Tickled Pink

by andlat

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The Costume Box
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Chapter 1

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“Ava! Leave me alone!” Johnny yelled, lashing out with a foot. Ava caught it with a smirk, pulling off his black and green sock. Try as she might, it was hard to find anything more fun than annoying her brother.

“Someone's grumpy.”

“Don't you dare.”

“You know what Johnny needs?”

“Don’t.”

“I think Johnny needs-”

“Don't!”

“Tickle, tickle, tickle!” Johnny had always been so ticklish that, even before her fingers touched him, he began to laugh and squirm, so when she actually started tickling him, it was hopeless.

“Stop!” He whined.

“Tickle, tickle tumtum!” Ava said. “Tickle, tickle armpits!” Johnny was helpless under the her ruthless attack

“Stop!”

“Maybe under your knees? You can't be ticklish there!” Ava knew all too well from experience that Johnny was basically

ticklish anywhere and everywhere. He kicked out at her, which only gave her ready access. “Tickle, tickle!”

“Stop!” Johnny whined, rolling over onto his stomach before she could move back there. His sister lifted up his shirt and stared at her brother's back.

“What the” she watched in disbelief as hair spread along his back, radiating out from his belly to meet along his spine. His arms were already covered and his legs would be soon. She met his worried gaze as white woolly fur covered his face.

“What's…. What's happening?” Johnny asked as he looked over his body in disbelief, flipping back over onto his back and staring down at his hairy belly. Ava stared numbly at him for a moment longer before doing what any kid would.

“Mom! Dad!”

The next half hour passed in a blur. Both parents came running and were just as stupefied as their kids about Johnny's strange change. Dad took charge, sending Johnny to go get dressed as Mom called the doctor. It seemed to all of them like the right thing to do. Johnny came out of his room, sniffling, in a hoodie and jeans. Dad added gloves to his hands, although they had to be his work gloves to fit over the hair, fur, whatever it was that covered the tops of Johnny's hands. His palms were one of the few parts of his body not covered in hair, but Dad figured the doctor would know more about why than he did.

“I look like a monster!” Johnny blubbered. Dad grabbed a

face mask to cover at least the lower half of his face, but thought better of it when he realized Johnny's ears were now long, floppy flaps of fur on either side of his head.

“You look like a werewolf.” Dad said, trying to smile reassuringly. “Are we sure it's not a full moon?”

“You look like a puppy.” Ava said. He obviously was a dog. She'd always wanted a dog.

“Puppy?” Johnny whimpered. Ava sighed. He was still a whiny boy. His whines sounded nothing like the dog three doors down.

“Isn't that what you'd call a kid werewolf?” Dad asked.

“Puppy or cub.” Mom suggested, watching her daughter closely. Ava had recovered from her shock a little too quickly.

“Cub.” Johnny said. That sounded at least a little better. “I don't want to be a werewolf though!”

“This really happened when you were tickling him?” Mom asked. Ava nodded. “And did you stop when he told you stop?”

“How is this my fault?” Ava asked, crossing her arms. “This isn't even possible.”

“We'll see what the doctor says.” Dad said. “Johnny, keep your hood up.”

“Here.” Mom rushed into the kitchen and came back with a bottle of water. “It's gonna be hot and you are very bundled

up.” Johnny took the water, trying to force himself to smile. His lips were also fur-free though they looked like they were black, like they had been frostbitten. “I'm sure the doctor will know just what to do.” Mom said, giving him a hug.

By the time they were in the examination room, Johnny was so warm, the nurse did not even have to tell him twice to get undressed for the doctor. He stripped down to his underwear in what had to be record time, though he did still habitually cover the front of his briefs until she had left the room, trying her best to remain professional even as she took another look at the strangely hairy boy as she closed the door.

“Wow, so it's really all over.” Dad said, looking over his son. “Check your front.” He nodded to indicate where he meant. Johnny pulled out the front of his briefs, though they snapped back into place immediately in his shock.

“It's all hairy there too!”

“But it still looks the same?”

“Uh, I think so. There's just a lot of hair down there.”

“Hmm…”

“What's gonna happen, dad?” Johnny asked as he sat on the exam table.

“Dunno, bud. You might get to go on tour as a medical marvel.” Johnny reached up to run his fingers through his hair, a habit he had whenever he was worried, only to feel his ears. “What the?”

“Oh, yeah. Your ears changed too.” Dad said. Johnny pulled them forward enough to be able to see them.

“What's wrong with me?”

“I'm not sure, kiddo.” Dad said gently. “But hopefully the doctor will get to the bottom of it.”

“And doesn't try to run me out of town with a torch.”

“You're not a monster.” Dad came over and gave him a hug. “This hair is soft. Have you ever heard of a soft monster? And hey, didn't the nurse say you grew an inch since your last check-up ? That's cool, right?”

The door opened. Dr. Webster seemed a bit taken aback by Johnny, though he did not say anything other than ‘good morning’ as he walked over to the desk. He clicked his pen, wrote down a few things, and then looked at Johnny.

“So, what brings you in today?”

“I'm hairy!” Johnny exclaimed.

“Inside voice, Johnny.” Dad said, rubbing Johnny's back. He quickly explained the situation to the doctor as Johnny, in spite of himself and what Dad had said, watched the doctor for any signs he thought the boy was a monster.

“So, clearly, we have significant hair and those ears.” The doctor said, rolling over on his stool to lift up one of Johnny's ears. “We've still got an ear canal and clearly, you can hear me, right?”

“Uh-huh.” Johnny's free ear flopped as he nodded. The doctor checked his ears with his otoscope.

“Any other changes you've noticed?”

“Uh, no?” Johnny looked down at his knees.

“Well, his lips.” Johnny's dad said.

“What's wrong with my lips?”

“They're black!” Dad said.

“But they don't hurt?” Johnny touched his mouth and shook his head, whimpering as his ears flopped around again. “What about in your underwear?”

“Hmm?”

“Do you notice anything different with your private parts?”

“Uh, no.” Johnny shrugged. “Should I check again?”

“Why don't you stand up and pretend like you're going to the bathroom.” The doctor suggested. Johnny complied, a soft embarrassed whimper escaping his lips. “Alright, everything looks typical there. And it's good to know that we do have hair everywhere, but it looks more like…” he frowned and sucked on the top of his pen. “Actually…” He looked from Johnny to his dad and back again. “Go ahead and get your underwear back on. I've actually got a… specialist friend who I'd like to pull in here. Normally we go to lunch around this time, so he might be here early.”

“What does that mean?” Dad asked.

“It's really just to get a second opinion more than anything.” The doctor replied, trying to sound nonchalant. “Obviously we don't see this every day. He might have some tests he can think of.” He wrote something down and handed it to Johnny's dad.

“Huh. You think that's… you think that's what we need?”

“Maybe.” The doctor left the room.

“What did the note say?” Johnny asked.

“Oh, it's just the kind of doctor his friend is. It's nothing to worry about.”

“So they're not gonna slice me up?”

“I'll be right here. I won't let them.” Dad said with a chuckle. “It's not so bad. Maybe they'll just decide we gotta shave you.”

“Hm” was all Johnny said before the door opened and the doctor returned, another man in tow.

“What do you need me for?”

“Well, I mean, look at him.” Dr. Webster said.

“He's covered in” the specialist frowned and looked him over. “Alright, boy, let's get you up on the exam table.”

“I am.”Johnny said, but this second doctor grabbed him by his sides and set him on his hands and knees. He ran his hands along Johnny's torso.

“Coat feels good, no obvious scabs or anything.” He looked

at Johnny's nonplussed dad. This was not what he had expected. “Do you know the breed?”

“Hey!” Johnny exclaimed. “What do you mean breed?”

“Not really… he just kinda sprouted the hair.”

“Fur. This is dog fur. Best guess, he's almost definitely at least part poodle.”

“Poodle!?” Johnny wiggled, but the vet – that's what he had to be, after all – held him firm on the exam table.

“Have we gotten a temp?” This question was directed to Dr. Webster.

“Not yet.”

“The nurse took my temp!”

“But she said it wasn't working right.” Dad said.

“Alright, well, dad, how about you come hold him? Puppies tend to get skittish for this part.” He summarily tugged down Johnny's briefs. “No tail makes it easier at least.”

“For what? And I'm not a puppy!”

“Dr. Webster, can you grab those treats out of my bag?” He smiled at Johnny as if he was truly aware of him for the first time. “You like candy, don't you?”

“Uh”

“Well, this is like candy that's good for… boys like you.” He took the bag. “Here, dad, you give him a treat while I take his

temp.” Johnny watched, still held in place on his hands and knees as his dad grabbed what looked and smelled like a meatball and, shrugging, pushed it into his son's mouth.

Johnny chewed it, trying to figure out just what the flavor was, but the sensation of something cold pressing against his butt distracted him.

“What the?”

“Shh,” He felt the vet stroke his side. “There's a good boy.”

“What are you doing?”

“He's checking your temperature.” Dad said in a mellow tone.

“But” Johnny groaned as he felt the thermometer go inside him. “Why there?”

“Did the nurse say what was wrong with the thermometer?” The vet asked.

“She didn't.”

“My bet” Johnny bit his lip as the thermometer slid back out. “Is she saw the temperature and thought it was busted. Dogs run hotter than humans and it looks like your furry little poodle patient here is running a dog temperature now.”

“I'm not a poodle.”

“Poodlelike then.” The vet said vaguely as he removed his rubber gloves. “I've got all I need. I don't think there's really anything to do but monitor his condition. If he develops anything more, give me or Dr. Webster a call.” He handed

Dad a card and Johnny promised himself he would destroy it. He wasn't a dog and he wasn't going to the vet!

