrons turning their heads to see the commotion. “Sorry, it’s just a black shirt.” Aaron told him. “I thought you liked Batman.”

“Maybe when I was seven!” David growled at him. But finally he emerged wearing the new outfit. “At least it fits.”

The shopping took longer than expected as David inspected outfits in the boys section. Ultimately he settled on a simple pack of plain t-shirts in black white and grey. A pair of jeans and some socks. When it came to underwear he picked a pack of boxer briefs at random.

Shoes were a whole ordeal. David needed to get measured by the store clerk who was amazed at the shoes he was wearing. He was nice enough to let David wear the new pair of red sneakers out of the store.

Aaron wasn’t bothered by the high cost at the checkout, he kind of expected a steep bill before they even entered the store. “Do you need anything else?” Aaron asked him.

“Can I have a snack?” David asked and pointed to the chocolate bars by the checkout.

Aaron was caught off guard, it was extremely unlike David to ask for anything. “Oh sure.” Aaron agreed immediately.

A smile appeared on David’s lips as he grabbed a caramel filled chocolate. “Thanks Dad.” He said quickly, then froze.

Aaron also froze. But quickly brushed it off. Maybe the medicine was still having him be confused. “Dad?” He asked David.

“Shut up.” David said, his face getting redder by the second. “SHUT UP! I DIDN’T MEAN THAT!” He threw the chocolate back onto the shelf and turned around.

“Okay, okay.” Aaron agreed, but grabbed the treat to purchase anyway.

“YOU AREN’T MY DAD!” David yelled.

“Okay.” Aaron agreed again. He was quick to check out the clothes and was hoping to make a swift exit. “Just calm down okay.”

David was still flustered and finally calmed himself down enough for them to get back to the car. Once inside Aaron hands him the chocolate he abandoned earlier. “I’m not trying to be your Dad.” Aaron told him once they had both sat down.

“I don’t want to talk about it.” David said. “You just... Kinda... Look like him... It’s... Confusing...”

“Oh.” Aaron said. He hadn’t really thought about looking like his Dad. Other than David he didn’t really know anyone who even knew his Dad. This was the first time he was hearing it. He looked in the mirror and he could see a resemblance, maybe if he grew a beard or something.

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Aaron let David be on his own for a little bit while he made

them something to eat. He wasn't a great cook but after college he was pretty confident in his cooking abilities. Today he was making a simple roasted chicken with vegetables.

David on the other hand was quick to head to his room with his new clothes. When he got inside the whole place felt 'off', it didn't smell right. The walls were the wrong color and he quickly raced to his bedroom. The room was a replica of his original childhood bedroom, except for the fact that all the posters, furniture and really anything he held dear when he was ten was missing. Today however everything felt uneasy, misplaced, wrong. He took a deep breath.

David went to his window and looked into the backyard. One thing that didn't feel off was his view from his window. It was the same backyard he grew up with. Eventually he couldn't really stand being inside the house any longer. He was getting anxious, it didn't feel like home.

He went back downstairs, into the kitchen where his brother was putting things in the oven and opened the sliding glass door.

"Where are you going?" Aaron asked him. "Dinner will only be like twenty minutes."

David looked at him and rolled his eyes. "Just outside. I need some air." He told him.

"Okay, I'll let you know then." Aaron told him.

David went outside and Aaron watched him from the window over the sink. He went straight for the garden shed in the

backyard. It was the only structure left after the fire. Everything else was knocked down and rebuilt.

David went inside, the smell inside was much more familiar. The smell of old garden equipment. He wasn't here to do some gardening though. He went to a shelf and dug through some old balls stored in a box. They were mostly toys from when David was a kid but also had some relics from when Aaron was a kid. He grabbed the first tennis ball he could find. David went to the wall of the house and threw the ball against it just to catch it again. He was shocked at how quick he was on his feet.

David was so preoccupied playing his game he didn't even notice Aaron come up behind him. "Dinner is almost ready." Aaron said.

"Catch!" David announced and tossed the ball at him. Aaron fumbled but managed to catch it. He flashed him a grin and tossed it back.

David smiled back and caught it with one hand. He then threw it a little harder and stepped backward to make space. He hadn't walked backward with such abandon since his fall.

"I can't believe it worked." Aaron remarked seeing his brother's agility returned to him. He threw the ball back to him.

"I know!" He said excitedly. "It wasn't without some side effects though." Again he tossed the ball.

The two of them laughed and tested the limits of David's

regained speed. Aaron threw the ball harder and higher while David ran circles around him. The both of them got lost in their game, they hadn't played together like this for a long time, since way before the fire. It was cut to a halt when the two of them heard a loud alarm. 'BEEP BEEP BEEP!' a piercing noise blasted from inside the house.

"Shit." Aaron growled and turned around. Not before catching sight of David.

David's face was pale as if his heart stopped pumping blood to his face. His hands were dramatically pressed against his ears and he had collapsed onto his knees. His eyes were wide and he was panting. David was terrified.

"DAVID!" Aaron exclaimed and was about to rush to help but the consistent alarm pulled his attention back to the kitchen. He needed to fix that first. "I'LL BE RIGHT BACK."

Aaron rushed inside and he could already smell what was wrong, dinner was burnt. He had spent way too long outside playing with his little brother and lost track of time. He quickly turned off the oven and hesitated before opening it. Instead he grabbed a tea towel and fanned the smoke away from the smoke detector in the kitchen. After what felt like a small eternity the high pitched alarm finally shut off.

He abandoned the dinner and headed back outside. David was gone. It didn't take long for Aaron to hear the snivelling coming from the garden shed. He opened it to see David wiping tears from his eyes with the back of his hand. "David?" Aaron said carefully.

David tried to respond but all that came out was a sob, which just made him cry some more. He knew what this was, his various doctors agreed, he had mild PTSD. This didn't feel mild though. It felt like the world was ending. The worst part is that he never even told his brother about it. By the time he became his guardian it hadn't bothered him in over a year. He thought it was behind him.

He held up his hand with a finger to tell Aaron he needed a minute, it was all he could do. Speaking was a little beyond him at the moment. He gasped, then gasped again. Why was breathing so hard right now? He gave up on wiping the tears away and focused on the breathing techniques Dr Bellamy had taught him. He knew there was no fire, Aaron came back after all. He knew smoke detectors went off on the mildest things. He couldn't convince himself though. He could feel the heat of the fire. He could feel the smoke in his lungs. He wasn't calming down, it was getting worse. He groaned.

Aaron went into the shed and placed an arm around his little brother. "Dave!" He said a little panicked.

David threw up, like the feeling in his stomach was too terrible to keep in. His brand new clothes were ruined. Yet somehow he started to feel a little bit better. He leaned into his brother and took a deep breath, he smelt his Dad. The scent of irish spring soap and lawn clippings, the second scent might have been because they were literally in the garden shed, but it reminded him of his Dad and the Saturday morning he would spend maintaining his garden. He was starting to calm down.

The two sat there for a few more minutes while David tried to compose himself. Aaron, not sure what to do, tried to make a little conversation. “We still have some of our old stuff in here.” He told him and reached into a box and pulled out an old water gun.

“I... I guess...” David agreed and lifted up his head to see the green and yellow plastic water pistol. “That thing is old.”

“Well it’s all old.” Aaron agreed and dropped it back into the box. “Ready to go inside?”

David nodded and stood up. He could now clearly see how big a mess he had made of himself. He was embarrassed and still felt nauseous. Although now he wasn’t sure if it was the anxiety or the fact he just threw up. His mouth tasted awful and he had a lingering headache.

“You should take a shower.” Aaron told him and pressed on his back to lead him out of the shed. “Do you want me to call Dr Bellamy?”

David shook his head. “Um. No.” He told him. “This is something else.” He deflected although he had been struggling keeping his emotions in check all afternoon and he was pretty certain that was a side effect of the treatment.

“Okay.” Aaron said and led him into the house.

The stench of the burnt dinner left a horrible disgusted look on David’s face. He ran out of the kitchen and booked it into the bathroom. Aaron was still very concerned but left him to clean himself up.

## *Chapter 4*

# The Treatment - Chapter Four

David ran upstairs and into his room. He had a headache and his clothes were ruined. He stripped them off and dropped them into a pile beside his laundry hamper. He tried to catch his breath and looked at himself in the mirror. The changing room at the store only had one in the hall so he didn't get a chance to look but he was surprised at what he saw. The scars from his burns when he was ten were more prominent, just like they were when they had finally started to finish healing at thirteen. He traced the familiar lines across his chest and up his arm, he knew it would continue onto his back. His lips quivered a little. Was he going to cry again? He didn't. He pushed the feeling down with a deep breath and grabbed a towel to hurry to the bathroom and clean himself up.

Aaron finally addressed dinner. The burnt husk of chicken and roasted veggies didn't seem appetising but he couldn't exactly let him and David go hungry. He decided to order some pizza. He knows David's order since that was usually a go to dinner for the two of them.

He sat down on the couch in the living room. While the place had been rebuilt it didn't leave a huge budget for new furniture so most of it was used. He leaned his head back on the back of the sofa wondering what he was going to do about David. The procedure he went under seemed pretty intense. He started to think of all the things they would need to do, some things were easy but there was no way David was

going to be able to take driving lessons like he wanted to, he would get pulled over immediately. Maybe now that his leg was fixed he would buy his brother a bicycle, he used to love riding those when he was little. Well before he got lost when he was a kid. Aaron simply dismissed the idea all together.

