To Build a Nest

by TheMissingDays

Leo starts a journey that will change him forever.

Its the start of a new story! This is a pretty different start with a really bad situation but stick with me and I think it will be worth it. I'm very excited with what I have planned.

The Costume Box
2023

Chapter 1

To Build a Nest - Chapter 1

An Age-Regression Tale

Leo Rushton pulled on his plain white t-shirt before taking a look in the small mirror on the wall of his room. He ran his hand through his buzzed brown hair. The first thing he was going to do was let his hair grow out. It was going to be the first decision he got to make about his appearance after all. As he looked at his face a little more he wiggled his nose, toying with the idea of getting a nose ring as well. He could picture himself now with long hair and a nose ring. He would definitely be taking a picture and sending it to his parents as a final screw you. His parents were the controlling type. They had never let him do anything that did not match their perfect little picture of how he should be. In their heads he was going to be a straight A student get into a good college and then become either a lawyer or some sort of CEO, there was really no other option after all. They were respectable people, perfect people with the perfect child and Leo was not going to mess that up.

Leo had certainly tried to be the perfect son, yet as he had found out perfect was hardly possible. He had listened to his parents obediently for a long time. He had been studious and had done whatever they had told him too. If they hadn't liked a friend of his he had to stop hanging out with them. Any extra curricular activities they had signed him up for he had done, and they had signed him up for more than few. Piano,

violin, soccer, basketball, and debate, and some extra tutoring just to make sure his grades stayed in tip top shape. It had all began to be too much for Leo its not like he could really enjoy any of it either he had no time to practice so he was lousy at most of it, which just made his parents all the more critical. The problem wasn't the schedule in their minds it was down to him being inadequate.

He had started to find little ways to let off steam lest he completely break down with stress. His parents had been exceptionally good at squashing each and every one however. When he had started listening to some heavy metal music on his phone they had erased it and put parental locks on the phone. A skateboard he had traded another kid for was taken away, and when he had dared to come home wearing a shirt with some skulls on it his Mom had confiscated and cut it up with a pair of scissors. His parents had made it clear he had work to do and no teenage rebellion was going to get in the way of that. To Leo he felt trapped in a box that was too small and maybe that's why he had done it.

He had been fourteen and found himself home alone on a rare occasion with both parents gone. He had invited his best friend Robert over, pretty much the only kid his parents let him hang out with on a few occasions. Then Leo had taken the lock picking kit he had managed to hide from his parents and broke into their liquor cabinet taking a whole bottle of whiskey up to his room.

“Party time,” he had said entering into his room.

“What's that?” Robert had asked looking at the bottle in Leo's hand.

“I don't know, but it'll get us drunk,” Leo had said unscrewing the cap.

“Are you sure you should do that? Your parents will kill you if they find out,” Robert had said clearly uncomfortable with the situation.

“Who cares, what are they going to do?” Leo said motioning around to his bare room that could best be described as minimalist it looked like a room out of a home décor magazine and completely at odds with the taste of its teenage inhabitant. His parents had made it clear, this was their house not his. The only thing he had for himself was a cork board above his desk that had some photos from a school trip and one framed photo of him and Robert at a pizzeria that had been taken at Robert's birthday a couple of years ago. “Ground me? They don't let me do anything anyways.” Leo said.

Leo had gone to take a swig before Robert stopped him.

“Don't do that,” he had said. “I get that your parents are...strict,” which caused Leo to scoff.

“You're stressed you just need some time off. So instead of drinking just come over to my house for the night. Blow off some steam.”

“Do you know my parents?” Leo said with a skeptical look. “When have they ever let me spend the night. Any time I've

gone over to your house they've demanded me back by seven p.m sharp."

Robert pursed his lips. Leo was speaking the truth.

"I wish I could though," Leo said sitting on the edge of his bed in a defeated slump. "Your parents are so nice to me. I wish they were my parents."

Robert had looked at Leo with a sympathetic smile as he sat down next to him listening to Leo vent which seemed to be all the help he was capable of.