“Ready to get dressed, Johnny?” Dad asked.

“Yeah, but… do I have to wear all of that? It's hot.”

“Let's do hoodie and everything until you get to the car.” Dad said. “Puppy in the waiting room might cause a panic.”

“I'm not a puppy!”

“Big boy manly dog.” Dad teased.

The drive home felt normal, though Johnny was eager to get out of his jeans and t-shirt when he got there. Could I just hang out in my underwear? He wondered.

“I think we'll have to fill Mom in on your doctor visit.” Dad said as they pulled into the driveway.

“Can I go change first?”

“Sure.” Dad smiled and, reaching over, scratched behind his ears before realizing what he was doing. “Sorry, but you know, you do kinda look like a dog. It's the ears.” Johnny frowned.

“That's the other thing. Can we not mention the poodle part?”

“Your sister?”

“Yeah.”

“Sure.” Dad chuckled. “I'm not the most thrilled about that, to be honest. If we got a dog, I'd want a cool one.” He glanced

over at Johnny. “But if you were a dog, I'd think you were cool whatever breed you were.”

“I'm your son.” Johnny said. It bothered him that Dad did not confirm it before they headed inside.

Johnny disappeared into his room, having finally settled on a t-shirt and shorts. He had tried a tank top, but that just was too much exposed fur, so a t-shirt it was. He shuffled to the living room, noticing Ava quickly looking away. She had not said a word to him, though he had rushed past to get out of his overly warm clothes. He could have sworn he saw a smile on her lips as she saw him.

He sat in silence between Mom and Dad as Dad gave them the details, though he only mentioned a specialist and tests. There was no mention of his breed, the butt thermometer, or even the dog treat. Johnny felt relieved.

“Well, we'll just have to play it by ear.” Mom said. Johnny wondered if that was a pun with how much she had been playing with his ear that was closer to her. “We'll have to figure out how to do baths now.”

“Bath?” Dad chuckled.

“Now he tunes in.”

“I just think for the first couple weeks, we should do baths until we learn more about how to better take care of your… hair.”

“The specialist called it fur.” Dad said.

“Alright, fur.”

“I'd prefer hair.”

“It feels like fur.” Mom insisted. “Nice, soft fur.” Ava snorted and Mom gave her a stern look.

“Well, if we're all caught up here, I need to go mow the lawn.” Dad said.

“Sounds good. I'm going to be organizing things in the other room, but you two” she gave both Ava and Johnny her stern look. “Are not to fight. You can talk if you're nice, but Ava-”

“Why me?”

“Because!” Johnny interjected.

“Don't you two start.” Mom said with a sigh. She got up and left the room. Johnny remained on the couch, shifting slightly. It felt so weird being covered in fur!

Ava laughed softly about something on her phone and Johnny frowned. He jumped to his feet and stormed over to his sister, who was sprawled across a chair.

“What?”

“Fix this.”

“Fix what?”

“Whatever you did.”

“I didn't do anything.”

“I'm covered in hair!”

“Fur. Mom said fur.” She shrugged. “Sides, it's cute.”

“It is not!”

“Sure it is. You're a puppy.” Johnny growled, but realized that only proved her point. He took a breath.

“Change me back.”

“Can't.”

“Do it.”

“I don't know how. It wasn't me. Maybe you're like a mutant or something. The way your socks smell, there's obviously something wrong about you.” Johnny fumed. Somehow, he knew she could fix it. She was just being a stubborn little girl!

“Fine. I'll…” he searched for something. “I'll tickle you and make you into a dog too!” He lunged for her sides, but she just stayed still as his fingers danced along her sides.

“I'm not ticklish, but” she sat up, pushing him away. “Wow, you really are soft.” She shook her head to clear her mind. “But I'm glad you just admitted you are a dog.”

“What? Did not.”

“You said you were gonna make me a dog too.” She smiled wickedly. “And you're not even just a dog. You're a poodle.”

“What? No.” He stammered.

“I know enough about dogs to recognize a poodle. And not

just a poodle-”

“Stop!”

“Ava.” Mom called from the other room. “You two better be behaving in there.”

“A pink poodle.”

“What? I am not.”

“Your fur is pink.”

“It is not. It's” he looked at his arm. “It's not.” Ava grinned and lifted up his shirt.

“Pinky tummy.” She said.

“It's white. With like a reddish tint.”

“Uh-huh.” She rolled her eyes. “You're as pink as my shirt!” He realized she had not been wearing that shirt before he had left for the doctor.

“Nuh-uh. That shirt's like bubble gum pink.”

“And what shade of pink are you, poodle?” He stammered, his mouth opening and closing more like a fish than a dog or boy. “Let's call it prissy pink.”

“What? My fur is white.”

“Nope. Johnny the prissy pink poodle pup.”

“You're dumb!” Johnny said, turning on his heel.

“Johnny, sit!” He kept walking, fighting the urge to give her

the satisfaction. “Johnny! Here boy!” She whistled.

“Ava.” Mom called sternly from wherever she was. Ava smiled and sat back down, hitting play on her dog training video. They even said these things take time. She would get Johnny trained. And he was definitely pink. Dogs just didn't know these things. Girls did.

“So, um” Johnny said, picking at his dinner. Fur or not, he did not like green beans, but Dad had once again given him a heaping helping of them. “I was thinking. I can't” he took a deep breath. After spending the afternoon hiding in his room, avoiding the mirror in nothing but his underwear, there had to be some plus to this whole situation. “I can't really go to school like this.”

“He's right.” Dad said.

“Make him go to school!” Ava protested. “Or let me stay home.”

“We're definitely not doing that.” Mom said. “It's hopefully just temporary. If you wake up tomorrow still furry, you can skip school, kay?” Johnny nodded.

The next morning rose and Johnny was just as furry as the day before. He threw on fresh underwear and a pair of shorts, but then stopped. It was already warm and it was barely even seven AM. Couldn't he just wear this today? He headed down to breakfast in just shorts, which made Ava snort into her cornflakes.

“Good morning.” Mom said, walking over. “Can you see?”

“Sure.” Johnny said even as she brushed fur out of his eyes.

“Hm” was all she said, sitting him down at the breakfast table before going into the bathroom. She returned a moment later with a brush and began to brush the top of his head.

“Might be at that all day.” Dad observed.

“Hush. I'm just getting his fur out of his eyes.” Johnny felt her doing something by his ears, but was unable to see.

“Very pretty.” Ava murmured as Mom pulled away, satisfied. Johnny bolted for the bathroom and saw two black bows, one above each ear, keeping his fur back.

“I'm home all day.” Mom said. “So those are staying in.”

“Why?”

“Because you were clumsy before. Not being able to see where you're going is a recipe for disaster.” Johnny sighed. “Now go eat.”

“Nice bows.” Ava said, sticking her tongue out at him. He stuck his out and she snorted. “Looks like you're panting.” She drank the milk out of her cereal bowl. “Why are you wearing shorts?”

“I'll probably strip to my underwear after you leave.” Normally, she would have been grossed out by that, but she just shook her head.

“Puppies don't wear people clothes.”

“Guess I better take these bows off.”

“No, bows are ok. Poodle puppies, especially ones that are prissy pink like you, always wear bows.”

“Do not!”

“Then why'd Mom put them in your fur first thing?”

“So I can see.”

“Uh-huh. If you wanna believe that, be my guest.” She looked at his shorts and shook her head. Johnny focused on eating as she disappeared into the kitchen, but then she came back and scritched his ears. “Be a good puppy.”

“Stop!”

“It's really amazing you're shocked you're a poodle. You were a poodle as a boy too.” Leaving him with that cryptic statement, she left for school.

The next few days settled into a sort of rhythm. Johnny would wake up furry and spend the day watching TV in nothing but shorts. Mom's job let her work from home often enough that he was only ever home alone for a couple hours at most, but it still felt nice.

The afternoon of day four brought a new development. Mom left around noon, promising to be back in time for dinner. Johnny stretched out on the couch. TV was boring, so he thought he could take a nap, especially with the sun warming his fur. He sighed, content, and must have fallen asleep because the next thing he knew, Ava stood over him.

“Wha? When did you get home?”

“Uh-oh!” She said in a syrupy sweet voice. “Naughty puppy knows he's not supposed to be on the furniture!”

“Why are you talking like that?” He realized it was the voice she used for Cinnamon, the dog that lived down the block.

“Come on, Johnny. Puppies go on the floor.”

“Haha, very funny.”

“Ok, no more nice Ava.” She pulled out her phone.

“What, you're gonna send” a shrill whistle suddenly sounded. “What the- what's that whistling?”

“No way, you can hear that?”

“Ugh, yes!” Johnny had to shout to make himself heard over the whistle. It was so loud and super annoying! “Turn it off.”

“Get off the couch. Puppies belong on the floor.” Johnny was desperate. He rolled off of the couch. The whistle stopped.

“What was that?”

“It's a dog whistle app. Only dogs can hear it. And I guess that includes you, Johnny the prissy pink poodle pup.”

“Whatever. Argh!” He covered his ears as it started again. “Stop! It's annoying!”

“Sit. Johnny, sit!” She pointed to the ground.

“This is freaking demeaning.” Johnny sat on the floor.

“What? This is how you train a puppy.”

“I am not-” the whistle began again.

“Sit right.”

“What do you mean?” Ava rolled her eyes and turned off the whistle.

“Be a good boy or it starts again.” She grabbed his hands and put them on the floor in front of him, adjusting his legs as well until he was in an approximation of how a dog sat. “There. Up.” Before Johnny had even moved, the whistle started again. “Puppies belong on all fours. Hands and knees, Johnny.” He complied, grateful that the whistle stopped as soon as it was clear he was obeying. She's actually training me. He thought sullenly. C'mon, Mom. Come home early. His only hope was to get her phone, but she kept a firm grip on it while also keeping him busy with alternating orders of up and sit.