David felt a lot better after his shower, so he decided to just put on some black sweatpants and grey t-shirt for the rest of the night. He thought about his scars. The ones on his face, chest, legs all over really. Aaron hadn't said anything so maybe it was just his imagination that they were worse. He had hit a growth spurt at fifteen so maybe they just didn't seem that bad before. Either way he was a little self conscious of them, just like he was in middle school. The fact that it was bothering him just made him feel worse about it.

He stepped down the stairs to see his brother accepting pizza at the door. He liked pizza. He wasn't particularly hungry after throwing up but figured he should at least eat something.

Aaron closed the door and saw David had come down. "Hungry?" He asked him.

"Not really." David admitted.

"Okay, well try to eat something." Aaron suggested and brought the pizza into the living room.

David sat on the couch with his brother. He still felt off about everything. He looked around at all the new furniture, not really sure how to feel about it. Nothing was really the same in the house. It looked like a whole different family had

moved in. He just sighed and took a single slice of pizza.

“How are you feeling?” Aaron asked curiously.

“I dunno.” David said truthfully, he did not feel like a conversation about PTSD. It’s not like Aaron was there that night, he doesn’t know how intense it was. “Can we just watch a movie or something?”

“Sure David.” Aaron agreed. “What do you want to watch?”

“Just pick anything.” He told his older brother not really in the mood to make a decision. He was happy he didn’t ask him what he wanted for dinner. Having someone else make decisions for him felt nice.

Aaron picked an old western movie. The kind of movie he used to watch with his Dad when he was a kid. He didn’t know if David and his Dad did the same thing. Either way David put his feet up on the couch and curled up against the armrest.

David watched the movie, it was longer than he expected and when it was finally over he yawned. He didn’t actually feel like going to bed though, he felt like his room still felt weird.

Aaron also yawned. “I’m going to bed.” He told his younger brother.

“Yeah, okay.” David told him and watched his brother leave him in the living room. The two of them always held different schedules when it came to going to bed. David was more of a night owl while Aaron woke up early for work. He

never really bothered him about it and the two were perfectly happy to have some time to themselves in the evening.

David eventually did go to his room though, he laid down on his bed staring into the darkness. For some reason he couldn't get to sleep. The darkness felt eerie and unsettling. It made him think about his time in the foster home. He remembered sleeping in a shared room with a couple of other kids, it was always noisy. He then thought about when he was sleeping in this bedroom. In the darkness it looked the same way from when he was ten. Nothing felt exactly right. He sat up and turned on the lamp on his bed side table feeling immediately better.

David looked around the room for answers but didn't find any. Eventually he collapsed back onto his pillows looking at the now illuminated room. He couldn't explain it but nothing felt comfortable. Like the walls were too close together or he didn't fit into the room. He decided to get up.

He left his room behind and wandered the house a little. He went into the kitchen and got a glass of water, he watched some late night TV in the living room and even stepped out onto the deck. He didn't like being outside at night so quickly retreated back inside. Eventually after a few hours and properly into the middle of the night, the last time David looked at a clock it was past two in the morning he finally fell asleep on the couch with the light of the living room TV on his face.

“BEEP! BEEP! BEEP!” The fire alarm blared. David was on

his feet in moments. His room is filled with toys, posters and stuffed animals. He almost had a whole zoo of stuffed creatures strewn about. He raced out of his room and his eyes stung and his face and arms burned. “Ahhh!” He screamed in pain and darted away down the hall as fire slicked behind him into his room.

He looked down the hall, the path to his parent’s room already had fire crawling up the wall with his family pictures. “MOMMY! DADDY!” He screamed and against better judgement ran through the flames and pushed against the door. It came off its hinges easily as the fire damaged door crumbled into ash.

“AHHHHHH!” He screamed deeply. His parent’s bed was engulfed in flames along with the rest of the room. The smoke stung his eyes filling them with tears as he had to step away coughing. He collapsed onto the ground. It was hot. The window broke and air rushed in. Painful fire rushed over him. “AHHHHH!” He screeched again, loud and harsh since his throat hurt.

He crawled through the smoke to the last place he could go. His brother’s room. It was mostly empty since he left for college but it was furthest away from the fire. He crawled into the room. It was still smokey and hot but felt almost cold on his fire burned skin. “HELP! DADDY!” He screamed. “HELP! MOMMY!”

Aaron woke up when he heard the first scream coming from downstairs. At first he thought it may have been the TV but

when David screamed the second time he rushed downstairs. His younger brother was thrashing around on the floor, he looked like he was in genuine pain. Aaron didn't know what to do and tried to move things out of his way. When he started to scream for help he finally grabbed him and pulled him into his lap.

"I'm here Davey." He told him. David still convulsed in his arms. He held him a little tighter.

David's eyes finally snapped open. He screamed loudly. Harshly. With everything he had. Everything felt bad. He wasn't in the right place. He gasped for air, it was clean. He groaned as his mind caught up with his surroundings. He was in the living room. Nothing was on fire.

"Davey." Aaron said calmly. Loosening his grip a little.

David groaned again. He was sweating. He was crying. There was snot dripping out of his nose. He sniffed deeply. He breathed heavily. He didn't say a word.

Aaron's heart dropped. He didn't need to ask. This was the second time today his little brother had a complete meltdown. He was not okay. He felt like crying himself but just gently rubbed his back and pulled David closer so his face buried itself into his shoulder. He didn't protest at all, in fact he held onto Aaron trying to calm himself down. Which didn't happen quickly. He cried in big wails and shivers, whatever he was dreaming about had clearly sent him into an absolute fit. He only stopped crying after he got physically exhausted.

After David stopped crying Aaron picked him up so he was standing and led him to the kitchen. He got him a big glass of water which he greedily drank from. “David.” Aaron said while his brother gulped down the water. “Is there something you want to tell me?”

David set the glass down and looked up at his brother. He gulped. He knew there were things to tell him but where to start? Does he simply explain the dream, a dream he hadn't had in years. Does he tell him about the PTSD, which shouldn't be bothering him anymore. “I think... I need my medicine.” He told him and frowned, scrunching up his face. He didn't like relying on it but this situation was part of the reason he had started taking it in the first place.

Aaron nodded and went to the cupboard and pulled out one of the bottles. He stopped though. “Should we call Dr Bellamy?” He asked him.

David frowned. Then thought for a second. “I know what I need.” He spat at his brother. “YOU WEREN'T THERE!”

Aaron's lips quivered. He looked at the complicated medicine that started with a B, he didn't really know what they did. “Do you want to talk about it?” He asked and held out the bottle of pills to him.

David felt guilty. His brother was obviously and rightfully concerned about him. He had just cried on his shoulder for half an hour, he could still see the damp stains on his brother's clothes. “After the fire.” He started and struggled to open the pill bottle. “I was hurt pretty bad.”

Aaron sucked in a deep breath but didn't say anything, wanting his brother to continue. He remembered how his brother looked. But he wasn't there. It took him hours to get to the hospital and by then he was asleep and in bandages. The doctors had him sleeping for days and days. Aaron tried to stay by his side but had to commute back and forth, it's not like he had a place to stay.

"It was hard." David started. "It hurt a lot and I kept thinking about Mom and Dad." The pill bottle top finally snapped open, spilling the pills onto the ground. "FUCK!" He screamed.

"I got it." Aaron told him and knelt down to carefully pick up each pill. He put one of the little blue pills into his brother's hand, it was shaking.

His brother took it and gulped down some more water. "That night." He went on. "I saw them."

"Saw who?" Aaron asked putting the pills back into the yellow bottle.

"Mom and Dad." David said. "That's what I was dreaming of."

Aaron froze. He didn't know the details of the night. David wouldn't talk about it and eventually said he told a therapist about it. "On the night of the fire?" Aaron asked.

"Yeah." David confirmed. The two of them stood in silence for a moment.

“Oh. David. I’m so sorry.” Aaron told him and pulled his brother into a hug.

David let himself get hugged but his arms were lifeless at his sides. “I haven’t been like this in years.” He complained.

“Well.” Aaron said. “I want to call Dr Bellamy then.”

David knew that was the right thing to do, she was his therapist afterall and doing a new treatment with her. He wrapped his arms around his older brother. “Okay.” He told him.

*Chapter 5*

## The Treatment - Chapter Five

First thing in the morning Aaron called Dr Bellamy, she was actually pretty eager to talk to him about David and was immensely interested in everything he had to say. David himself was still asleep, that blue pill from yesterday clearly helped him sleep.

“So he’s having bad dreams?” Dr Bellamy asked him over the phone.

Aaron was describing it poorly. “He was terrified, even before that.” He tried to explain. “He gets angry in quick sharp bursts.” He swore he could hear the scribbling of her pen through the phone.

“We have another appointment tomorrow, just observe him for another day.” Dr Bellamy told him. “This could simply be a side effect of The Treatment.”

Aaron was actually a little relieved. “So it can be fixed?” He asked.

“Maybe.” She dismissed it rather simply. “Just try to do something relaxing.”

“Like what?” Aaron said.