"You know I went to the doctor's office last week, he told me I seemed stressed out and that I was developing high blood pressure. Afterwards my Dad yelled at me for making him look bad." Leo said venting his frustrations before his face turned downwards. "What am I supposed to do?" Leo had said as he began to hold back some tears. "I can't take this anymore. I just want to leave this place and never come back."

"I know," Robert had said his hand moving to hold onto Leo's. "But I would miss you if you left," Robert said as both boys looked at their hands held together before they looked up at one another. Their eyes locked with one another. Slowly they both leaned in until their lips had come together in a kiss. Leo's emotions had exploded upon his first kiss. He had never experienced such a happy feeling before. However it was short lived as his door opened and his Mother let out a shocked gasp.

The boys had separated immediately as they had shot up from

the bed. A tense silence had invaded the room.

“I gotta go,” Robert had said as he quickly exited the room. Leo had been left alone looking at his Mother's expression of horror. Her eyes had then worked their way down settling on the bottle of whiskey still in Leo's hand.

“Leonard,” she said grabbing the bottle from his hand. “Were you drinking?”

“N-no,” Leo had stammered. However his Mother had erupted with anger screaming at him at the top of her lungs. Leo's Father came into the room to see what all the noise was about. After a brief explanation from Leo's Mother his Father had joined in as well. After what had seemed like an eternity both his parents seemed to calm down.

“It seems we have our answer,” his father had remarked.

“Looks like it,” his mother said nodding her head.

“Pack your bags,” his father had then said.

“You're kicking me out?” Leo had said his voice filled with fear. Even though just a little while ago he had been wishing for such a thing being faced with the reality was a little much. Where would he go, what would he do?

“We would never,” his mother had said.

“We're taking you somewhere,” his father had said placing a hand on Leo's shoulder. “A place we're they can help someone like you.”

The next day Leo had been placed on an airplane as his parents waved at him from behind the gate. Upon landing he had been met by two men. They had lead him to a car and drove for a good hour. Neither one of them was telling him where he was going. Finally they came to a gate. One of the men then flashed a badge and the gate opened. They drove up a long winding road until they came to a large building. It was pretty nondescript building but as Leo could see it was sprawling facility.

“Welcome to Hawthorne Woods Boarding School,” one of the men had said. That had been four years ago. To Leo though it had felt much longer. He came to quickly understand this was no ordinary boarding school. There were still the normal school classes to attend but in addition to that Hawthorne touted itself as a therapy center. The residents were never allowed to leave the grounds. That even extended to holidays. Leo had spent every Christmas at this place. His parents would usually send some gifts his way. Mostly baked goods and some books as the kids were not allowed to have clothes that were not provided by the school and electronics were also banned. All in all the place was rather rigid. The residents were held to a schedule, which Leo didn't find that hard to adjust to given his home life in some ways it wasn't even as bad. Yet there were other things that Leo definitely did find hard.

The school called them reflection classes. Basically it was an hour of telling the students how they had failed to form into proper young men and these classes would get them back on

track. It was the schools job to ensure that they understood that a good life was filled with respectable attitudes. Hard work and healthy relationships were key and as far as Leo had surmised the only relationship the school was concerned about was the acceptance of authority figures. Leo also had to go to group therapy every week to help him abandon his immoral feelings as the school called it. Leo thought it was kind of ironic, if they wanted him to like only girls then why did they keep them separated?

At first Leo didn't think this was going to be so bad. At least he was away from his parents. However his first day had been a wake up call as to what sort of place his parents had sent him to. After having his stuff confiscated which confused Leo as to why his parents had even had him pack anything he was given the school uniform. He met with the man who ran the facility, Mr. Gareth a portly gentleman with a beard and spectalces that sat on his chubby sweaty face. Mr. Gareth had greeted him warmly into his office as he gave the rundown of what the next four years held for Leo.

“So that's it I'm stuck here?” Leo had asked.

“Not at all,” Mr. Gareth had said. “Your parents have enrolled you here for the next four years until you graduate school. But if we determine that you have successfully completed the aims of our program you could be out of here in back home in as little as a year.”