“Alright, now stay.” She said as he sat for what had to be the twentieth time.

“You're not taking photos.”

“That's a good idea actually, but” she smiled. “I actually just want to go over the rules. Repetition is important for puppies. So no sitting on furniture is a big one and when I say sit, you sit like a good boy.” Johnny rolled his eyes.

“Mom and Dad are never gonna go for this.”

“Sure, but they won't even know.”

“Huh?”

“Think about it. You're the only one who can hear the whistle. They'll just see you being a good boy.”

“I'll tell them.” Ava shrugged.

“It's a risk I'm willing to take.” Johnny stared at her. She seemed so confident, there had to be something he had not realized. “Now, since you're being such a good boy, don't you think it's time you take off those silly people clothes?”

“Why do you want me to be naked so bad?”

“Cuz you're a dog and the sooner you realize you're a dog, the happier we'll all be.” The whistle started again. Johnny squeezed his eyes shut and pressed his hands against his floppy ears. Thinking quickly, he rolled them up so that they muffled his actual ear holes more. It almost made it bearable. Just once, couldn't Mom or Dad come home early? The whistle stopped. “Well, I guess we can go with the old standby.” Ava said, dropping to her knees and lunging at him.

It was the last thing Johnny expected and he squealed as she began to tickle his sides. Since it had been unplanned on her part, however, Johnny was able to slip free before she could really get going, though in her efforts to stop his escape, she hooked his shorts and pulled them down. Johnny was free, but naked. He covered himself with his hands, staring at her.

“Give me my clothes back.” Ava stared at him in disbelief. “Oh, god. What now?” Leaving one hand over his crotch, he touched his nose. Still the same. He looked at his hand. Still the same. His fur looked the same, though it was a little

unnerving how quickly he had become used to seeing his furry arm and hand. He reached behind him, half-expecting to feel a tail.

“What's your problem?” He asked as Ava seemed to be searching for words. Then she found two perfect ones.

“Up, Johnny!” When he didn't immediately obey, she grabbed her phone and the whistle started. He got onto his hands and knees. “Stay like that and let's go over here.” She led her crawling brother over to a door frame and the whistle stopped. What were they doing here? This was where they were measured every birthday to see how much they had grown. “Just this once, just this once, puppy, you can stand up on your hind legs.” Johnny rolled his eyes, rising to his feet. “Back against the door.” Johnny was frozen in place. Ava had been two or three inches shorter than him just a few minutes ago. Now, she had to be at least six inches taller! “Back against the door, Johnny.” The return of the dog whistle punctuated her order. “That's what I thought.”

“What?” He whined.

“It's official. You are a puppy.”

“What are you talking about?” He turned and looked at the marking closest to the top of his head.

“You're the same height as you were when you were eight.”

“The tickling shrunk me? You only got like three tickles in.”

“Doesn't matter. You're a puppy and puppies need to listen.”

She waggled her phone in front of his face. “And this proves you are a puppy.”

“Shuddup.”

“An itty bitty” she relished every syllable. “Prissy pink poodle pup.”

“Ava! Quit!” She just smiled and the whistle started again. Johnny groaned and covered his ears.

“I think you've been on your hind legs for too long. You're getting fussy. Down on the floor like a good puppy.” Johnny got down on his hands and knees, following his sister back to the living room.

By the time Mom and Dad got home, Johnny had his shorts back on, but he was now a master of sit, stay, roll over, and Ava had even tried to teach him speak.

“Arf.” He said as she shook her head in disappointment.

“I guess you're still kinda a boy and not all dog.”

“I'm not a dog at all!”

“You can hear a whistle only dogs can hear. You whine like a puppy.” She counted her evidence on her fingers. “You have adorable floppy ears. Oh, and you're covered in fur.” He knew what she was about to say. “Prissy pink fur.”

"For the last time! My... fur is white! There's just some kind of reddish tint."

"You're pink. A pink poodle pup."

"It's not... I don't even have poodle fur..."

“I overheard Dad tell Mom the vet said you were a poodle. Oh! That's more proof you're a dog! You saw a vet and not a human doctor.”

“Dr. Webster was there too…”

Mom and Dad came home just then and Johnny felt like things were normal again. They had brought home fried chicken and asked both him and Ava about their day as they all dug in. Thankfully, Ava did not mention the torment she had put him through, except for the most obvious development.

“So, you only tickled him a little?”

“Yep.” Ava said. “We were just having fun and we got carried away.”

“We?” Johnny almost spilled the beans about the whistle right then and there. Ava tapped her phone, hidden down by her leg and shook her head.

“Well, you're not going to school anyway, so maybe it'll be ok.” Mom said pensively.

Ok, as Mom had called it, turned out to mean that Johnny was suddenly the little sibling of the family. On days when Mom had to go into the office, she stayed at home until Ava got back from school. Mom would tell them to be good, which Ava naturally took to mean she had Mom's full support to secretly continue with Johnny's training.

“Good boy.” She cooed when she noticed that Johnny had started dropping to all fours as soon as they were home alone. She had also noticed that, while he still sat on the furniture when Mom and Dad were around, he hesitated if he saw her watching and never even tried when it was just them. “Lie down.” He complied. “Ooh! Now sit.” She clapped as he shifted position. “Very good! What a smart puppy!” Johnny rolled his eyes, but noticed something: Ava's phone was sitting on the coffee table. “Maybe we should shift to treats.” Johnny could actually feel his ears rise. “Oh, wow. You haven't done that before!” Ava grinned. “I'll go see if we've got anything treatlike in the kitchen. Stay, boy. Stay. Stay.” She disappeared out of sight. This was his chance!

Johnny got to his feet as quickly as he could, tugging up his shorts. Ever since Ava had shrunk him – which had only gotten her sent to bed a half hour early for three days – his shorts had fit loosely unless he remembered to tie them tightly. Worse was that his plain white briefs were now too big and he was back in some old Mario underoos that were slightly snug, but Mom had deemed ‘good enough’ until they could go shopping this weekend. Why that annoyed him more than being covered in woolly fur, he was not sure. Right now though, he was single-mindedly focused on one thing: stealing Ava's phone. Without the phone, she'd have no power to train him anymore. It was the perfect plan.

Knowing that he had only seconds to spare, Johnny lunged for the phone. His furry hand wrapped around it. This was really going to work! He was so excited, a celebratory noise

escaped his lips. Did… did I just bark?

“That was a playful little yip.” Ava said. “What's puppy play-drop it!” Johnny froze, caught red handed. His heart pounded. He had to think of something. “Drop it! Bad dog!” His mind was made up. Moving as quickly as he could, he threw the phone behind the couch. He yipped again as it slid right back there. Ava would need to move the heavy couch to get it back. “Bad dog!” She said sternly, grabbing him by the nape of his heck.” Very bad puppy!”

“Now you can't-” he grunted. “Do that annoying whistle.”

“Hmph.”

“It's so annoying! It's like a super high pitched mosquito right in my ear.”

“Well, no treats for bad puppies.”

“Seriously, Ava. I'm not a puppy. You need to stop, okay? Just quit.” She shook her head.

“You're a grouchy little puppy. You need to be more cheerful. That playful yip I heard? That was adorable.”

“Leave me alone.” Johnny said, abruptly aware she still had him by his neck.

“Happy puppy.” She said in the same tone that she had been telling him to sit, stay, and roll over for the past couple weeks. “Here's what's gonna happy, prissy pink poodle pup.”

“Stop.”

“I'm gonna let you go and you're gonna grab my phone.”

“It's stuck behind the couch.”

“And who threw it there?”

“Me. Cuz you left me unsupervised.”

“You're a bratty puppy. That's what you are.”

“Just drop the puppy thing.”

“Maybe I will,” she said in sing-song. “If you get my phone back.”

“That couch weighs like a ton though.” He looked. “But, maybe I can fit back there.” He did not want to say it was because of how much he had shrank thanks to Ava's last tickling. “Dad says poodles are water dogs.”

“Oh, so now you're okay being a poodle, now that Dad told you they're cool.” She scratched behind his ear, loving how the little black bows holding his fur out of his eyes were such a fact of life, even she had stopped noticing them. “Still, a win's a win. Now we just gotta get you to admit you're proud your fur is prissy pink.”

“Never gonna happen because I'm white!”

“Go on, boy.” Ava said in a saccharine tone. “Go get my phone! Go on!”

“Yeah, cuz that makes me want to do it.” Johnny got down on his hands and knees and began to push himself between the wall and the couch. “It's dusty back here!”

“We'll give you a bath or something.” Ava said. “Hurry up.”

“I'm trying.” He grunted. He felt his hand brush something. “I think I've got it.”

“You're not stuck, right?”

“No, the first part was a little tight, but this should be okay.” He paused to reflect. Should he really be getting Ava her phone back? He couldn't be certain, but he had a sneaking suspicion she had not even used the app during some of their training sessions. Waving her phone where he could see it had been enough to get him to do whatever she wanted. Well, I won't be trained so easily. He thought. Maybe… maybe I can get the phone but only give it back when she agrees to my terms.

His mind made up, Johnny kept pushing forward, crawling along with the phone held firmly in one hand.

“Did you get it? I can't see you anymore.”

“I'm about to back out.” He lied, seeing the path to freedom before him. He burst back out into the living room, his ruse almost perfect if not for the yip that slipped out as he took off running.

“Johnny!” He grinned. That was the tone of an annoyed sister. “Drop it!”