He heard pages flipping. “He likes the Zoo.” She told him.

Aaron was a little floored with that information. For one he wasn’t sure if this was breaching some kind of Doctor-patient

confidentiality. Also this was actually useful information which is not what he was really expecting. “The Zoo?” He tried to confirm.

“Yes. He mentioned on many occasions he used to enjoy the Zoo.” Dr Bellamy told him.

“I don’t remember Dad or Mom really taking him that often, maybe on a field trip or something.” Aaron said.

“His first hospital used to bring in animals to the kids section, then he went alone a lot while in foster care.” Dr Bellamy informed him. Now he was sure it was getting too personal, but he supposed this wasn’t exactly secret information.

“Thanks. I’ll suggest it to David.” Aaron said and ended the call shortly after.

It was still morning so Aaron decided to make some coffee and look up the Zoo, he hadn’t been there himself in over a decade so was actually getting into the idea of going again.

David woke up to the smell of the coffee maker brewing a fresh pot of coffee. He groggily pushed himself up off the bed. The pill he took in the middle of the night left his head a little heavy but he knew it would wear off. Other than that he actually felt a little good, at least he seemed to feel alright.

He lifted himself up thinking a cup of coffee would be perfect, there was a lot he wanted to do now that he didn’t need a cane and could walk around perfectly fine. When he got to the kitchen he noticed Aaron looking at him with concern.

“Good morning?” Aaron said cautiously.

“Hey.” David replied and went to get a cup of coffee. He poured a full mug of black coffee from the pot and sat down at the table where Aaron was. He took a sip of the drink and winced, it was so bitter!

“What’s wrong?” Aaron noticed David’s discomfort.

“Is something wrong with the coffee?” David asked.

“No, it's the same as always.”

“Well this is gross.” David complained and slid the mug further away from him.

“We can get you a fresh cup when we go out.” Aaron told him.

“Where are we going?” David asked wondering what Aaron was planning, he had his own plans.

“Dr Bellamy recommended the Zoo. She wants you to relax today and we will see her tomorrow.” Aaron told him.

David bit his bottom lip. It’s not like it was surprising that Aaron called his therapist in fact he said he was going to after last night. He liked the Zoo but he hadn’t been back to it since the fall. It was too big to walk around without being in tons of pain. But now that didn’t matter, so that's probably why Dr Bellamy suggested it. “Okay.” He agreed. He took a deep breath, breathing in sharply. He caught the feeling of anger inside him before he yelled. He wanted to tell Aaron he was going to go by himself and he wasn’t allowed to come.

He didn't though. He didn't even feel that way, not really. He just felt very angry with his brother.

David must have seemed a little strange since Aaron asked. "Are you okay?"

"Fine." He grumbled. "I'm going to go get ready." David abandoned his coffee at the table and went back upstairs to change.

David went upstairs to pick out an outfit for the Zoo, there wasn't much to pick from. He figured he would have to do some shopping online for some new outfits. He dug through his closet looking for something to wear but his taste in clothing had drastically changed since he was thirteen. He decided to just wear the Batman T-Shirt and his black jeans, both of which Aaron had purchased yesterday.

Aaron started packing some things for the two of them, water, a snack and he figured they would eat at one of the restaurants in the Zoo. He also packed some sun screen for them since it was a nice day out.

David came back down the stairs a little bit excited, he didn't really know why he was so against the Batman shirt at the store, he did like Batman. He hurried to put on his new shoes while Aaron finished getting ready. Pretty soon the two of them were back in the car.

Being away from the house made David feel immensely better. He was getting anxious standing around the house that had caused all his problems. Although it wasn't the same

house, theirs had been rebuilt, it was still a bit too much.

As Aaron drove he could tell David was excited. He was practically bouncing in his seat. “You okay?” He asked his younger brother.

“Yeah.” David said and fiddled with the radio in the front seat. “I just like the Zoo, hopefully some of the employees are the same.”

“You know some of them?” Aaron asked. “How often did you go?”

“Like... Every weekend...” David admitted.

Aaron was shocked, how had he and his brother never talked about this before. “You must really like the Zoo then.”

“The people are nice,” David told him. “and I like animals.”

Aaron smiled a little, learning more about what his brother liked made him feel closer. “You liked animals when you were little.” He reminded him.

“Yeah.” David agreed. “I wanted to work at the Zoo.”

“Really?” Aaron said. This was the first time David had spoken to him about the future. “You never told me that.”

“Well...” David trailed off. “It would have been hard to do... With the injury.”

Aaron went silent for a moment. His brother’s medical troubles had caused him a lot of pain but after the treatment he should be able to get back on track. “Well what about

now?" He asked. "Still interested?"

"Yeah." David said and smiled. "Let's talk to the staff."

Aaron paid for two adult Zoo tickets. For a moment he considered that given David's new size he could get an under twelve ticket but thought better of it and purchased the correct ones. It also wouldn't be worth it to annoy his brother for a couple extra dollars.

David led Aaron through the entrance of the Zoo. It had a gift shop on one side and the food court on the other. David grinned freely as he ran toward the 'America's' exhibit. "I want to show you the wolves!" He told Aaron as he ran ahead.

Aaron struggled to keep up. He couldn't help but smile at his brother's enthusiasm. It reminded him of when they were kids and the two of them would go bike riding together.

David stopped a bit away from the wolf exhibit though. The viewing area was packed with younger kids trying to view the Zoo's pack of wolves. He could tell they were pretty rowdy.

Aaron finally caught up to David and looked at the wolves. "Want to show me?" He asked him and looked at his brother.

"Nevermind..." David said and looked around.

"What's wrong?" Aaron asked. His brother had been so excited only moments earlier.

"It's busy... People will make fun of me." David admitted then got embarrassed and darted off in a random direction.

Aaron tried to stop him but was now in a chase with his younger brother through a crowded Zoo. He didn't want to cause a scene so didn't yell at him but made sure to follow. David kept having these outbursts and he was worried this was another one.

David ran through the crowds until he got to a corner of the Zoo he knew people didn't really go to. No one really comes to a Zoo to look at rodents. Sure the otters were cute but David was staring at the raccoons, a small family of them had a spacious pit and they were asleep. No one else was there. He hated crowds.

Aaron finally caught up to David who was leaning on the fence looking down at the raccoons. "Hey." He said cautiously.

"Hey." David said back inviting him to join him. "Sorry I ran off."

"It's okay." Aaron said. "Why did you say they would make fun of you?"

David shot him a glare. "Isn't it obvious?" He told him annoyed and gestured to his face. The prominent scar from the fire had left its mark down the right side of his face. It looked bigger than it had a couple days ago. "They'll say I'm a freak or some kid will cry."

Aaron didn't like where this was going. He had never really seen this side of his brother, he never talked to him about this kind of thing. Maybe at sixteen he had just gotten over it and

now due to the treatment it came back? “Do people make fun of you?” He asked him. He was worried his little brother was being bullied. He felt guilty that this had never occurred to him until now.

David frowned and looked back at the raccoons. “Sometimes.” He admitted. “We should find some staff.” Clearly he didn't want to talk about it.

“Why is that?” Aaron asked.

“I want to ask them about volunteering.” David said. “They said I could when I was older.”

Aaron agreed and followed David through some of the hallways until they got to an information building. David led Aaron into the building and he approached a young woman with dark hair sitting at a counter. “Umm, Hi Lyla.” David said sheepishly.

Lyla looked up at David a little surprised. “David?” She asked curiously. “Oh wow, it’s been a while.”

“I umm.” David stammered. “I was busy for a while, but I'm back now.”

“You don’t look like you have changed at all.”

“I’m sixteen now.” He told her. “I want to volunteer at the Zoo now.”

“Oh!” Lyla said surprised. “I don’t know if we have an opening.”

David's face went from a nervous smile to a disappointed frown. "Oh..." He said. "I just thought that I would be able to now. I'll do anything!"

Lyla smiled at David. "Anything?" She asked.

"Yeah anything!" He said again. "I want to work at the Zoo."

"What about helping with the Kid's Kamp?" She asked him.

David felt a little self conscious being around kids. "I'll just scare them." He told her.

"Oh I don't think that'll be an issue." She told him.

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Aaron leaned against the wall of the backroom as he watched one of the employees paint his face. He looked adorable. The employee was painting his face to match the fluffy costume he was wearing. He was honestly surprised he even agreed to it. Usually the idea of doing anything that put him in the spotlight was completely out of the question.

David sat on the tall stool, he had his hands placed between his legs and leaned forward while Kira painted him. The employees had pulled out a red panda costume for him to wear. They told him he would be playing the Zoo's mascot and really just needed to say 'Hi' to the kids and take some pictures. He was honestly just happy they were letting him volunteer at all. "That tickles." He told Kira.

"I'm almost done." She told him. "Just be ready to smile and put your arms up in the air."

“My arms up in the air?” David said, confused.

“It’s just what red pandas do when they are scared.”

“Oh.”

David finally slipped off the stool. The outfit now complete, he looked at himself in a mirror. The fluffy costume covered his whole body except for his face which was painted to look like a red panda. He looked closely at the scar that was on his face and smiled at the fact that it was hidden, even if it was under childish face paint. “It looks good.” He told Kira.