“So what do I have to do exactly?” Leo had asked.

“Don't worry so much about that, its all about acceptance”

Mr. Gareth said with a smile. “You'll learn all that soon enough, its all part of the process, although if you want a clue just keep up with all your studies and you'll see progress.”

Leo had been sent along to lunch. He sat in the cafeteria alone. The food was gross. He looked at the brown square of meat that was swimming in a watery gravy with some sad looking vegetables to the side. Leo was only able to stomach about half of it before giving up. He drank about half the milk carton, yet he was never a fan of milk, especially skim. He got up to go dump his food into the trash when he was met by a burly man named Bruce.

“You still got some food on your tray,” Bruce had said looking at the remains of Leo's food.

“I'm not really hungry anymore,” Leo had said. Bruce then flipped up the tray in Leo's hands sending the remains of the food to splatter across his clothes and the ground. Leo was so shocked as he stood with his mouth open not even sure how to respond.

“Look at that now you've made a mess, that's why you shouldn't walk around with food on your plate.” Bruce said before grabbing a mop and bucket that was leaned up against the wall and shoving it into Leo's hands with the instruction that he needed to clean it up and then hit the showers. Leo did as he was told, like always it had been so ingrained in him all his life. As the reality of his situation set in. Living with his parents had pushed him to a breaking point and this school was going to finish the job, they were going to grind him to

dust.

After showering Leo headed back to his room to find another boy on the other bed of the small room.

“Yo,” the other boy had said looking up from a magazine. Leo guessed this was his roommate however he wasn't in any mood to socialize.

Back in the present Leo smirked looking at the now empty bed across from his own. That had been the only bright spot about his time here. His roommate Tanner. After a some time He and Tanner had found they got along. Which was strange since they were different in many ways. Leo due to his upbringing was rather meek, Tanner on the other hand could be a real hothead. They were the same age separated by only three days. Leo learned that Tanner had come to Hawthorne as a last resort. He was an orphan at birth and had spent time in and out of juvie and group homes. After smashing a window and stealing some money Tanner had been given an ultimatum by the judge. Either he could go to Hawthorne until he turned eighteen or he could go to juvie and then prison to serve out the rest of the seven year sentence he was staring down. Tanner had remarked it was a no brainer. Even though they came from different worlds over time Leo had found that he and Tanner could support one another when times got tough.

Leo had been feeling rather down one day about a month after arriving. Tanner sensing his friends rather depressed mood asked him what was wrong.

“I'm just going to give in,” Leo said. “Do whatever they tell me. Who knows maybe my life will be better. After all I'm good at doing whatever I'm told too.”

“Hell no,” Tanner had said. “Don't let these assholes win. You're better than that,”

“Says you,” Leo had said. “I'm not like you.” Tanner had let out a huff.

“Listen to me, we just gotta make it to eighteen, once that happens we'll be adults and they can't keep us here.”

“Then what?” Leo had asked. “I can't imagine my parents will let me come back home if I don't get with the program I'll have nowhere to go and no money.”

Tanner had been was silent for a moment.

“That doesn't matter. And there is no way you are going back to your parents. We'll get an apartment together and get jobs or something.”

Leo had laughed at the suggestion but over time it became a shared dream between the two of them. Time had passed and finally the day of Tanner's eighteenth birthday had come. Leo had hugged him before he was about to set off to Mr. Gareth's office to demand his release and to tell the headmaster what he really thought of him.

“Alright three more days and then it'll be just you and me off to the city,” Tanner said with a grin.

“Yeah I guess,”' Leo said with a gloomy tone.

“Hey I know you still got three days left but you've gone through four years whats another day or two?” Tanner had said.

“I'm happy really,” Leo had said. “Its just I'm thinking about whats going to happen when we get out. You know what they do to the failures,” Leo had said putting air quotes around the last word. It was no secret to either boy what would happen when they were released. They would be marched down to the gate and be let out with only the clothes on their back. Neither one of them had a cent to their name not to mention any form of identification. Their plan of getting a job and an apartment had been a nice dream, something to keep them going. Yet Leo knew they would most likely end up on the streets.