“No!”

“Where are you even going?”

“Uh..” he skidded to a halt. What was the plan now? “I'll give it back, but we gotta discuss terms.”

“Terms? What does that even mean?”

“No more calling me a puppy or a dog or anything. No more saying I'm pink. I'm not… not any of those things.” He looked down at the phone. “And I want you to delete that dumb dog whistle app.”

“Why should I? It's obviously working.”

“Stop.”

“You may not be a dog, but you're obviously kinda one. You hear the dog whistle, you don't go to school anymore, you bark!”

“Mom and Dad said they're pretty sure the doctor will figure something out soon.” Ava shook her head.

“They… just give me my phone back.” Seeing Johnny's hesitation, she put her hands on her hips. “Johnny. Drop it. Drop it.”

Johnny thought about doing it in the hopes it would break. He wouldn't really, but the naughtiest part of his brain, the one that always contemplated if he would really get in trouble, made it feel tempting.

“Alright, well, you made me do this.” She stepped toward him and he realized he was cornered. He held firm to the phone and set his jaw, completely missing what her plan was until her fingers had curled. “Tickle, tickle, tickle!” Johnny fell to

the floor in a blend of giggles and yelps, squirming and wiggling as Ava's fingers plunged again and again into his fur. He managed to keep a firm grip on the phone as he tried to push her away. The phone was right there if she wanted to take it, but her mind was on other things now. Besides, the order had been to drop it and Johnny had not done that yet.

The phone slid from Johnny's grip as he was overtaken completely by the tickling. He laughed and laughed and laughed, wondering if the sensation would ever stop. His laugh began to falter as he became aware of a growing discomfort under him. He rolled over to try to ease it, as well as shield his belly from his sister.

“Ow!” He exclaimed as the discomfort continued to grow and grow, metamorphosing from discomfort to outright pain. “Ow! Ow!” It reminded him of when his finger got bent back, but this was not in his hand. It was right above his butt. “Ow!”

“Are you alright, Johnny?” Ava was nothing but concern, watching her brother rub at the back of his shorts. It took her a moment to realize he was trying to pull them down, squirming and kicking. As panic drove adrenaline through her, she yanked down her brother's shorts and underwear. “Oh!” She exclaimed as a white wooly tail bounced free, almost shaking itself out. It was only then that she noticed why Johnny had been unable to do it himself: his thumbs were gone.

“What is going on here?” Dad stood in the doorway, Mom

peering around him. “We heard someone screaming bloody murder.” They looked down at Johnny, his tail quite obvious. He got shakily to his feet and rubbed at his eyes to try to get rid of the tears that threatened to fall. Once he saw his hands, he began to sob openly. Mom pushed past Dad and hugged her whimpering, crying boy, rocking him back and forth.

It took a few minutes, but Johnny calmed down enough to let his parents examine him. The tail and the loss of his thumbs were not the only change. Johnny seemed shorter once again, hardly even four feet tall anymore. Standing there completely naked, it was clear to Mom and Dad at least that Johnny now almost exactly resembled a dog from the neck down, though his face still remained human under the wooly fur.

“There, feel better?” Mom asked, pulling away. “It's not so bad. You just have a tail now.” Johnny felt as if he was hyperaware of the tail, constantly moving back and forth and hitting his inner thighs.

“Why's it all tucked? Are you doing that?” Ava asked.

“No…” she nodded.

“That's right. Dogs can't really control their tails.”

“Ava!” Johnny yelled. “I am not a dog!”

“Johnny.” Dad's voice had a warning tone.

“You need to calm down.” Mom said as if Johnny was the one being unreasonable. “It's just a tail.”

“Just a tail? I have paws!” He waved his hands as if no one

else had seen them. In truth, the tail was a significant enough change that his hands becoming paws seemed subtle by comparison. “Paws!” He repeated.

“His voice sounds different.” Observed Ava.

“What? What are you talking about?” Johnny demanded.

“It's not bad, sweetie.” Mom said, rubbing his shoulder. “You just sound a little more like a whiny puppy rather than a whining boy.”

“I'm not whining! I'm panicking!”

“You're just a bit overstimulated. Go out back and get some fresh air.” Dad said. “Go on. It'll give us some time to discuss your sister's punishment.” Johnny stood there, mouth agape. “Go on. Outside!” Johnny fumed and marched toward the backyard, but ran into an issue.

“Uh, I can't open the door.” He tried to wrap both hands around it, but couldn't get it to turn. His fingers seemed stiffer and were they shorter? He whimpered as he realized his hands were more like paws.

“Here, champ.” Dad turned the knob with ease. “Outside!” His tone was a little too much like Ava's sickly sweet puppy voice. Johnny stepped out into the backyard, sighing as the door closed behind him. Thanks to that knob, he was out here until someone let him in.

Why did it feel like he was in trouble just as much as Ava? Stuck outside as he was, she could make up all sorts of lies to

convince Mom and Dad it was his fault. I guess I did try to take her phone… He shook those thoughts away, ears flopping. He stared down at his hands, trying to wiggle his fingers. No, he had paws. His sister had her phone back and he had paws.

“It's not fair.” He said to himself. “Ava better get like sent to military school or something.” He knew that was a silly idea, but it felt right. Chances were, he would go back inside and she would call him pink and prissy. “It's not fair!” His gaze fell on a mud puddle, the last remnant of the final vestige of winter's snow. A grin grew on his face as an idea formed. “Let's see how pink I am after this.” He charged toward the mud puddle and sat right down in it.

The mud was cold, though it did not bother him as much as it would if he were not covered in fur.Maybe there were some pluses to everything that had happened. He did not want to think about it right now, so he flopped onto his back and rolled around in the mud. He had not played in the mud since he was a little kid! He laughed as he looked down over his muddy body.

“Brown's the opposite of pink, right? Not that I was even pink before.”

“Johnny! Get out of the mud!” He clambered out of the mud, grinning sheepishly at his dad.

“It looked fun.”

“You're filthy.” Dad sighed before calling into the house

“Gracie, get a bath going.” Mom peeked around him.

“Johnny! You are not coming in like that.”

“Uh, what am I supposed to do?”

“What did we do the last time you were muddy?” Dad asked. Johnny thought back. He had been four or five and had gotten carried away with mud pies. Dad had…. A blast of cold water from the house hit him and Johnny yelped.

“It's cold!”

“Hold still and it'll be over quicker.” Johnny tried his best to, shuddering as he remembered how the last time had ended: with him running naked through the house to the tub. Well, now at least he had fur to cover him and…

Johnny looked down in shock. Something about his body had been bothering him, but only now had he realized.

“Dad? My… my weiner's gone.” The deluge of water stopped and Dad looked at his crotch.

“It's not gone,” Dad said reassuringly. “It's just got a little furry jacket now. That's how dogs-”

“But I'm not a dog!”

“Johnny. C'mon, you gotta admit, you are more dog than human now, right?”

“But I can still talk.”

“Sure, and you can still stand up on two legs, but I've

definitely seen you on all fours.”

“Cuz of Ava.”

“Yeah, your sister's going about it all wrong, but seriously, bud, it might be time to admit you are a dog.”

“But I have a human face!” Dad smiled and kissed his forehead.

“Ew, wet dog.” He smacked Johnny's back. “Alright, head inside and Mom'll give you a bath so you don't stink so bad.”

“Yes, I am giving you a bath.” Mom said once Johnny had reported to the bathroom. “You can't really hold a washcloth, can you?” Johnny wanted to try, but Mom stayed firm.

Johnny sat in the tub, feeling terribly overwhelmed. He wasn't a dog, but he had a tail now and his hands… the dog whistle… everything!

“Mom. You don't think I'm a dog, do you?”

“I know you're my Johnny.” She said. “But you gotta admit”

“Ugh”

“What? It's not like it's bad to be a dog. You have such nice fur.”

“It's hair.”

“Fur. Dogs have fur.”

“Mom, I'm not a dog!”

“Johnny, look at yourself. I know it's hard, but it's time to accept that you are more dog than human now.”

“But” he stared down at his knees poking out of the sudsy water. “What does it mean?”

“It doesn't have to mean anything. We'll still love you.”

“But like school and stuff? Am I just gonna be naked all the time?”

“We'll get through it as a family.” She kissed his forehead, her nose wrinkling as she smelled wet dog. “And we'll talk about it more later. Speaking of,” she sighed. “You should know that Ava has been grounded.” Johnny smiled. That was good news. “She's not allowed to talk to you again until she's done being grounded. Obviously, if there's an emergency or something, she can tell you the house is on fire, but you two won't be alone again for a few days.”

“Ok.” Johnny shrugged. “It still feels like she's getting off easy.”

“Well,” Mom paused and thought about how to say that a part of her agreed. How did you even punish something like this? “There might be more to come. I know this has been a lot,” Mom said with a gentle smile, trying to cheer Johnny up. “But your ears are so nice and soft now. I think that's an improvement.” Johnny only grunted. “Well, just you wait and see. Someday, you might meet a girl – or boy – who thinks your ears are nice and soft!”

“Mom!” He looked at her. “Do you mean like… another

dog?” Mom hesitated.

“Well, you're just a puppy now. Too early to be thinking about dating. Out of the tub!”

Johnny was grateful that Ava seemed to have been sent to her room so she could not see him as Mom, through a combination of the hair dryer and patting him with a towel, dried him off. He felt extra fluffy, but could have sworn his fur was even more pristinely white than before, so maybe the fluff wasn't so bad.

“Oh, rats. Looks like your ribbons got lost.” Mom said as Johnny batted at the fringe of fur in his eyes. You never really thought about how essential thumbs were until you lost them. “Well, let's see what else we have.”