“Well let’s get you out there.” Lyla told him. “Remember you’re Rupert the Red Panda.”

David nodded and followed Lyla.

Aaron didn’t have anything to do so went to the adult waiting area where some parents were waiting for their kids to be finished with the event. He could have gone exploring but didn’t really want to leave David out of his sight. If it was up to him he never would have let David do this to begin with. One moment David was worried he would get made fun of and the next moment he was dressing up in a ridiculous costume, he really didn’t understand how much the scars bothered his little brother.

David followed Lyla in front of the group. As discussed he waved and said “Hi” to all the kids and followed the Zoo Keeper’s instructions. He got laughs and smiles from the kids. They seemed to range in age from as little as four all the way up to ten. He was so popular after all the introductions

were made and his performance was done that he took pictures with all the kids.

“Can Rupert come with us around the Zoo?” One of the little girls asked. Lyle didn’t know what to say and looked at David, the look was pretty much asking for permission. David looked at Aaron who nodded to his little brother, he then nodded to Lyla.

“Yes, he can come with us.” Lyla told them.

David didn’t really know what he was agreeing to but pretty quickly he was ushered along with all the little kids around the Zoo. Being the only one in any sort of costume got him a lot of strange looks but David seemed almost relaxed. The costume gave him the ‘right’ kind of attention, people were happy to see him. Occasionally he would break away from the group just to take pictures with random guests.

Aaron followed along watching it unfold, also getting the full tour made for little kids while he was at it. He watched his little brother enjoy himself, getting lost in the moment.

After what felt like a few hours the parents collected their kids and David was allowed to get lunch. He got changed again but hesitated before taking off the facepaint, he did clean it off though.

“You didn’t need to hang around all day.” David told Aaron, who sat across from him as they had lunch.

“It was fun.” Aaron said truthfully. “You looked like you were having fun.”

“I guess.” David agreed.

Aaron wanted to ask him about the scars but after yesterday’s breakdown it felt like he would just be opening a wound, he resolved himself to at least bring it up with Dr Bellamy tomorrow.

The two were planning on wandering around the Zoo a little now that they were free to do so. Aaron made the suggestion to visit the gift shop first though.

“Remember you used to collect stuffed animals?” Aaron asked him.

“I guess.” David said as he ran his hand over them.

“Want one?” Aaron offered.

“What? I’m not seven.” David said and recoiled his hand.

“Come on.” Aaron encouraged him. “What about the red panda?”

David rolled his eyes but Aaron picked it up anyway. He wanted something to remember the trip so bought him the stuffed animal. After the fire Aaron tried to buy him more of them but he had lost interest in them after they burned away. Truthfully though Aaron suspected he missed a lot of his things from before the fire.

Aaron carried the stuffed animal in a bag as they finally returned to the wolf exhibit. David clearly had more confidence after being on display all morning and walked through the crowds to get a good look.

“MOMMY!” A little girl shrieked, the same girl who had asked ‘Rupert’ to join them on the tour. “HE’S SCARY” She squealed.

David’s face went pale. “Let’s go home.” He told Aaron miserably. Aaron wanted to stomp over to that girl and their mother to tell them how rude they were being. David was clearly on the verge of another tantrum though and decided to let it go.

David’s good mood had turned into a sour pout as they headed to the car. “It’s not fair.” He scowled at Aaron.

Aaron looked at him knowing what he was talking about, the scar on his face. It was more than his face. You could see it on his hand too and if he took off his shirt it was all over. “Do you want to talk about it?”

David looked at him and scoffed. But as they got in the privacy of the car he considered again and started to open up. “Before everything healed people were nice to me.” He told Aaron. “Like people didn’t make fun of me right away. But after I took the bandages off people were uncomfortable.” David looked away from Aaron. “People think I’m ugly.”

Aaron swallowed. He didn’t know this bothered his brother so much. There was a long time after the fire David wouldn’t talk about anything that happened. David started crying. He was trying to force himself to stop but kept hiccupping. “Hey.” Aaron said and brought his arm over his shoulder as they sat in the car. “I’m glad you told me.” Aaron took out the red panda stuffed animal and pressed it into David’s chest

until he took it.

David snivelled and leaned into Aaron. Between the stuffed doll and his brother he was starting to calm down. He didn't usually cry like this but it wasn't entirely foreign to him. Even Dr Bellamy knew he was upset about this.

After David calmed down Aaron finally drove the two home. He didn't think the trip was a complete failure, David managed to have a little fun. He wanted to talk to David about more things but decided that having Dr Bellamy there would probably be for the best.

*Chapter 6*

## The Treatment - Chapter Six

Aaron and David sat on the sofa across from Dr Bellamy. David was rather quiet, he didn't sleep well the night before. Aaron on the other hand was nervous with his foot tapping on the floor.

"Then I found him in the shed. It's the only thing from before the fire." Aaron explained.

Dr Bellamy scribbled in her notebook. "Has he ever done this before?" She asked him.

"I-uh don't think so." Aaron told and looked nervously at his younger brother for confirmation. He just shrugged his shoulders. "Well it's concerning, especially that later that night he had a nightmare."

Dr Bellamy nodded and took a couple more notes, some of these things Aaron had already told her over the phone. "Well we can try to manage the panic attacks." She told them. "I think it might be a side effect of the treatment."

David turned his head toward her, he had been acting strangely since the start of the meeting. "Will it go away?" He asked her directly.

Dr Bellamy smiled at him. "It's nothing to worry about, I'm sure with some techniques it's as manageable as anything else." She told him.

David didn't seem convinced though. "How does the treatment even work?" He asked directly.

"The treatment reverses the age of your cells by about three years." She explained. "While there shouldn't be any impact on your mental health, there may be some issues that existed three years ago, in your case it's a little traumatic. But you may find other things you enjoy, like going to the zoo."

"I always liked the zoo." David dismissed.

"Well maybe there are some other things you liked when you were thirteen." She suggested, trying to get him to open up a little.

"Hardly." David dismissed, his foot started to tap anxiously. "But what would happen if it was more than three years?"

"Similar side effects I suppose, it's not something completely outside the scope of the trial." Dr Bellamy theorised.

"Could it heal other injuries, like it did with my leg?" David asked.

Dr Bellamy smiled a little. "Ten years old is younger than you think it is." She said, seeing right through him. "Everyone would think you belong in middle school."

"What are you two talking about, why would David take it again..." Aaron stopped himself, the answer was obvious. David wanted to reverse the damage done by the fire.

"Think about it Aaron." David growled at him. "It would be like the fire didn't happen. Like I was normal."

“You would be so small.” Aaron said and gulped. “Is that what you want, to be ten again?”

“What I want is to look normal. It’s three years, not an eternity.” David told him. “Why wouldn’t I do it?”

“I don’t know...” Aaron said and started trying to think of a downside.

“We could do it today.” Dr Bellamy interjected.

The two brothers looked at each other. Aaron was concerned, to him it seemed like they were just guinea pigs for Dr Bellamy’s experimental treatment. He was starting to wonder if David’s history is why she picked him for this trial to begin with. Had she always planned for David to take it again?

“I want to take it.” David said firmly.

Aaron sucked in a sharp breath. He thought of everything David would have to go through. Puberty, growing up, not to mention he was a bit hyperactive before the fire even happened. Would that come back too? In the end though it really was David’s choice. Despite looking like a newly minted teenager he was sixteen and it really wasn’t up to Aaron to get in his way, especially when the benefits of the procedure were so good.

“Okay, he can do it.” Aaron agreed.

It didn’t take long for David to be back on the bed in the lab. David held the pill in his hand and looked at Aaron. “Even if I look like a twerp, I’ll still be sixteen.” He told his older

brother.

“I know.” Aaron confirmed.

David took the pill and layed down on the bed. It wasn't long until he was sleeping just like last time.

“Let's go back to my office.” Dr Bellamy suggested.

“Actually, can I watch?” Aaron asked, a little curious and sceptical of the doctor.

Dr Bellamy nodded and let Aaron observe his older brother. For several minutes nothing happened, just David's breathing raising his chest up and down. Eventually his muscles got a little less defined and he slowly started to shrink. There were twitches in his face occasionally as he slowly lost years of progress.

He rapidly shrunk in height as any sign of puberty disappeared leaving the scarred face of a pre-teen. Aaron's eyes widened in horror as the scars on his arms and face started to look fresher, as if they just occurred.

“What's going on!?” Aaron said in a panic.

For once Dr Bellamy wasn't taking any notes and instead rushed to David's bedside. “This shouldn't be happening.” She decided and started to work a heart monitor onto his finger. “It's reverting the healing he did when he was ten, eleven and twelve.”

Aaron swallowed deeply and went over to the other side of the bed. He saw the twitching on his brother's face get worse

and worse, he was clearly having some kind of nightmare. He slowly watched as the burns on his body got worse. The treatment was slowly coming to a stop. The burns looked only a week old, bright red with bubbled skin, it reminded Aaron of the day he arrived at the hospital, only this time he could see the horrible marks that were hidden by the bandages. "It's way worse than I thought." He gasped.

Aaron looked at his brother and could feel tears welling up inside his eyes. He couldn't help but think how upset and distraught he was going to be when he woke up. "Can't we do something?" Aaron asked the doctor. "Just give him a little bit more, just a bit!" He was pleading with her. "This isn't what he wanted!"