“Don't worry about that,” Tanner had said. “I've got it taken care of. I found a way to get around the firewall on the library computers. I got into contact with a lady who helps people like us. It was kind of weird though she had never heard of this place despite only living about an hour away. Anyways she said we can stay with her for a week or so to let us get on our feet. She can also hook us up with some assistance and help us get everything we need.”

“Really,” Leo said surprised Tanner had thought so far ahead.

“Yep, once I'm out of here I just got to make my way into town and call her to come pick me up.

You're lucky in three days I'll be outside the gate waiting with a car for you.” Tanner said slapping Leo on the arm. “You

wont even have to walk."

"Tanner that's amazing," Leo said as he and Tanner clasped hands and bumped shoulders.

"Alright, time for me to go," Tanner said he turned around in the doorway. "See you in three days." With the last remark Tanner had then disappeared. Leo had wanted to go and watch unfortunately he had a trignomotery class to attend and tardiness was not something that was tolerated.

Leo finally got up from his bed. That had been three days ago, and now it was his turn. He walked out of the room not even taking one last look. This whole place could burn and he wouldn't feel the least bit affected. As Leo got closer to Mr. Gareth's office he saw his nemesis Bruce standing in the hall barking at passing by students to hurry up and get to class. He turned his head his gaze locking onto Leo immediately as he walked up to him.

"Why don't you have your uniform on?" Bruce asked incredulously noting that Leo was wearing the white t-shirt that was issued for after school hours and weekends only.

"Because I'm not going to class," Leo said standing up straight.

"And just what makes you think that?" Bruce said crossing his arms. Leo could tell the man was getting ready to grab him and haul him back to his room to change.

"Because I'm eighteen, I'm going to see Mr. Gareth," Leo said standing his ground. Bruce's eyebrow's raised. He stepped

aside using his hands to motion the way forward as if Leo were some royal.

“You know the way,” Bruce said sarcastically. Leo walked past. He wanted to say something cheeky but felt like he shouldn't push his luck, especially with someone like Bruce who was just looking for an excuse to start something. Leo made it to the headmaster's office and knocked on the door.

“Come in,” Mr. Gareth said from inside. Leo walked in. Mr. Gareth's office was a little on the small side which seemed strange for a man with the title of headmaster. To one side was a row of filing cabinets each with a house plant on top. Mr. Gareth's desk sat in the middle stacked high with papers. Mr. Gareth looked up using his pudgy hand to push his glasses up.

“Leonard, something I can do for you?” Mr. Gareth said. Leo winced a little. He hated when people called him Leonard as it made him sound like an old man. It was of course at the age of twelve and at his parents behest that he start going by his proper name as they had called it, since he was at an age where he needed to act like an adult. Leo didn't really see what the big deal was, plenty of adults went by Leo. He had at least hoped at Hawthorne he would be able to go by his shortened name, yet upon trying to correct Mr. Gareth the first time he had used his full name he had been denied. Apparently as with his teachers at school before his parents had already made their request and Mr. Gareth had agreed with their reasoning.

“Can we just make this quick,” Leo said not wanting to spend any more time than he had to in the school. “I'm eighteen today and I want to be released.”

“Why don't you sit down,” Mr. Gareth said motioning to the chair at the desk.

“Like I said I'd rather just be on my way,” Leo replied.

“Well there is some business to take care of first, so please,” Mr. Gareth said once again pointing to the chair. Leo rolled his eyes as he sat in the chair.

“Someone is acting a little rebellious this morning,” Mr. Gareth said. “I've noticed that of late, its so unlike you. Usually we don't have problems like this with you.” Leo didn't reply.

“As for your request to be released,” Mr. Gareth continued on. “Its been denied.”

Leo's head jolted a little taken aback by what he had just heard.

“You see,” Mr. Gareth said taking a folder out from his desk and opening it up on his desk. “Your progress has been unsatisfactory.”

“That's bullshit,” Leo spat.