A glowering dogboy followed Mom out of the bathroom, now sporting a big blue bow with white lace accents above each floppy ear.

“It looks handsome.” Mom said as he tried once again to get even one of them lose with his useless hands.

“I want them off.” Johnny grumbled, but he knew no one in the family would take them off. Dad gave him a sympathetic look, but that turned out to be more about how dinner was going to go.

“So, I think one of us is going to have to feed Johnny from here on out.” Dad said. “He can't really grab things.”

“Couldn't I just eat from the plate?”

“I thought you weren't a dog.” Mom teased, rubbing his head. “I think we'll try this.”

Ava sat on her bed, sighing melodramatically. How was any of this fair? She didn't know how it was happening or even why! It's not like she was making Johnny into a dog! She didn't even want a poodle! A prissy pink poodle pup was admittedly better than a scaredy cat little brother, but whenever she pictured having a dog, it was a dog more like Cinnamon down the block.

“Why is this happening?” She asked the ceiling. It really didn't make any sense, but as she listened to Johnny's muffled complaints about something, she hoped her parents would eventually accept that he sounded like a dog, looked like one, even smelled like one! “We just gotta accept it.” She said as if it was the most obvious thing in the universe. If there was a cure, the doctor would've figured it out.

“Ava, dinner.” Dad said, knocking on her door. Ava got off her bed and Dad escorted her downstairs solemnly.

“Ha!” She covered her mouth, embarrassed by how loud her laugh had been as she looked at Johnny sitting at the table. Not only did he have big blue bows on his ears now, a definite improvement over his black ribbons, but he had a bib around his neck.

“Doggone Cute?” Dad said, reading the bib. “Little on the nose, huh?”

“...I picked it.” Johnny mumbled.

“We only have Ava's old bibs, so it was either Doggone Cute or” mom held up a pink bib with 'Spoiled Princess’ on it. Ava knew she was on thin ice, so she stayed silent as she resolved to get back into Mom and Dad's good graces, if only to get a photo of her poodle brother wearing that bib.

“Let's eat.” Dad said, sensing the wheels turning in his daughter's mind.

Ava tried to focus on her food, but watching Johnny getting fed by Mom was almost too entertaining. Somehow, she forced herself to both behave and finish eating.

“Obviously,” Mom said as she wiped Johnny's face with his bib. “There's going to be some changes around here. Johnny's going to need to be fed.”

“I can-”

“Your mom and I will be handling that.” Dad interjected. “But we're glad that you're so eager to help out with Johnny's situation.”

“Once your punishment is done, we'll discuss that further.” Mom said. “But as of right now, you are not to speak to Johnny until Thursday.”

“I know.”

“When you get home from school, you go right upstairs and into your room.” Dad said.

“I know.” Ava heard a thumping coming from the other side of the table. Johnny's tail was wagging. He saw that she had

noticed and braced himself for her to make some comment. Instead, she looked down at her hands. Johnny could not help but smile, but noticed everyone staring at him.

“What?”

“Did you just bark?” Mom asked.

“It was more like a yip.” Dad said.

“No… I don't think so?”

The family spent the rest of the evening watching for Johnny to bark again, but it did not come. The next day was Monday and they all acted like things were normal, even if they weren't for one member of the family. School was not even mentioned anymore. Johnny stayed home, wandering the house. Turning on the TV was too much trouble to be worth it most days and when he accidentally turned it to max volume, Mom took the remote away and disappeared back into her home office.

Johnny's wanderings around the house were interrupted by gates blocking him from going upstairs and going into the kitchen. He tried to avoid the hardwood in the dining room because of how his nails clicked on the floor, reminding him that his feet were more like paws now, just like his hands. He did not even need to go into the kitchen. Mom fed him at designated times, which usually included being sent out into the backyard to ‘do his business'.

“All fours.” Mom said as if he needed the reminder by the fourth day. He had discovered all too quickly that his new

weiner made standing to pee all but impossible.

“Alright, back to the living room.” Mom said when he came back inside.

“Can't I have a snack first?” Johnny asked.

“I just fed you lunch.”

“But dinner's hours away.”

“It's not that long.” Johnny walked over to the snack cupboard, nails clicking on the floor. “Johnny!” He kept forgetting he was significantly shorter than he had been, reaching up above him and standing on his toes to try and bat at the cupboard door. “Johnny! Down!” She watched in surprise as, not only did Johnny stop trying to reach the cupboard, he dropped down to the floor. At first she thought he was squatting, but then realized he was sitting like a dog! “Uh, good boy.” She said. It felt right to say that, even as she looked at her son in confusion. She had had some suspicions that Ava had been training him, but this almost seemed like confirmation. “No snacks before dinner. Now scoot.”

Ava came home from school, shrugging her backpack off her shoulders before noticing that Mom and Dad were on the couch and Johnny sat on the floor, playing with some of the toddler toys Mom had found him. They were big enough that he could usually hold them between both paw-hands. He saw her looking and dropped the block he was holding.

“What's up?” Ava asked.

“Well,” Dad began. Johnny whimpered. “Since your punishment is officially over, it's time for you to assume some new responsibility.”

“You said you wanted to at dinner a few days ago.” Mom reminded her.

“What kind of responsibility?”

“Mom, please.” Johnny whispered, but Mom shushed him back into silence.

“From now on, when you get home from school, you're going to take Johnny on a walk.” Ava grinned, but tried to pull her reaction back a bit. If she seemed too eager, they might change their minds.

“Just around the block a few times.” Dad said. “And you're going to be very responsible about it.”

“He needs exercise after being cooped up in the house all day.”

“So I gotta make sure he” she fought with herself to not call him a little puppy. “Doesn't get lost?”

“That,” Mom agreed. “And you'll need to pick up after him.” Johnny snorted, grinning. He had not thought of that!

“Oh.” Ava's voice was flat, which made Johnny feel even better.

“Johnny, go stand by Ava.” Dad said. Johnny obeyed, wincing as he felt Ava adjust one of his bows.

If I'm taking him out, he's gotta look his poodly best.

“Now I want to be abundantly clear.” Dad continued. “You two are brother and sister. That means, Johnny, you need to listen to your sister. Ava, you talk to Johnny like he's your brother. No orders, no bullying, nothing like that. Stay together. Understand?”

“Yes, dad.” They said in unison.

“Best behavior.” Dad called as Ava opened the door, grinning toothily as Johnny dropped onto all fours and followed her.

By the time they had reached the mailbox, Dad's instructions had been twisted in Ava's mind. Johnny needed to be on his best behavior, Dad had said so, and that meant being walked like a dog.

"Before we start walkies, we need to teach a poofy widdle poodle puppy how to heel."

"Heal?"

"No, silly! It means to stay right by me at all times on walkies. We can't have a prissy pink poodle running after a squirrel and getting hurt or lost!"

"I'm not going to do that." Ava grinned, kneeling down to come closer to Johnny's eye level. She cupped his fluffy face in her hands as if he really was just a cute little puppy.

"You say that, but you're a ditzy poodle puppy, so you might forget!” Johnny pulled away from her.

“I gotta pee.” She marveled at how casually he walked over to the fence and peed against one of the posts.

“Johnny the Pink was here!” She said.

“Quit.”

“I've had to keep it in for days, Johnny.” She stretched her arms out and basked in the afternoon sun. “So I gotta get it all out.”

“Whatever.”

“Heel!” Ava said, pointing to her left shoe.

“Well, yeah, that's part of your foot.” Johnny said. Ava smirked.

“You do know the app still works outside, right?” She did not know if that was actually true, but had a feeling it was. She pulled her phone out of her pocket. “Let's review the basics. Sit!” Johnny rubbed his ear with a hand before sitting.

“Did that thing get more annoying?”

“Maybe.” Ava said with an obnoxious smile on her face. “Lie down!” Ava ran him through every trick she had taught him. “And now, heel!” She turned her back to him and pointed at her left foot. Johnny dutifully came over. She rubbed the top of his head as a distraction from putting her phone back in her pocket. She had meant to charge it since it had died on the walk home, but had not had the chance. "Good boy.” She said. “You wanna go walkies?”

To Johnny's relief, Ava walked along with him in silence. If he had not been naked and on all fours, it might have felt normal. Am I really naked? Fur really is like clothes. He pushed the thought away, but knew that the changes made clothes impossible to wear. Wish I hadn't pooped over lunch. He snickered at the thought of Ava having to pick up his poop.

“What's so funny?”

“Oh, just remembering something I saw on TV.”

“I thought Mom banned TV.”

“What?”

“I heard her telling Daddy last night. She's worried it'll rot your puppy brain.”

“She did not say that. She just took the remote away because I can't really work it.” Ava snorted and he knew she did not believe him. “It's true.”

“Excuse me? Young lady?” They both turned to see a Community Officer walking up to them. “Do you have a leash for that dog?”

“Huh?” They said in unison. Ava recovered more quickly.

“He's my brother, not a dog.”

“Mhm” The officer said incredulously. “I'm giving you a warning today, but he needs to be on a leash unless he's fenced in.”

“Thanks for defending me.”

“Uh-huh.” Ava said, distracted. “Come on. Heel, boy.” She smiled, pleased at how quickly Johnny fell in line. Just to test it, she stopped. He went a few steps before realizing she had stopped.

“What are you doing?”

“You better be careful, pup. The cops are onto you and you don't want to dogcatcher to come for you.”

“Ha, very funny.” Johnny rolled his eyes.

“Come on, let's go see Mrs. Neal.”

“What? For what?” Ava did not answer, walking along. Johnny stopped in his tracks, glaring at her. If the dogcatcher somehow burst out of the bushes and nabbed him, it would be Ava's fault.