Aaron could feel the stream of tears fall off his face and he instinctively went to wipe them away.

Dr Bellamy went over to a fridge and produced a vile and a syringe. Expertly she filled the syringe and looked at Aaron. "Promise me you watch out for him." She said firmly, no longer having the demeanour of an impartial doctor.

"What is that?" Aaron demanded.

"It's another dose. It has to be three years at a time, we can't change that." She told him and took David's burned wrist and started to look for a vein.

Aaron was a little stunned but let the doctor work on his brother. "He'll be like a seven year old." He said. "He won't be burned anymore, like it never happened."

The Doctor stopped and looked at him. “Seven is young.” She insisted. Finally she found a vein. “You’ll need to take care of him, he won’t be able to do a lot of things.”

“I’ll do it.” Aaron agreed, just like before. “I’ll take care of him.”

The doctor nodded. It wasn’t like she had much of a choice, she wasn’t going to let David go through it all over again. She inserted the needle and injected him with a third dose of the treatment.

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David leaned over the railing of the wolf exhibit wondering what it would be like to be a wolf. He was wearing an oversized hoodie with a pair of blue jeans, his hood was up even though it was summer.

“Hey kid, are you coming for the camp?” A zookeeper asked him.

“Oh, uh, no.” He told her.

“Are you here by yourself?”

“...Yes.” He said. He could tell by the way she looked at his face there was pity. He still had bandages wrapping up the wounds.

“Tell you what, come with me.” She said and let the boy follow her to the camp. David looked around and started sweating. Once he stepped inside he realised he was in his house and the zookeeper was nowhere to be found.

He could smell it again, the fire. This time he wasted no time. He ran up the stairs and rushed into his parent's room. "MOM, DAD. FIRE!" He shouted at them.

Miraculously they woke up. They scooped him up and rushed him outside. This time rather than it being the middle of the night it was the middle of a Saturday. His brother was standing in the driveway hosing down his bike after riding it through the muddy trails.

"Can I go riding with you?" David asked his teenage brother.

"You're too little, maybe when you're older." He told him.

David was about to protest but got a facefull of water.

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David's eyes snapped open and he looked around. Aaron was right beside him and he was looking at him like he was made of glass, like he was going to break. He looked around and saw Dr Bellamy taking notes. "Did it work?" He asked and his hands shot up to his mouth. His voice was high and pitchy.

"David, it didn't work the way you planned." Aaron said. His brother, still shocked by his own voice, looked at him. Rather than explain Aaron picked up a handheld mirror he knew he would need for David to understand.

David's mouth fell open. Looking back at him was a small child. Bushy hair, chubby cheeks. But most importantly not a scar on him. He had effectively been healed but now he was properly a child. David reached up and traced the side of his

face where the scar was and felt smooth skin. He smiled a little.

Then he looked at his small hands, turning them over again and again until he eventually looked at Aaron.

“It worked.” He said. He could feel the excitement building up inside him. Feelings he hadn’t felt since the fire. “It worked! It worked! It worked! It worked! IT WORKED! DAD IT WORKED!” He started shouting and stood up on the bed and started jumping. The bottom half of his outfit fell away leaving him in just a long T-Shirt.

Aaron stared at his younger brother in wonder. He had been so worried about what his brother had lost by reducing him to a seven year old he only now understood what he gained. A second chance.

*Chapter 7*

## The Treatment - Chapter Seven

David hopped off the bed and rushed toward Aaron, his bare feet slapped noisily on the tile floor. He wrapped his arms around his waist. “Thank you Dad.” He said and hugged him. “I missed you so much.” David squeezed as hard as he could.

“Davey.” Aaron said and wrapped his arms around his brother. “Oh Davey, I’m not Dad.” Aaron barely even registered; he had changed from calling him Dave or David to his childish moniker.

David looked up at him and his lips puckered into a little pout, then his brow furrowed in concentration, then he just looked sad. “Oh. Yeah.” He said and his arms slipped away from his hug. As if everything he did caught up to his sixteen year old self David realised just how childish he just acted, jumping on the bed and running around in nothing but a T-Shirt. His cheeks glowered red and he looked away from his brother, he pushed himself away and shivered a little.

“Davey... You okay?” Aaron asked cautiously. He looked down at his little brother, the height difference was a little startling, he barely came up to his waist.

“Uh-huh” David hummed and shivered again. “I don’t have any clothes.”

Aaron let out a chuckle. He had been certain David would freak out, yell or get mad. He smiled at him and nodded. “I

guess we'll need to do some shopping again." He told him.

"Yeah!" David agreed and started to collect his previous clothes. He at least wanted something to cover himself up with. After hoisting up his old pants and slipping into his shoes he somehow looked even more like a kid. Like he was playing dress up with his older brother's clothes.

"Are you two going to be alright?" Dr Bellamy asked curiously. She had finished filling in some paperwork. "I want you to update me everyday. Aaron, please call me every day and I think we should continue our visits every other day."

Aaron seemed to think that was reasonable. "Is he going to be okay?" Aaron asked, a little marvelled at how fine David was acting.

"I'm fine." David said and was tying his old sneakers as tight as possibly with the sloppy knot.

"I don't know." Dr Bellamy admitted. "That was a large and untested dose of The Treatment. Just call me with any updates, even if they seem insignificant."

Aaron agreed and slowly the two of them headed back to his car. David had to hold up his pants to have any hope of them staying up.

Aaron got into the car and then heard the back door open and David sat behind him. "Davey?" Aaron asked. "What are you doing back there?"

David seemed to think for a moment about his question and

then looked sheepishly away. “Sorry.” He said and started to climb into the front. It was awkward in ill fitting clothes. “I wasn’t thinking.” He admitted.

Aaron observed his brother, it was a weird mistake to make but it made Aaron think about it. He probably was a little short to be sitting in the front seat, he barely took up any room at all now. He considered telling him to stay back there but let it drop when he dutifully put on his seat belt.

Aaron started driving but couldn’t get the whole thing off his mind. “How are you holding up?” He asked.

“I’m fine, just need some new clothes.” David told him.

“You’re like... Okay with this?” Aaron said with concern in his voice.

“What do you mean?” David asked.

“You’re just... So small.” Aaron told him.

David bit his lower lip thinking about it, then chuckled a little. “Yeah!” He said enthusiastically. “I’m like... Perfect.” David pulled down the mirror in the car to look at himself. He smiled at his reflection. “Okay... Maybe I look like a kid.” He admitted. “Being ten isn’t so bad.”

“It’s seven David.” Aaron corrected him.

“Right... Seven...” David said with a little concern. “Like... What should I tell people?”

“What do you want to tell them?”

“I doubt anyone will believe I’m sixteen when I look like this.” David said thoughtfully.

“You can tell people you’re sixteen.” Aaron told him. “What’s the big deal?”

“It would be a lot to explain.” David told him.

“What would you tell them?” Aaron asked. “That you’re actually seven. People would treat you like a little kid.”

“Yeah... Good point.” David agreed.

The two of them finally pulled into the parking lot of the store. “Do you want to come in or let me pick something out?” Aaron asked David.

“I’ll come in.” David told him and got out of the car. He walked around to the other side and slipped his right hand into Aaron’s left. He held his pants with the other.

Aaron was a little caught off guard but led his brother through the parking lot. After about ten seconds David realised what he had done and what his brother was letting him do. He was holding his hand! He had done it without even asking, he didn’t even know why. David was way too humiliated to rip his hand out. But the more he held his brother’s hand the more he didn’t want to let go. He was totally confused and preoccupied by the situation that he didn’t even pay attention until Aaron let go, they had made it all the way to the boys clothing section of the store.

Aaron had decided on a different department store than last

time, hoping to avoid seeing any familiar faces from before. The selection wasn't very big and even he had to admit were pretty childish. The shirts all seemed to have some type of cartoon characters on them.

David almost didn't seem to care and quickly grabbed the shirt he was closest to. It was a bright red and blue shirt with an image of Spider-Man on the front. He then moved quickly to the pants section and grabbed a pair of red sweatpants. "I'm going to put these on in the changing room." David said to his brother.

"Okay..." Aaron said, shocked by his brother's selection in clothes. He knew David liked comic books but the outfit he picked for himself was completely garish.

David was anxious to get into any outfit that fit. He followed his brother to the changing rooms and slipped inside. He quickly discarded his previous outfit and stopped to look at himself in the full length mirror. He wore nothing but the oversized underwear.

He bit his lip when he saw the little boy staring at him in the mirror. On one hand he was perfect, uninjured and new. On the other he was tiny. Like teeny tiny. He wasn't a teenager anymore; he looked like he was about to go into grade one or two. He then considered the outfit he had picked out himself and cringed further. It wasn't like anything he had worn before. He threw it to the ground. "Aaron!" He called out.

Aaron was waiting for him on the other side of the door, mostly just waiting for him to come out; they hadn't gotten

nearly enough clothes. “Yeah. Everything okay?” He called back.

“Umm. Uhh.” David stammered. “It doesn’t fit.” He lied.

“Oh.” Aaron hummed. “Can I see?”

David was starting to get mad at his brother and stomped his foot. He picked up the sweat pants and shirt and pulled them on. Of course the stretchy pants fit perfectly fine. They were just too bright. When he opened the door he could tell Aaron was confused.