“Your schoolwork has been very good,” Mr. Gareth said not taking notice of Leo's expletive. “As for the rest we see that you have not been making good enough progress. Especially in group. Mr. May's says you rarely engage and when you do

you seem to hold the opinion that there is nothing wrong with these alternative feelings that have manifested within you. Honestly after four years we really expected you to show at least a little progress."

Leo felt his face harden. He had gone along with so much of the bullshit the school had been shoving down his throat yet thanks to Tanner's influence hadn't actually accepted any of it, but if there was one thing he wouldn't budge on not to even put a facade of acceptance for it was Robert. His feelings for Robert had been real and he wasn't about to let these people try and tell him it was wrong.

"You can't keep me here, I'm an adult." Leo said as he gritted his teeth.

"True," Mr. Gareth said. "Under normal circumstances we would have no choice but to release you. Which is why I had a conversation with your parents about a month ago. I told them about your progress and they agreed that it was simply unacceptable which is why they agreed to sign over temporary guardianship to me." Leo's mouth fell open. His parents had actually gave him up.

"With that I had you placed under a conservatorship. Which gives us the legal right to hold you here until the age of 21."

"You can't be serious?" Leo said sitting back in his chair.

"Its all right here in this document," Gareth said placing a piece of paper in front of him. Leo didn't even bother looking at it before getting to his feet slamming his hands on the

desk. “We are not stupid Leonard. We are very aware that you have not taken proper time to reflect on the values we have tried to instill in you, but with a little more time I think we will get there.”

“I don't care what you, or my parents, or some piece of paper says. I'm not staying asshole,” Leo screamed before using his hand to knock one of Mr. Gareth's stack of papers off the desk onto the ground. Leo was breathing hard as he stared down the headmaster. Mr. Gareth didn't seem to make any reaction as he simply pressed a button on his phone. A moment later Bruce and another hulking aide came into the room.

“It seems Leonard that you are not in the right frame of mind to have a sensible discussion about this,” Mr. Gareth said before looking at the two men. “Take him up to Pine One.”

The two men grabbed Leo as he struggled against their hold screaming every expletive he could think off as they carried him out of the room by his arms and legs. They took him out the back of the main building and were going down a dirt trail into the woods. Leo knew exactly where they were taking him. Pine One was where they took students who were deemed out of control. Whenever a student disappeared the others would whisper that they must have been taken to the Pines. Leo had avoided the punishment his entire time there. Tanner had only been a few times. Upon his return he told Leo it was no big deal, just another flex by Hawthorne to make it appear that they were the authoritative masters they believed themselves to be. Even with the reassurance Leo had

been careful not to get on the schools bad side. They came upon a run down non-descript white box of a building. Leo had stopped struggling enough for the two men to set him back on his feet. Bruce unlocked the door and opened it as the other man shoved Leo inside. Leo fell to the ground catching himself. He stood up rolling his shoulders and dusting off his shirt.

“If you need the bathroom there's a bucket in the corner,” Bruce said. Leo spun around to face the man but found that he had already shut the door as Leo listened to sound of the door locking as if it were reverberating against all four walls.

Leo looked around the dingy room. There was a bare mattress on the concrete floor in one corner of the room. A single white stucco pillar was in the middle of the room. There was a single window which had bars on it. Leo then spotted the large yellow bucket that Bruce had mentioned. He walked over to it and peered over the edge, thankfully it was empty. Leo decided that under no circumstances was he going to use it. He went over to the mattress and sat down burying his face into his hands. His situation had just gotten magnitudes worse than he could have imagined. How could his parents do this to him? Was he really so much of problem? Leo remembered something Tanner had said to him shortly after Leo had told him about his relationship with his parents. Tanner had remarked that it seemed they viewed him more of an accessory to their lives than his own person. Leo had been surprised to hear such a thing from Tanner yet it seemed to be the perfect explanation for all of it. To them he was a black

stain on their perfect life.