“Come, Johnny.” Ava said.

“Why are we going to Mrs. Neal’s?” He was all but certain Ava was planning to make him do a doggy playdate or something.

“No barking.”

“I didn't!”

“It does kinda sound like barking when you're upset.” Ava said. “But you usually kinda whine like a puppy.”

“I do not!”

“See? Now, heel!” She pulled her phone out of her pocket

and nodded as Johnny begrudgingly fell in line.

“Come on, Johnny.” Ava said when they arrived at Mrs. Neal's. She stood up on the porch and gestured for him.

“No!”

“Now. Come up here.” She marched down the stairs and grabbed him by his nape. “Good boy.” She rang the doorbell.

“Hello there!” Mrs. Neal said. Johnny only realized then that she had not seen him in weeks. He expected her to be shocked, but she looked down at him as if it was perfectly normal for a boy to be on all fours and covered in wooly white fur.

“Hi, Mrs. Neal. I was wondering if you still had Cinnamon's old collar?”

“You know, your mom just called me a little bit ago about that very thing. Did she not send you over?”

“Nope. My phone's dead, so if she texted me, I didn't get it.”

“Well, I've got Cin's collar, her leash, and maybe a few other things. Let's start with the collar though.” For the first time, she addressed Johnny. “Aren't you excited? New collar!” She looked back at Ava. “Cinny's always so excited about those things. I see Johnny's still a little shy. I put Cinnamon in the backyard because I figured he might still be a little skittish.” She handed Ava a collar of pink nylon, festooned with rhinestones. It looked girly!

“I don't want that!” Johnny said. Mrs. Neal seemed a bit

taken aback. “I don't need any collar!”

“Johnny.” Ava said. “Johnny, sit!” He dropped to the ground. Hadn't Ava said her phone was dead? He could've sworn he heard the dog whistle. “Good boy! Stay. Stay.” All he could do was whimper as he sat still for Ava as she put the collar around his neck.

“You've got him well trained.”

“Yeah, everything I've read says start them young. Johnny's still a puppy, but he wants to learn, I feel like.” She stood back. “There! The pink's a good touch for him. It really brings out the pinkness of his fur, don't you think?”

“I am not pink! Tell her, Mrs. Neal! Please.” She smiled.

“Listen to him beg. You two still argue like siblings. I need to be going, but I did gather a few more things for Johnny.” She handed a big paper bag to Ava. She peeked inside, grinning.

“Down pup.” She said when Johnny tried to see. “Four legs in public.”

“Be a good puppy, Johnny, and listen to your big sister!” Mrs. Neal said as a goodbye.

“You're my little sister.”

“How can that be when you're such a little puppy? Heel!”

“What's in the bag?” Johnny asked, falling into step with her.

“You'll see!”

“How are you gonna explain the leash to Mom and Dad?”

“We were told by that community guy that you need to wear it. They can't argue with the law!” She snickered. “Besides, how can you take it off?”

Mom and Dad seemed entirely unsurprised by his collar and leash. Johnny was beginning to suspect that the whole family was conspiring against him to turn him into a total dog. I'm not that different from a dog, I guess. He thought, glumly staring down at his paws.

“Oh, isn't that nice?” Mom asked, pulling a pair of strange bowls out of the bag Mrs. Neal had given Ava.

“What are those?”

“Ditzy poodle pup.” Ava murmured just loud enough for him to hear from where she sat before raising his voice. “They're dog dishes.”

“They might not work for you.” Dad said before Johnny began to protest. “How about you just pretend and we'll see how it works?”

“You want me to-” Johnny sputtered. “This is too much!” He stood up, shaking a bit. “I am not a dog!” He tried to undo the collar, but it was too tight to go over his head and he could not get the buckle to work.

“Johnny, down.” Mom said. “Down.” She kept repeating it until he sat down on the floor again.

“Ava, can you go let Johnny out into the backyard?”

“What? Why?” Johnny asked.

“Cuz you still have energy to burn.” Ava said knowingly. “Puppy energy!”

“And no tickling!” Mom called as Ava pushed Johnny toward the back door.

“Shoot.” Johnny could have sworn he heard Ava mumble before he was outside.

Johnny remained in the backyard, despite sitting by the door, until dinner. The patio door slid open and Ava stepped out, holding one of the dog bowls. Johnny felt his stomach twist, but he was hungry.

“You're lucky.” Ava said, holding the bowl above his head.

“What? Why? Cuz I get to have a picnic out here apparently?” Ava laughed.

“That was clever. But no, it's because you're such a spoiled poodle, you get people food in your dog dish.” She put it down on the ground and Johnny saw it had chicken, vegetables, and rice in it. He stepped toward it.

“No, sit.” Johnny rolled his eyes. “Sit!” He complied and Ava nodded.

“Good dog.”

“Ava-”

“Hush. You're getting dinner delivered to you on a silver platter.” The dog dish was more like a chrome bowl. “You

really are a princess of a poodle." Johnny growled and Ava laughed. "So much for being clever." She set the dog dish down and disappeared inside.

Johnny was too hungry to really consider just what being brought dinner outside meant. He ate, finding it easier than he would have expected to eat from a bowl on the ground, though he did try to grip it between his hand-paws and eat that way. It did not seem to make much of a difference.

Once he finished eating, he returned to waiting for someone to let him back inside. The sun was setting and it was getting chilly. Would they make him sleep outside? How many hours had it been since Ava had taken him food? It had to be after bedtime by now, right? He whimpered as he heard laughter inside. They had forgotten about him.

"Hey. Hey!" He called, practically pressing his face up against the glass of the patio door. "Hey!" He grinned as he saw Dad approaching.

"What are you barking about?" He asked.

"I… I thought you forgot about me."

"Ava brought you dinner half an hour ago." Dad said. "You can come in when it's time for bed."

"What?" The door slid shut again. Johnny, furious, jumped up and tried to slide open the door, but his hands slid all over it and he could not quite get them to hook around the white handle. He sighed and surveyed the backyard. If he could not get in through the patio door, the gate to the front yard was

hopeless. He had had trouble undoing it even before all this and with how much shorter he was now, he probably could not even reach it. “I'm trapped.”

True to Dad's word, he let Johnny back in at bedtime. Johnny padded inside and discovered a baby gate blocking the stairs.

“Uh”

“Johnny! Here boy!” Mom called from the living room. This had to be a trap.

He looked around the living room in surprise. They had rearranged things, which only made him feel more as if he had been outside for hours, if not days. Now, sitting in a corner was a large brown cushion. No, not a cushion…

“A dog bed?”

“Yep, your very own bed.”

“Fit for a poodle princess.” Ava remarked.

“Go brush your teeth, Ava.” Dad said mildly. Had they made another trip to Mrs. Neal's to get him yet another Cinnamon handmedown?

“Try it out.”

“Mom.” Johnny whined. “I… I want to sleep in my bed.”

“This is your bed.” Mom said. “We're adapting, remember?”

“Why am I the only one who gets screwed by these things?” Johnny muttered.

“You'll get used to it.” Dad said as Johnny stepped onto the dog bed. He frowned as he realized that the dark brown made his fur look slightly pink, a realization he would take to his grave.

“Can I at least take my collar off?”

“You don't like it?” Mom asked. “I think it's very handsome.”

“It's pink and has rhinestones!”

“It doesn't look bad.”

“Does so!”

“Well,” Dad said with a chuckle. “I guess that you should keep wearing it so you never have to see it.”

“Like Guy de Maupassant.” Mom said, smiling at her husband.

“Who?” His parents chuckled.

“It's a mommy-daddy thing.” Dad said, giving him a rough scratch between his ears that sent them flopping. “Floppy, floppy puppy dog.”

“Quit!”

“Aw, but your tail was wagging.” Dad said, eyes warm from his smile.

“Alright,” mom said. “Let's let Johnny sleep.”

“Here?”

“It's your bed, silly.” Mom scritched his ear.

“But what about my room?” The question went unanswered, though Johnny did pad over to the gate once he was alone. All he could do was stare at it, certain he couldn't climb over it. What was going on up there?

Johnny gave up and returned to the dog bed. It had a weird smell to it that reminded him of Mrs. Neal's house, but something told him that he needed to sleep on it to get rid of that weird smell. He lay there, sighing until sleep found him.

The next thing Johnny knew, it was morning. He opened his eyes to see that Ava stood over him, dressed for school as she eyed him critically.

“What?” He asked, only becoming aware of the fact he was on his back, limbs pointing in all directions.

“Must be nice.”

“What is?”

“Getting to sleep in as late as you want, like a princess.” Ava had a sudden light in her eyes, but it passed.

“What?” Johnny tried to wipe the sleep out of his eyes, easier said than done with the state of his hands. “What are you even talking about?”

“Ava? Can you tell Johnny his breakfast is on the patio?”

“I heard.” Johnny called. Ava smirked.

“Have fun, pinky poodle pup. I'll take you for walkies when I

get home.” She headed for the front door, almost wishing she was the one turning into a dog. She had an English test today.

The newest normal once again became normal. Johnny spent the days outside in the backyard. Ava would still take him for a walk after school every day, he ate all his meals on the patio, and slept inside. A surprise rain shower got Ava's old playhouse put in the backyard to serve as Johnny's doghouse.

“It's pink like you.” Ava said. Johnny did not even react, having expected her to say exactly that.

Johnny still tried to walk around on two legs when he could, even startling a squirrel he had been chasing one afternoon. He noticed, however, that his parents seemed to discourage it, at least inside. He stood up to stretch one morning out of habit and Mom sternly told him 'down'. He obeyed, glad to have had someone talk directly to him.