“You look fine.” Aaron told him.

“I don’t like it.” David complained.

“Did you want something else?” Aaron asked.

“I don’t know.” David said and looked at his shirt again, pulling it away from him.

“Wear that for now.” Aaron decided and went into the changing room to collect his old clothes.

Aaron took him back to the clothes in the store to find something for David once again. He tried to find something more mundane, no cartoon characters and duller colours.

David wasn’t really all that interested in picking out even more clothes and settled on the fact he would need to put up with what he already had on. “Can I browse another section?” He asked his older brother.

“No Davey, stay with me.” Aaron told him, almost naturally.

“Actually if you aren’t interested in clothes go try on some shoes.”

David quickly rushed away not wanting to have to try on endless clothes, Aaron seemed to be picking much more mature outfits anyway. He didn’t really trust himself to pick out something after selecting a Spider-Man sweat suit. He went over to the shoes but they all seemed the same, red or white. He rolled his eyes quickly and measured his foot. His feet were so small now. He pulled off his big shoes and discarded them. Rather than spend a ton of time finding the right size he picked a pair of Crocs off the shelf and wore those instead.

Satisfied with his blue Crocs David wandered the store, he wasn’t really all that interested in clothes shopping and ended up browsing some of the new LEGO sets. One in particular caught his eye, it was a roaring tiger.

Aaron finally picked out a few outfits for David and carried them away. He also picked out a pair of pyjamas for him to wear at night. The pyjamas were incredibly childish so he went with his brother’s instinct and picked ones with superheroes on them, this time Super Man. The long sleeve T-Shirt had a big ‘S’ on the front. The only problem now was that he didn’t know where his brother had wandered off to.

Aaron pulled out his cell phone and called his brother, he rolled his eyes when he heard it ringing from David’s old pants. He had placed everything into a very full basket and found David’s discarded old shoes in the kids shoe section,

still no sign of his now very little brother. He was starting to consider getting the store to page him when he looked into a toy aisle to see David holding two boxes of LEGO, one in each hand.

“Davey?” Aaron asked. His brother didn’t move an inch, clearly transfixed by the boxes of building bricks.

“David.” Aaron said firmly which made his little brother turn his head.

“Uh huh.” He said and looked back at the boxes.

“You wandered off.” Aaron told him.

David looked at him directly now and looked past him. He could see the shoe section from the aisle. “Not really.” He said and shrugged.

“You were supposed to get new shoes.”

“I did.” David told him and lifted up a foot to show him the Crocs.

Aaron let out an exhausted sigh. “Fine.” He told him. Aaron remembered a particular lengthy conversation with David about how Crocs were barely shoes but he didn’t comment on it. Anything was fine, it’s not like he had to wear them.

“Can I have these?” David finally asked and showed his brother the LEGO. One tiger and another one was a fox.

Aaron looked at him sceptically. “We are just getting the clothes.” He told him. He still had even more things he would

need to buy David due to the changes.

“Pleeeeee.” David said, making sure to make it sound a little desperate. “Please Dad.”

Aaron scrunched his face for a second. David noticed. “Davey... I’m not Dad.” Aaron told him.

David frowned. Tears welled in his eyes. He threw both boxes to the ground in a fit. “Forget it!” He screamed at his brother and pushed past him. “Let’s just go.”

Aaron followed him carrying everything with him. “Davey wait.” He told him. His brother was already wiping his face with the sleeve of his arm. Aaron felt like he was failing his brother. One thing after another he kept letting him down. All because he wanted some toy.

David kept slowly marching faster through the store. He didn’t really even know why he wanted the LEGO, it just seemed like it would be fun. He wanted both because having two animals seemed like it would be better. He didn’t really have any money of his own, his brother paid for everything. Then he had also called him ‘Dad’. Again. It kept slipping out. It wasn’t fair they looked so similar to each other. “Aaron.” He muttered under his breath. “Aaron. Aaron. AARON.” He said louder.

“Davey.” Aaron said finally having gotten to the checkout, he was worried he was going to walk right out.

“I know you aren’t Dad.” David told him. “Sorry.”

Aaron let out a relieved breath. “It’ll be okay.” He reassured him. “I won’t correct you anymore.”

David’s face was all red and his nose was stuffy from crying. “Thanks.”

Aaron paid for everything. He had to pull the tags off the outfit David was wearing but the cashier didn’t seem to mind. Once they got back in the car they headed straight for home.

*Chapter 8*

## The Treatment - Chapter Eight

David sat on the couch scrolling through his phone and eventually let it slip out of his hands. "I'm bored." David announced.

Aaron was in the kitchen, he was surprised at his brother's rather loud and obnoxious admission. Usually he would hide away in his own bedroom but after getting home he seemed to always be close by. "Is that why you wanted the LEGO?" Aaron asked.

David let out a loud huff of breath. He didn't really think those two things were related. He just thought the LEGO was cool. "I guess." He admitted. He knew if he had gotten the LEGO he would currently still be piecing it together.

"I guess we could buy some toys if you really want them." Aaron reasoned. His little brother had been acting strangely all afternoon. He had caught him jumping on his bed which David explained away that he was cleaning. Only for Aaron to catch him doing it a second time. Getting him to spend time downstairs was mostly to save his mattress.

"I don't know." David said. Having now gotten up and was pacing around the kitchen.

"Do you think it's because of The Treatment?" Aaron asked.

David froze. He frowned at his brother, opened his mouth and closed it again. He honestly didn't know. It's not like he hated

LEGO a week ago, but he just felt a strange obsession over it at the store. He wanted to build it, then he also wanted to play with it a little. It wasn't as simple as just liking it. When he was little he had all kinds of LEGO, he had his brother's old stuff and his parents bought it for him all the time. None of it survived the fire.

"Maybe." David admitted, his lips quivered at the admission. It was like he had told Aaron a secret he was holding in. As if by saying it he was admitting something embarrassing.

Aaron sucked in a breath as he put together their dinner, some spaghetti. He had a feeling the treatment was affecting his brother more than physically. In fact he was absolutely sure of it. It was worrying to think how much has changed and what was happening to him. "It's okay." Aaron told him. "We'll pick some up after the Zoo tomorrow."

"The Zoo?" David questioned. "Are we going again?"

Aaron brought the dinner over to the table. David happily joined him. "I thought you agreed to volunteer."

David looked at Aaron like he was out of his mind. "How can I?" He demanded.

"Well you are sixteen."

David swung his feet back and forth on the chair, demonstrating how short he was now. "They won't believe that, I look like I should be in the class."

"So you don't want to go to the Zoo then?" Aaron asked.

David smiled. "Of course I do!" He told him. "But I look like a kid."

"You could join the class." Aaron offered him. "We could explain the situation to Lyla."

David smiled a little more. "Will she believe me?"

"I'm sure she will." Aaron reassured him.

"Okay!" David cheered. "We are going to THE ZOO!"

"Calm down." Aaron chuckled.

"THE ZOO! THE ZOO! ZOO! ZOO! ZOoooo!" David said getting out of hand and finally started eating his dinner.

For a teenager that was so closed off and moody. This version of David reminded him of his little brother he used to know. The one he left with his parents before going off to college. Aaron felt nostalgic. While David's life was a whirlwind of tragedy. Aaron felt like he had left his home and never got a chance to go back, it was ripped away from him by the fire. His parents gone and his little brother traumatised and hurt he never really got a chance to think about everything he lost. He watched his brother create a song about going to the Zoo. The back door framed behind him. For a moment he let himself believe that all the bad things in his life never happened.

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In the evening Aaron had to get some work done for his software job and left David to himself. Even though he was

the size of a seven year old he was still sixteen, he didn't need constant supervision.

David was in his room on his own computer. He didn't really have all that many friends and he wasn't exactly a "gamer". He was mostly browsing some familiar sites he went to. He found them all a little boring now and eventually found his way to YouTube. He watched funny videos of kids doing challenges and pranks but most of them would show a big family. Every time he saw them he lost interest and eventually closed his laptop all together with a yawn.

He got up from his desk and crashed into his bed. He spread out his arms in comfort, his bed felt so big now. Being smaller meant a lot of small problems but his bed felt huge. He laid there for a moment but the feeling of physical comfort disappeared when he noticed how empty the bed felt. Finally he sat up unsatisfied with the way he was feeling and went to the washroom.

He didn't have to go to the actual bathroom and stared at himself in the mirror. The younger version of him stared back, the youthful face staring at him. He ran his hand over where the scar used to be. He looked at the way his hair was longer and lighter. He looked at the freckles that filled his cheeks. He felt off about everything. He brushed his teeth and yawned deeply. He wasn't ready to go to bed quite yet, it was still early.

David wandered the house and peeked into his brother's room, he was typing away on his own laptop. "Hey." David

said sheepishly, he didn't usually interrupt Aaron.

"Oh Hi." Aaron said. He looked up from the laptop. "What's up?"

"Nothing." David said then yawned.

"Tired?" Aaron asked. Now closing the laptop.

"I guess." David agreed. "My room... Feels big." He admitted.

"Big?" Aaron asked.

"Yeah, the bed feels huge." David told him and now felt stupid for even saying it.