Leo then remembered Tanner. He was probably standing at the front gate at that moment waiting for him. Would someone walk down to the gate and tell him that Leo would not be coming, or would they simply ignore him? Leo wondered how long Tanner would wait for him. Leo then was reminded about the woman Tanner had been in contact with. It gave him a small shred of hope. If she was someone experienced in dealing with people that came from places such as Hawthorne then maybe she could get him out. Leo laid back on the hard mattress waiting for the door to unlock and be told he was being released. As the day wore on and Leo did nothing but watch the sunrays move slowly across the ceiling his hope had waned. It was becoming clear that nobody was coming for him. Whatever mechanism of the legal system Mr. Gareth had employed to keep him here was no doubt ironclad. Leo spent the rest of his time sleeping and pacing the room as the day turned to night. He was incredibly thirsty and the hunger pains in his stomach had spread to his sides causing him to ache. Yet there was nothing for him to do except close his eyes and hope he would be released soon.

Leo awoke to the mattress shaking. Bruce was standing next to it having just kicked it.

“Lets go,” the man said before walking towards the door. Leo got up and followed out the door as the fresh morning air hit him in the face. The sun was just beginning to rise. He followed the men back down the forest trail towards the main building. He was feeling so weak that it was troublesome for

him to keep up. Finally they came before Mr. Gareth's door. Bruce opened it ushering Leo inside. Mr. Gareth was at his desk once again.

“Leo, good morning take a seat,” Mr. Gareth said. Leo took a seat without a word not even noticing that Mr. Gareth had not called him Leonard. “Hopefully you've calmed down and we have a much more constructive conversation,” Gareth said taking a pitcher of water and pouring himself an ice cold glass of water. Leo wasn't even listening as he could only concentrate on the glass of water. His mouth was so dry it felt like his tongue had gone brittle. Mr. Gareth took a sip of the water before setting it down looking at Leo.

“Are you thirsty?” Mr. Gareth said.

“Yes,” Leo croaked.

“You just need to ask properly,” Mr. Gareth said. “Use your manners.”

“Please, may I have some water?” Leo asked. He knew this was just a power game that Mr. Gareth was playing with him, but at this point he didn't really care.

“Good lad, now that wasn't so hard was it?” Mr. Gareth asked as he pulled out another glass and poured some water into it before handing it to Leo. “That's all we've ever asked of you.”

Leo chugged down the water downing the whole glass. Leo set the glass on the table panting. Water had never tasted so good before. Mr. Gareth poured him another glass which Leo drank a little slower.

“Now I know last time we spoke you were unhappy with the new arrangement,” Mr. Gareth said. “However if you had let me finish instead of throwing a temper tantrum I would have gotten to explain that while we can keep you here until the age of twenty-one I doubt you will be here that long. I have consulted with your parents and we believe that we have come up with a much more appropriate treatment plan for you.”

“It doesn't matter,” Leo said stopping Mr. Gareth's prattling. “I don't care how long you keep me here. I will never do what you want.” Leo knew it was probably a bad idea to go and say stuff like this given his situation. In reality the last two days had been out of character for him. He was usually a meek guy letting others in authority walk all over him. Yet even though he had been beaten down there was still an exhilarating sense of control to it. Like for the first time he was taking control of his life. Maybe some of Tanner's confidence had rubbed off on him. “Now can I please have some more water?” Leo asked with some surlyness.

“No can do,” Mr. Gareth said. “You've already gotten a double dose.”

“Wha-” Leo said finding the explanation odd. Just then he felt the room begin to spin.

“You might want to hold on to the chair, this next part is a little rough,” Mr. Gareth said in a very calm tone as he dialed some numbers on his phone.

Leo gripped the arm rest of the chair feeling if he didn't he

would be thrown from the chair.

“You drugged me,” Leo sputtered as he looked at the pitcher of water thinking that there had been something in it. “But I saw you drink it,” Leo said with some confusion as he felt his thoughts going hazy.

“It wasn't in the water,” Mr. Gareth said coming around the desk and hoisting Leo from the seat and walking him to the door. “It was in the glass.” Mr. Gareth opened the door revealing two people in blue scrubs waiting outside next to a gurney. They took Leo and put him on the bed before strapping him down. Leo was thrashing around letting out yelps as if he were on a roller coaster. The straps did nothing to help him feel stabilized. The two people began wheeling him down the hallway.