That was another thing he had noticed. Mom and Dad had started talking about him even when he was in the room. Only Ava seemed to talk to him, though more and more, she seemed to delight in telling him he was a poodle princess.

“Pink collar, you get to sleep inside, you have a princess house in the backyard.”

“Shuddup.”

“Seriously, you're spoiled.” She said, rubbing his furry back. “Pampered poodle princess.”

“Stop.” Johnny muttered.

“Such an aggressive puppy.” She teased. “Since you're not in people school, maybe we should do obedience school.”

“Whatever.”

“Well, I've trained you pretty well myself.”

After a few days of that, Johnny was getting fed up. When they got home from the walk, he flopped down on his dog bed.

“Seriously. Can you quit? This is still a lot to get used to. And I wish my own sister would be more supportive!”

“What do you even have to be mad about?” Ava demanded, surprising even herself with her anger. “You get to be a dog and laze around all day!”

“I don't want to be a dog! I'm a human being!”

“Ugh!” Ava exclaimed, throwing her hands up in the air. “Mom and Dad accept it. Mrs. Neal, everyone accepts it! Why can't you?” She glared down at him. “You are a dog.”

“No, I'm not.”

“Yes, you are.” She grunted. “You know what? You need an attitude adjustment.”

“No. Ava, no!” He growled and barked at her, hoping the ferocity would scare her away. Ava would not be deterred however and his growls soon transformed into squeals of laughter. Even with all of the changes that had happened, Johnny was still helplessly, hopelessly ticklish. He rolled

back and forth, falling off of the dog bed and onto the floor, laughing uncontrollably even as he felt his face elongate and his legs shift. He finally rolled over onto his hands and feet as Ava stood back. Hands and feet? He had paws now, fully transformed paws. Ava and Johnny both looked over his body. “Ava.” He moaned, his mouth no longer able to form words.

“I guess you're all dog now.” Ava said, patting him on the head. Johnny snapped at her, but she dodged and smiled. “Now you won't have any problems eating out of your dog bowl.” Johnny whimpered as she pulled on his collar until he started to walk to the backdoor with her. “You play outside.” She said. “I'm gonna go do homework.”

It took all of half a second once his parents saw him to work out what had happened. Johnny sat in the backyard, listening in as his parents talked with Ava. They were upset, but what could really be done? Grounding her would not turn Johnny back. He was a dog now and that was that. He tried to scoff at the injustice of her getting grounded for three days, but it was more of a ruff that escaped his lips. He awkwardly brought a paw up to his nose before resorting to the patio door. He whimpered at his reflection. There was not any part of the boy Johnny left. He was all dog Johnny now.

It seemed to sting less once Johnny had gotten used to it. Mom and Dad seemed to take pity on him. There was bacon on top of his dinner and they even let him come inside before bedtime to watch a movie with them.

“Down in front!” Dad teased as Johnny sat on his dog bed, which had been pulled in front of the television.

“Johnny, down.” Ava said from her place lounging extravagantly on the couch that she and Johnny had once shared for movie nights. Mom and Dad exchanged a look as Johnny immediately lay down, but did not comment.

“Alright, pup. Time for bed.” Mom said once the movie ended. What kind of dog had a bedtime anyway?

“We should all get ready for bed.” Dad slapped his knees. “Big day tomorrow.”

“What's going on?” Johnny asked.

“Ruff arf to you too, bud.” Dad said, rubbing his head.

“He's complaining about bedtime.” Ava said. “Can you guys not understand him?”

“Some things never change.” Dad chuckled. “Johnny, lie down on your bed.” Johnny sighed and settled onto his bed. What was gonna happen tomorrow? Maybe I'll wake up a human again. He thought glumly as he fell into a dream where he was human and in his underwear, but everyone still saw him as a dog. Even the next morning, as he was herded outside to pee and eat breakfast, he could not decide if it had been a nightmare or not.

The 'big day’ turned out to be a garage sale. Johnny was almost relieved when Dad picked him up and put him in the car. A garage sale was nothing to be excited over, he thought,

until they were pulling out and he realized that most of the stuff was his!

“Hey! You can't sell my action figures! And my books! And… well, I guess you can sell that old sweater, but not-”

“No barking, Johnny.” Dad said from the front seat. “Sit still. Geez, I thought dogs were scared of the vet.”

“The vet!?”

Johnny tried to communicate with his Dad the rest of the way to the veterinary clinic, but even when he focused and enunciated clearly, Dad seemed to only hear dog noises. Ava had claimed last night she could understand him. Was that his future? Ava as his translator?

Johnny had a suspicion about the vet and, sure enough, it was the same one from his last doctor visit. Literally my last doctor visit, he thought as Dad set him on the exam table.

“So, I see Johnny's had some developments.” The vet said.

“For sure.” Dad said. “Near as we can tell, he's all dog. From his head to his tail to his, uh, poodle doodle.” The vet chuckled in spite of himself.

“I see. Well, let's take a look at him. I see he's on a leash.”

“Yeah, his sis- my daughter really took charge of training him. He seems to respond well.” The vet nodded, talking as he worked.

“Near as I can tell, he's roughly at the same stage of canine

development as he was in human terms.” He rubbed Johnny's back. “Of course, dog puberty doesn't come with more body hair. His fur'll just become different as he grows up. Less puppy fluff. I'll have someone find you poodle grooming information, though most people go with a professional.”

“I'm really a poodle?”

“And obviously, Johnny here will have an opinion. Poodles are intelligent dogs, so don't be surprised when he tries to communicate a preference to you.” The vet shrugged. “Of course, Johnny's not any ordinary dog. You understand us, right, boy?” Johnny gave as clear of a nod as he could. “See?” He looked back at Johnny's dad. “However, I wouldn't be surprised if maturing still gives him some of the usual canine instincts. The most common one to look out for his aggression. He's a standard poodle, it seems, and it's actually the smaller poodles that usually present aggressive behavior, but still. And actually, it's the girls that get aggressive.” He chuckled. “A bitch in heat can nip even people she knows.” He laughed again, more to himself than Johnny's dad before he tapped his fingers on the table. “And that brings us to the question of breeding.”

“Breeding?”

“Oh, he likes that.” The vet patted Johnny's back.

“Well, if you're getting at what I think you are, his- my wife and I are still discussing.”

“Of course. Near as I can tell, he's still a puppy, though males

will start getting those urges around ten months." He paused. "A lot of the indicators we have for dog age: body shape, teeth, eyes, don't seem the most reliable for Johnny here." He shrugged. "When we do our next appointment, how about you give me your decision?"

"That seems fair." Decision on what? Johnny whimpered as it clicked. They were gonna talk about getting him fixed?

"Perfect. All-in-all, Johnny's a healthy poodle. Now that he's settled into a full coat and we're getting into warmer months, you maybe want to consider getting him trimmed." He heard Johnny whimper. "It's like a haircut, just everywhere." Johnny nodded.

"What color is my fur?" He asked. An official guy like the vet would totally put Ava's dumb lies to rest.

"Any idea what he's saying?" Dad asked. Johnny felt his ears and tail droop.

"No, but you could maybe look into those buttons some people use."

"Good idea."

"For now, I'll have the gal up front get you some general information pamphlets. They all have websites with reliable information that should answer most of your questions. You'll have our phone number if anything more comes up. We actually just added texting!"

Johnny left the vet feeling as if no one was particularly

interested in turning him back into a human. That feeling only compounded when he was tied to a pole in the front yard to watch as most of his toys, books, even his bed were all sold off in the garage sale.

“I gotta do something.” He muttered as he saw some kid eyeing his Ozawa action figure. “Well, I'm a dog, so…” Johnny began to bark as ferociously as he could, startling everyone at the garage sale.

“Johnny, no.” Ava said, coming over. “Sit!” Johnny barked again, but his butt still touched down on the ground.

“Sorry, he gets excited sometimes.” He heard Mom said.

“No barking.” Ava said sternly.

“But…” he sighed, knowing it was all pointless. “I don't want to be a dog.” He whined down at his big front paws.

“Howling about it is just silly.” Ava said, playing with his ears as the kid bought his limited edition Ozawa for three dollars.

“He just robbed our family.” Johnny muttered, head down on his paws.

Over the next few days, Johnny remained hopeful that someone would start pleading his case to return to being a human. All that changed was the route of his after school walks and what was served to him in his dish. Gone were the days of eating what the family ate. He was on kibble morning, noon, and night. Once he got past the hurdle of

assuming it was Cocoa Puffs based on the shape, Johnny decided it could be worse.

It was difficult to track the days when they were all mostly identical, but Johnny realized it was the weekend when Dad and Ava were still home once he finished his dry, meaty breakfast. It was a rainy morning, so he was allowed inside, where he was doing his best to ignore Ava as she waved a purple rubber bone in front of him. Purple was practically pink!

“It'll clear up by noon.” Mom said, staring out at the rain. “So, Ava, I think today's the day for Johnny's appointment.”

“Perfect.”

“Not the vet again!” Johnny protested. He knew no one could understand him, but he still owed it to himself to try. “I just went!” He had to do something, anything. If they were taking him to the vet again, that meant…

“No, this time it's the barber.” Ava said. Johnny glared at her. He felt reassured, but she clearly understood him better than the rest.

“They're going to give you a nice trim.” Mom said. “Ava, you know the way?”

“Uh, yeah. I've gone with Daddy to the barber lots of times. There's that bookstore right next door.” She looked down at Johnny. “And you'll probably be less mopey once you've got shorter fur.”

“It's hot for humans.” Dad said. “So it's worse for him. Johnny's main way to cool down is to pant.” Johnny had found himself doing it a few times as if it was instinct, which it probably was now.