"I guess that makes sense." Aaron agreed and went to a bag in his room, it had the logo from the Zoo on it. He picked it up and led David back to his room. "You seem tired though."

"I am." David said and followed.

When Aaron got to his room and opened the door he rolled his eyes at the mess. He couldn't really blame his brother, he had too many clothes of different sizes strewn around. He would have to put those in storage tomorrow.

"Here." Aaron said and pulled out the red panda stuffed animal and placed it on his bed. "This way you won't feel lonely."

"I didn't say I felt lonely." David told him and huffed, crossing his arms. He glared at the stuffed animal sitting on his bed. It's not like he hated it, he didn't like the way his

brother knew he would like it.

“Well, he’ll make the bed feel more full.” Aaron reasoned and propped the doll up on a pillow.

David just rolled his eyes and climbed into the bed.

Aaron just smirked and thought his little brother looked cute next to the stuffed animal, he was once again reminded about how he was before the fire. “Have a goodnight Davey.” Aaron said and went to close the door.

“Goodnight Dad.” David said. He regretted it immediately but heard the door click shut before he could say anything. He knew Aaron promised not to correct him but his cheeks burned red from the mistake. He was flustered and reached over to the stuffed doll for comfort. He knew Aaron was his brother, not his Dad.

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David sat on his brother’s bed and watched him as he stuffed clothes into a duffle bag. “You’re taking everything!” He told him.

Aaron smiled at him and ruffled his brother’s hair. “Well once I’m done with school I’ll be off to work.” He said. “I’ll probably go live in California or something.”

David gasped. “You aren’t coming back?” He asked.

Aaron shrugged. “Probably not kiddo.” He said.

“I’m not a little kid anymore.” David said.

“Well, you’ll always be little Davey to me.” Aaron told him.

“Wait! You need to pack Bearington!” David said and scampered off the bed and out the door. He was back in a flash with a worn out looking brown teddy bear. “You said I could only borrow him, remember?”

Aaron bit his lip but took the stuffed bear from his brother. “Okay, okay. I’ll take him with me.” He told his brother. The two laughed together.

David dreamed happily about the final day before Aaron left for college. He was sad to see him go but they ended up hanging out all day in his room. Aaron had let him take whatever he wanted. His books, clothes that he would have to wait until high school to wear and pretty much any toy that Aaron hadn’t already let him play with.

David felt relaxed for the first time in a long time but eventually he shivered. He felt cold, as if the window to his room was burst open. He rolled over and wrapped the blanket further around himself when he discovered what was wrong. His bed was soaking wet.

David shot up out of bed and ripped the covers back. He flicked the lights on but he already knew what happened. He had an accident. David felt horrible, embarrassed and helpless. He looked down at himself. His sweat pants had deep stains from where it had gotten wet. Worst of all, he could smell it. The acrid stench in the air clung to his nostrils. Tears filled his eyes. He tried wiping them and that only caused him to start snivelling. He wanted to rip off the sheets

and throw everything into the washer but he was too upset and just stood looking down at his mess in tears.

David's snivelling turned into a full blown cry. He was loud and sucked in wheezy raspy breaths.

Aaron had been lying awake in his bed reading a late night novel. When he heard the commotion coming from down the hall he went to investigate. He knocked once on the door. "Davey." He asked. "Are you crying?"

"Nwo!" David snivelled.

"I'm coming in." Aaron announced and opened the door. His little brother's pants were soiled and when he looked at the state of the bed he understood what happened. "Oh Davey."

David made a long drawn out moan. "I'm soooooory." He cried.

"Davey, it's okay. It's not a big deal." Aaron reassured him. "We have other sheets and more clothes." Aaron turned into problem solving right away and started to strip the bed of the soiled sheets.

"I ruined it!" David cried with tears still streaming down his face. "I didn't mean to!" He pleaded

"Davey, it's okay." Aaron told him and kneeled down so he was closer.

David visibly recoiled and took a step back. "Please don't hit me." He squealed.

“Davey.” Aaron said carefully. He watched his little brother’s reaction and felt his own heart ache. He had a feeling he knew where that reaction came from. It made him feel guilty. Even though his brother had been through so much and they were still treating all his physical pain there were parts of him that needed a different kind of treatment. Aaron opened his arms up to invite David in. “Come here.” He told him.

David stepped toward his big brother and wrapped his arms around his neck. “I’m sorry, Dad.” He told Aaron again. Aaron noticed that David didn’t even correct himself, clearly too upset to be worried about calling his brother Dad.

Aaron squeezed his younger brother and rubbed his back. “Why don’t you hop in the shower and I’ll clean this up. Okay?” He asked him.

“Okay.” David whispered.

Aaron let him go. He reached and started pulling his shirt off. David raised his arms and let him do it. David was quick to pull down his own pants and then his underwear and hurried off to the washroom.

Aaron replaced his sheets and got a second blanket for his bed, you couldn’t tell at all something happened. He took away his pajamas and left him a T-Shirt of his from when he was sixteen. At least they were good for makeshift nightwear.

Once in the shower David felt a lot better. The hot water washed away the foul smelling pee quickly and it was good to feel warm again. He was flushing rather deeply and didn’t

want to face Aaron again. He must have cleaned himself multiple times because eventually Aaron knocked on the door and asked if he was okay.

David finally shut off the water and returned to his room. Aaron was waiting for him but David didn't want to talk about it, not yet. "Thanks." David said upon looking at his new bedspread.

"Sure Davey, have a good night." Aaron told him.

"Good night." David said and closed the door to his room. He was quickly back in bed.

Aaron took some of his own notes about what happened in order to talk to Dr Bellamy about it tomorrow. He thought about calling her right away but gave up on that idea when he saw the time.

*Chapter 9*

## The Treatment - Chapter Nine

Aaron and his brother were sitting in their living room with Aaron's phone on speaker. Thankfully David made it through the night without another accident. He practically demanded that he be on the phone call with Dr Bellamy, Aaron didn't see any harm in it.

David was wearing brown shorts with big pockets along with a T-Shirt that had Captain America's shield on it. Aaron didn't say anything but he was certain David had a similar outfit when he was younger.

"Then I cleaned up the mess." Aaron said finally finishing the embarrassing story from last night. He looked at his brother who looked away, his face was red and had a frown on it.

"This is the first time he's wet the bed?" Dr Bellamy asked.

"Yes!" David gasped, he was almost offended at the question.

"Well your body is seven now." Dr Bellamy thought out loud.

"There could also be side effects from the double dose. When did you stop wetting the bed originally?"

David growled a little. Aaron tried to remember but he didn't know the answer. He gave his brother a puzzled look.

"You already know." David whispered as if Aaron couldn't already hear everything.

Aaron heard a bunch of pages flipping over the phone and

was even more confused. While Dr Bellamy was looking for some notes she took, Aaron put the phone on mute. “You’ve talked about this before?” Aaron asked his brother while Dr Bellamy couldn’t hear.

David growled again. “I uh.” He stammered. “I had some accidents... After the fire.” David had gotten so quiet Aaron could barely hear him.

Aaron pieced everything together really quickly. “When you were in foster care?” He asked.

David didn’t answer, only nodded. Aaron swallowed trying to not get too emotional, Please don’t hit me, kept banging around his head. He knew David was significantly older than what he looked like right now but he could only imagine a stranger hitting this tiny version of his brother - it made him feel sick. He wanted to ask for more details but got cut off by the Doctor.

“Oh right.” Dr Bellamy chimed in. “Those times were definitely related to your injuries and stress, completely different from this time. I was asking when you stopped wetting the bed as a little boy.”

David unmuted the phone. “I don’t know.” He told her. “Probably around seven.”

Dr Bellamy took more notes. Aaron could hear her pen scratching through the phone. “Well then, it’s nothing to worry about then.” She decided.

“Nothing to worry about!” David exclaimed. “I pissed the

bed!”

“Davey, language.” Aaron scolded David who just crossed his arms.

“What should we do, Doctor?” Aaron said, cutting to the chase.

“Well most children wet the bed due to many reasons. Try drinking less water at night and going to the toilet before bed.” She suggested.

Aaron wasn’t convinced, neither was David, the advice seemed rather lacklustre and did nothing to guarantee dry sheets in the morning. The rest of the call was rather procedural, asking how David was feeling. He mostly just explained that he was looking forward to the Zoo and getting LEGO. David was a little surprised at the amount of notes she took about that. They agreed to meet again in her office tomorrow and Aaron ended the call.

David let out a big exhausted sigh when Aaron disconnected the call. He wanted to think about anything else. “When are we going out?” David asked.

“Go get ready.” Aaron told him.

David didn’t need to be told twice, quickly scampering away making sure he had everything he wanted. David had an idea earlier that morning to draw a picture of some of the animals and wanted to bring his sketchbook.

Aaron packed everything they would need for the day in his

own backpack. When David returned carrying all the drawing supplies Aaron grinned down at him. He packed them up without saying a word and the two went to the car.

“Oh, Davey. Can you sit in the back?” Aaron asked.

“Why?” David said. He didn’t understand why Aaron would ask.

“You just need to be older to sit up front.” Aaron explained. “I mean like physically bigger, it’s not safe if we got into an accident.”