“Be careful with him,” Mr. Gareth called out. “He's on the accelerated program.”

One of the people looked down at Leo as they continued to roll him down the hall. She placed a facemask over Leo's mouth.

“Deep breaths sweetie you're going to be fine,” she said before pressing a button. Leo felt a cool mist shoot into the mask. As he breathed it in he felt his eyes began to droop another breath and he was unconscious. When he would awake he would find himself with the shock of a lifetime.

Chapter 2

To Build a Nest: Chapter 2 - Chapter 2

Chapter 2

Leo opened his eyes' groggily as he heard the steady beeping of a heart-rate monitor. He let out a groan. He could feel a soreness all throughout his body as if he had been hit by a semi-truck. Leo let out another long groan. He opened his eyes as he stared up at a darkened ceiling. Leo forced himself to sit up with another pained groan. He looked around the room to see that he appeared to be in some hospital room. There was singular lamp on in the room which made it so Leo had to squint to try and see. He looked out the window and could see that it was dark out. He had been out all day. Leo shirked the heart rate monitor off his finger before rubbing his face a little before he stopped, something felt off. He started to use his fingers to feel his face prodding at something that felt unfamiliar. He pulled his hands away looking at them. A minute later he let out a gasp. These were not his hands. They were far too small. As Leo looked at his arms he noticed he had an IV in his arm but it wasn't his arm that he was looking at, it was too small, too skinny, it appeared to be a small child's arm.

“What the hell,” Leo exclaimed. Just then a light turned on as the door to the room opened. A woman entered. She was older maybe in her fifties. She was heavyset and had frizzy

brown hair. Leo let out a yelp upon seeing her walk in still in a state of panic. The woman however gave him a warm smile.

“I see you are finally awake,” she said moving towards the bed. She shut off the heart rate monitor that had been emitting a long uninterrupted tone of a flat line.

“Stay away,” Leo said scrunching up in the bed. He then grabbed his throat upon hearing his voice. It had a chipmunk like quality to it, far removed from how his voice had sounded before he had woken up in this place. The woman came and sat on the bed.

“Its alright, I'm not going to hurt you,” she said gently.

“What's going on here?” Leo asked still a little frazzled but he had been somewhat disarmed by this woman's demeanor. “What did you do to me?”

“I will answer all your questions,” the woman said. “But first you need to take a few deep breaths.”

Leo did what was asked at first taking a few shuddering breaths before getting his breathing under control. “How do you feel?” the woman asked.

“Sore,” Leo replied still being surprised at the sound of his voice.

“I'm sure,” the woman said giving a small laugh. “Can you tell me your name?”

“Leonard Rushton,” Leo replied.

“You go by Leo though right?” the woman asked.

“Y-yeah,” Leo said.

“My name is Maribelle, but you can just call me Ms Mari, I'll be looking after you for awhile,” she said.

“Where am I?” Leo asked.

“All in due time,” Ms. Mari said patting Leo's leg. “Can you tell me how old you are?”

“I'm eighteen,” Leo said. Ms. Mari gave him a skeptical look.

“I think you are a little confused,” Ms. Mari said picking up a chart from nearby the bed. “It says here you are four years old.”

“What no way,” Leo exclaimed. “I'm eighteen.”

“Maybe you should get a look at yourself in the mirror and then you'll see how silly that sounds,” Ms. Mari said pulling the covers on the bed back. “Think you can stand for me.”

Leo was shocked to see his full body now. He had gotten so small it didn't even feel like he was really seeing this, kind of like he was in some sort of VR thing. Leo moved his legs a little to swing them over to the side when he felt something strange. He pulled back the hospital gown to see he was wearing a plain white diaper.

“A diaper,” Leo yelped his voice cracking an octave.

“Oh don't worry about that, some children wet the bed as a side effect while they are recovering,” Ms. Mari then reached

down sticking a finger into the leg gathering which caused Leo to let out a surprised squeak. “Looks like you are still dry, lets go to the bathroom and I can take that off since it looks like you don't need it and we will get you something more appropriate. Plus I imagine you probably have to go.” she said. “You've been asleep the whole day and most of the night.