“Well, looks like the sun's out.” Ava said. “Johnny, sit!” He obeyed, realizing that maybe a haircut didn't sound so bad. Furcut? He wasn't sure.

Johnny knew the way to Sal's like the back of his… paw. He wondered just what the barber would say. He wished Dad had come along instead of Ava. Dad would probably just tell them he was a dog, Ava was for sure going to say poodle. Still, he could not deny going to the barber felt normal, the first normal thing in he wasn't even sure how long!

“It's a right.” Johnny said as they came to the street Sal's was on.

“Johnny, sit.” Ava said. “We need to cross the street.”

“It's right there.” He waved a paw at the barber pole, but remained in an obedient sitting position.

“It looks busy at Sal's.” Ava said.

“You can understand me!”

“Mostly. Not always.” Ava said.

“Let's go.”

“Sal's does heads, not full bodies.” Ava said. The walk sign turned green. “Johnny, heel!” Johnny fell into step, but

whimpered as he saw where they were obviously heading: Pampered Paws Dog Groomer and Pet Spa.

Ava marched right inside and ordered Johnny to sit. He looked over at the only other dog in the waiting area, wondering if she was also a human turned dog. The husky eyed him curiously for a moment before returning to bothering her owner.

“Hello,” the woman behind the counter had an apron on that showed the Pampered Paws logo: a pawprint with hearts on the pads.

“Hi, I've got an appointment for Johnny, standard poodle.” She said, doing that thing with her voice where she tried to sound older. It reminded Johnny a little too much of the voice she used to give him commands.

“Your dad called it in?”

“Yep.”

“Perfect. Looks like a bath and trim?”

“Uh, yeah.” Ava fished out her phone. “But we really want this.” She showed the attendant a photo.

“Oh, so a continental. That we can do. It'll be much more summery for him.” She pointed to a chair. “Go ahead, have a seat, and we'll come collect Johnny in a few.”

“It's technically a barber, just for dogs.” Ava said as they sat down. “Don't look at me like that. Dad made the appointment.” Johnny couldn't shake the feeling there was

more to the story, but Ava fell silent.

“What was the photo?” He asked, trying to enunciate every word.

“Johnny, down.” Ava said. He complied, but was barely down on the floor when the door opened. He heard the sounds of water, clippers, and dogs. What was this place? All the windows were too high for him to see.

“Johnny the poodle.” The man said, walking right over to them. “Ready, pup?” Johnny stood up as his leash was passed to the groomer. “Continental, right?” He felt the bow that Johnny had forgotten was on his head. “And keep the bow?”

“Sure.” Ava grinned.

“No.”

“Well, that's two votes for the bow.” The groomer said. “Come on, Johnny. Your haircut awaits!” As Johnny disappeared into the grooming area, Ava shifted to a stool right in front of the main event. This was it! She looked down at her phone again and grinned at the poodle photo there. Johnny was gonna look great!

If Ava had not known Johnny, she would never think of him as anything other than a dog. He is a dog, she reminded herself. Mom and Dad had told her they just needed to accept it and see him as a dog now. Mom had cried, which made Ava feel guilty. It wasn't like she turned him into a dog on purpose. It was an accident! She watched as the groomer lifted him onto a station and clipped him to it to keep him in

one place. Picking up her phone, she took a photo and sent it to Mom and Dad to let them know Johnny was being seen. The sprayers came out and Johnny was soon soaked from head to toe.

Ava grinned, raising her phone once again as she saw a miserable Johnny covered almost entirely in rosy suds as they shampooed his fur. She knew he had hated baths even as a human, so this especially invasive bath had to be bothering him! Whining or barking would only get soap in his mouth though.

The sprayer came on and, for a second, she thought the bubbles weren't being sprayed away. Looking closer, she realized that the bubbles were going away; it was just that his fur, from his nose to the tip of his tail, was now a bright, bubble gum pink! She giggled with delight, immediately snapping at least a dozen photos of her brother's new fur color.

“I'm not pink, Ava.” She mocked to herself. “Well, you are now!”

She admired Johnny's fur as they seemed to take a brief break, putting something in his mouth that she assumed must be a dog treat. They rubbed him all over and she realized just how much more fluffy he seemed.

“Really getting what we paid for.” She mused, wondering just how expensive these extra treatments were. It'll be worth it, she thought. If we're gonna have a poodle, might as well be a capital P Poodle!

With the grooming station holding him still, Johnny was unaware of his new fur color. He shuddered as he heard the clippers come on. It's just like a haircut, but all over, he reminded himself as he felt more than one set of clippers dive into his fur.

“You're being such a good dog.” One of the groomers murmured. Johnny realized that did make him feel a little better until he noticed some cotton candy by his paw. Cotton candy? In here? He managed to look down at it and noticed that there was cotton candy on his arm-leg too. Why was it so pink? That— he whimpered as realization set in. Out of the corner of his eye, he could just barely see Ava, phone in hand, loving every minute. She.. she had dyed him!

“Oh, he's looking so good.” Ava gushed as his fur was shaped into the classic continental cut. With his unclipped fur, Johnny was only a poodle if you really knew your dogs. Now, all pinkalicious and trimmed, he was as poodly as a poodle can be. “Ooh, that reminds me.” Ava hurried over to the dog tag kiosk, all but skipping in her delight at how well this was going. Johnny was nearly done, so she needed to get him his dog tag!

Once it was done, she slipped it into her pocket. Johnny was sure to be way too upset for her to get it on his collar right away. Later tonight, she told herself.
Johnny thought that the grooming would never end, but finally, they lifted him off the table and onto a floor that had pink, wooly poodle fur everywhere. Johnny sighed. At least they had shaved a lot of it off. Most of it, it even looked like.

He noticed a mirror and a growl came from deep within him as he realized how wrong he was. He wished he could have mistaken his reflection for another poodle, but he knew that was him. Ava was going to pay.

“Oh! He’s perfect!” Ava squealed as Johnny was led out. He had pink pompoms around all four legs and one on each side of his tail, which also was topped by a fluffy pink pompom. He had a pink vest and a big pink puff atop his head, topped off by an equally big white bow. Now this was a poodle!

“He’s been growling a bit, so I thought we nicked him with the clippers.”

“Oh, he’s just not sure about you guys.” Ava said. “Since we’re gonna be coming here regularly, he’ll get used to you.” Johnny barked. “See? He’s already asking to make his next appointment.” She leaned down and patted Johnny’s furry hat. “Prissy pinky poodle pup.” She whispered, relishing what had to be her final victory. “Johnny, sit. Johnny, shake.” Johnny was furious, but Ava had trained him well enough that he complied and begrudgingly offered his paw to all the groomers. They all worked with dogs. How could they not tell he was unhappy with his haircut?

"This is why I thought it was goofy that you kept howling at the yard sale!” Ava said as they stepped outside. “It paid for your grooming!" She giggled. "All pink and poofy, the way a pampered princess poodle pup should be. And the way you will be from now on.”

Johnny spent the first couple blocks plotting his revenge on

Ava. He would chew up all of her sneakers and pee on her bed, that was for sure! Reason set in and he realized that he did not need to lift a paw. Mom and Dad were going to ground her for life, if not two full lifetimes, for this.

“Oh, doesn't he look handsome?” Mom said that every time he came back from a haircut, but he had never come back quite so pink.

“It” Dad said, clearly taken aback. “It works for him.”

“Course it does.” Ava said.

“What?” Johnny barked.

“He likes it too.” Ava said proudly. “He thanked all the nice workers and everything.”

“I do not!”

“Johnny,” Dad kneeled down and stroked his ears. “I know it feels like a lot, but it's like any haircut. You'll be used to it before you know it.”

“I'm pink!” Johnny protested.

“You've always been pink, Johnny.” Ava said. Johnny shook her off. “You know, we discussed at dinner a few nights ago that Johnny really doesn't fit a poodle.”

“Is that why you dyed him pink, Ava?” Mom asked.

“Well, Daddy said he was basically my dog.” Ava said defensively. “So doesn't that mean I should get to name him?” Johnny watched as his parents exchanged a look.

“What did you have in mind?” Dad's pensive tone felt like the utmost betrayal to Johnny. Ava could not rename him! That wasn't fair at all!

“Well, I got him a nametag at the groomer. Johnny, sit. Sit!” Johnny could only hesitate slightly before the command took hold. Ava kneeled down and fixed the bone shaped nametag to his collar.

“Princess?” Dad read. “Uh…”

“He's her dog.” Mom whispered.

“I don't want to be named Princess.” Johnny whimpered, backing away until he reached a wall. Mom, Dad, and Ava were all down at his level and they began to pet him. Johnny wiggled and tried to get free, but there were six hands coming at him and no way of escape.

“Princess.” They all repeated. “Soft puppy Princess.” Johnny ended up on his back, belly up in the air. They rubbed it and he wiggled. It did not tickle, but it felt good, his tongue lolled out of his mouth and he just accepted the belly rubs. Johnny or Princess or whatever they wanted to call him, at least belly rubs felt good. He blinked, wondering if he was falling asleep. No, it was something else, almost like the colors were becoming less obvious. Blue and yellow were still there, but more muted. He cocked his head, wondering just what was going on.

The belly rubs stopped. Princess rolled upright. He scratched an ear. He looked around. There was Ava. He liked Ava. Ava

was his human. He barked in greeting to her and she laughed. The other two humans were also his. They were talking to each other. Sometimes he wondered what they said.

“Princess, outside.” Ava said. Outside! He understood that! He liked outside. He hurried along. His tail wagged. He liked outside. “Good dog.” Ava said. Princess felt happy. His tail wagged. “Good Princess.”