David scrunched his face up. Aaron worried that they were about to start the day with one of David’s tantrums. Aaron was actually about to concede and bring it up again later but his brother surprised him.

“Yeah I guess.” David told him. “You might get pulled over.”

“Y-yeah.” Aaron agreed. “Wouldn’t want to get a ticket.”

David chuckled and opened the backseat and climbed in. He didn’t really mind sitting in the backseat now. With his leg not cramping him and his smaller body he actually considered it more comfortable than the front seat. It also kind of made him feel important. Like his brother was his personal chauffeur. “To the Zoo!” He declared.

“Okay okay.” Aaron said as he started the car.

“Hurry up Dad.” David demanded.

Aaron kept driving and didn’t correct his brother. David

didn't seem to notice that he had called him Dad. It was something he had wanted to talk to Dr Bellamy about - he would have to find some other time to bring it up.

When the two got to the line to get into the Zoo Aaron took David's hand. David held on to him without it seeming to bother him. "I'm getting you an under twelve ticket." Aaron told David.

"Oh." David said and scrunched up his face again, clearly uncomfortable. "I guess that makes sense."

Aaron gave David's hand a squeeze. He was certain that was going to set him off but he could use the savings to buy his brother a treat later. Besides the way he looked now he was pretty sure he didn't even need to ask for a child ticket. He was right, he barely said anything at all and the two were in the zoo.

"Um Da- I mean Aaron." David said. "Do you really think I can still volunteer?"

Aaron gave him an awkward smile. "We can ask if you want to." He told him. "Do you know what you're going to tell people?"

"That I'm sixteen and got little after taking some medicine." David said.

Aaron chuckled a little. With his brother's little kid voice and tiny body it sounded like a made up story to play pretend. "Okay." He agreed. "I can back you up if that's what you want."

“What else would I say?” David asked.

“That you’re seven.” Aaron suggested.

“But I’m not.”

“You kind of are.”

David pouted at him. “I’m sixteen.” He growled and yanked his hand out of his brother’s grip. “I’m going to volunteer!”

“Okay, okay.” Aaron agreed. “But you’re going to draw later.”

“Yeah.” He grunted.

Aaron just shook his head as he followed his brother through the Zoo. The whole situation was getting surreal and even he didn’t understand how to treat him. Sometimes David acted like a moody teenager who demanded to get his own way. But he could tell he kind of liked goofing off and playing games.

The two of them went straight for the offices to let David volunteer. Aaron was really sceptical of this plan. He had met Lyla a couple days ago but the idea of explaining everything seemed impossible. David led them to the counter where Lyla was sitting.

“Hello!” Lyla said in a cheery voice. “Oh you’re back.”

“Yeah.” Aaron told her. His cheeks flushed. “Me and my brother are back.” Aaron looked down to the much shorter David who was doing his best to look big and tall, he was even standing on his toes.

“We haven’t met yet.” Lyla said in a sweet smile and looked down at David. “Are you joining our activities today?”

“Ummm.” David hummed, he was thrown off that she didn’t recognize him. “I’m David.”

“Hi David!” Lyla said with enthusiasm. “Are you excited for today? Do you like the zoo?”

“Uhh, yeah.” David said and swallowed nervously, he could tell she thought he was a little kid. “I’m sixteen.”

“Oh wow! That’s really big.” Lyla said with a smile and looked over to Aaron.

Aaron’s own face was red from second hand embarrassment. “He’s serious.” Aaron explained. “This is the same David, the one who had the scar on his face.”

“What?” Lyla said, her overly chipper attitude shifted immediately. “Is this like a joke?”

“No it’s not a joke, he was getting an experimental treatment and now he’s... Shorter.” Aaron told her.

David just nodded along to Aaron’s story. “Ask me anything!” He told her.

Lyla just looked between the two of them. “Okay.” She said, clearly not believing them but willing to entertain the little boy. “What did you wear last time you were here?”

“A red panda costume.” David said proudly. “I was helping.”

“Okay.” Lyla agreed. But she obviously needed more

convincing than just a few days ago. “Why do you want to volunteer at the zoo?”

“I LOVE ANIMALS!” David shouted with his arms extended.

Lyla smirked at him a little but then leaned over the counter. “Alright little David.” She said which made David wince at the term little. “Why do you really want to volunteer at the zoo?”

Aaron looked at David. The way Lyla said it made him think this was a conversation he may have had with her back when he first started coming here. David’s eyes went wide and his lips sucked in. He looked to Lyla and back to Aaron. His cheeks flushed deeply and he let out a gasp of breath. “I uh...” David started and swallowed. “Ummm.”

Lyla was now more interested. Her eyebrows narrowed as she focused on David. She was starting to take him seriously. David noticed. He built up some courage. “I had a crush on someone.” He blurted out and then pouted.

Aaron chuckled a little and was curious if it was Lyla he had a crush on. Lyla was certainly pretty and very nice. He wasn’t sure why David was so embarrassed, especially if she knew already.

“Who?” Lyla asked firmly.

“N-Neil.” David said in a whisper. “The Zookeeper.”

“Oh.” Aaron said. David and Aaron had never spoken about relationships, women or anything like that. He didn’t know

his brother was interested in guys and it surprised him. He tried to play down his surprise and gave his brother a smile but David was looking shamefully at the ground.

Lyla was looking between the two of them. “You’re not kidding.” She said and leaned back in her chair. “He really is David. He’s turned into a little kid!”

Aaron explained the treatment to Lyla, how it was meant to cure David of all his trauma and that it worked. Lyla didn’t seem totally convinced but couldn’t deny that David didn’t really act like a typical seven year old.

“I can’t really let you volunteer.” She finally said. “No one would believe you’re not a little kid.”

“I could dress up again.” David offered. “That was fun.”

“You wouldn’t fit in the costume anymore.” Lyla dismissed. “Also Kira is out today.”

“Oh…” David hummed.

“You could still join the class.” She offered. “Like as a helper and keep everyone focused.”

David bit his lip. “I’m sixteen.” He said again.

“There is an art challenge later, so it would help me out.” Lyla told him.

David’s eyes lit up a bit. “What’s the prize?” He clearly gave up on the idea of volunteering and became interested in the contest.

“Oh, something from the gift shop I think.” Lyla said.

“I’ll do it.” He decided.

Aaron shook his head again. Once again David was acting like a little kid, too interested in arts and crafts to be focused on actually volunteering. Since he agreed Aaron shrugged it off and let him have his fun.

The three of them eventually headed for the Kids Kamp classroom and Lyla hung back while David ran ahead. “Are you just playing along with him?” She asked seriously.

“No, he’s really sixteen.” Aaron told her.

“He’s acting like a child.” Lyla said. Aaron couldn’t even deny it. At that moment David had his arms stretched out acting like one of the birds in the exhibit they were passing.

“It’s a side effect.” Aaron told her. “He’s physically seven but mentally older. If he knew we were looking at him he would get embarrassed.”

“Isn’t that hard on him?” Lyla asked.

“It was his choice.” Aaron told her.

“Isn’t it hard on you?” She went on. “You’re a single father now.”

“I already signed up for that.” He told her. “Really it’s fine.”

Lyla smiled at him, she was impressed. “Well stick around.” She told him. “I may need someone responsible to help me out.” She touched his arm and went inside the building with

David.

The Kids Klub had a lot of children, mostly around the ages of five to nine. Old enough to be left without a parent but young enough that the volume of the room was unbearably loud. David felt uneasy. The last time he was here it was pretty clear that these kids were younger than him but this time a lot of the kids were actually bigger than him. Some were screaming about a new movie he had never seen, toys he had only seen commercials for and jokes he didn't understand. All of a sudden he was an outsider, not really understanding anyone.

When Aaron sat down at one of the chairs in the back David rushed over to him. "What's wrong?" Aaron asked him.

"They are all so... Loud and childish." David complained.

"Well they are children." Aaron chuckled.

David blushed. He had been thinking about them as if they were his peers. "Yeah... Right... But I'm not." He said.

"Why don't you just draw like you wanted to?" Aaron suggested and fished out his sketchbook.

"Yeah." David agreed and smiled at him. He sat down at an empty table and started to work on drawing a tiger. He was trying to draw a realistic cat but his fingers were struggling to do what he wanted and it ended up coming out weird. The colors he selected were good and the technique was there but knew he could draw better at sixteen. He even occasionally posted his art online. Getting frustrated at his lost muscle

memory he gave up.

“That’s very good!” Lyla told him, looking over his shoulder.

David flushed. “No it isn’t.” He insisted, then in complete frustration took a black marker and drew a big X across the whole image.

“Aww, that’s too bad.” Lyla told him.

Aaron just shook his head, Lyla gave him a smile and went over to him.

“Sorry about that.” He told her. “He’s having a hard time... Adjusting.”

“Is he really sixteen?” She asked. “If it’s just a game I understand.”

“He really is.” Aaron told her. He watched her seem to form some kind of opinion about him.

The rest of the day went by without any more of David’s tantrums. He listened to the staff. Followed their instructions as they walked around the Zoo and drew a new picture of all the animals. It still wasn’t his best work but looked decent enough.

Aaron followed the group and helped with watching the large group of kids. Mostly just carrying things for the staff. At the end of the day Lyla gave Aaron her cell phone number which made David a little annoyed and red faced.