Leo could only nod. She was right about that at least he really did need to use the bathroom. Leo put his feet onto the cold ground having to slide out of the bed since he couldn't reach. He was a little wobbly as Ms. Mari helped him into the bathroom that was located in the room. She took off the diaper and tossed it into the garbage can before helping Leo over to the toilet which had a training seat attached. Leo was little weirded out by it. Although he had to admit he now needed it with how small he was. After he had finished Ms. Mari brought him over to the mirror so he could see himself. In the mirror a little boy with a mop of light brown hair that curled slightly at the ends with big wide green eyes stared back at Leo. He brought his hands to his face touching his new smaller features. This couldn't be real.

“That certainly doesn't look like an eighteen year old now does it,” Ms. Mari said as she was digging through a bin as Leo looked at himself.

“No, this isn't possible,” Leo whispered.

“Here we are I got some undies for you,” Ms. Mari said returning to Leo's side as she knelt down holding out a pair of

plain white briefs for Leo to step into. “Let me help you since your still a little wobbly.” Leo let her put the underwear on him. “There, now lets get you back into bed and then I'll explain whats going on.” Leo followed the woman back into the room. She lifted him up putting him back into the bed pulling the covers up to cover his legs.

“Now Leo let me ask you again, how old are you,” Ms. Mari asked.

“I told you I'm eighteen,” Leo said.

“I see will have to start at the beginning,” Ms. Mari said with a sigh. “Leo I have read your case file and I must say your parents certainly did you no favors.”

Leo looked up at first he thought he had been at a local hospital, but it was apparent now he was still at Hawthorne. Yet what Ms. Mari had just said struck him as out of character. He had become so accustomed to all the staff at Hawthorne reiterating how Leo had ended up there as a consequence of his inability to see that his parents were doing what was best for him that it surprised him to hear someone actually criticize them.

“It is quite apparent to me that they coddled you so much, that as you grew you didn't know how to make good choices for yourself, so its no wonder you turned to the things you did.” Ms. Mari said wearing a smile. But Leo could only be reminded of a snake, he knew there was a different meaning to what she was saying. “That is why your parents along with Mr. Gareth and myself decided upon a new treatment plan for

you.”

Leo felt his stomach knot up. Ms. Mari had been so nice unlike the rest of the staff at Hawthorne that he had forgotten that she was one of them. Whats more she had just said that his parents had also been in on this, or rather they had given their permission.”

“What part of this is treatment?” Leo spat out. “I'm a little kid.”

“That's right,” Ms. Mari said with another smile. “You see here at Hawthorne our mission is to help as many people learn the skills they need to be proper adults. Now some people only need a little help but there are those that wouldn't be able to do it no matter what because their problems run much deeper. Simply put if you are ever to become a proper adult you must first learn to be a proper child which is what we do here.”

Leo felt a chill go down his spine. He had been so filled with optimism the other day. He was finally going to escape but now he was in an even worse situation. Buried far deeper than he had ever been before.

“This is a good thing Leo, you know not everybody at Hawthorne is afforded such an opportunity sometimes we just have to cut them loose with sadness in our hearts that we couldn't help, not too mention this type of treatment isn't appropriate for everybody, but thankfully you have parents that have your best interest in mind. You're also special in other ways.” Ms. Mari said.

“Special,” Leo said repeating the word back.

“Of course, you see most of the students here are between the ages of six or seven, we don't enroll many kids younger than that, but your parents insisted that you would be able to graduate no problem even if you were a little younger than most, they have the utmost faith in you it seems.”

“Graduate, what are you talking about?” Leo said still trying to wrap his brain around all the information that seemed to be coming at him a million miles per hour.

“This is like any other school so when you are done, you graduate. However unlike other schools our students graduate at the age of six or seven depending on where your birthday falls. I guess you could say we're more of a dedicated kindergarten.”

“So I'm here for another three years?” Leo asked.

“No,” Ms. Mari said. “Like I said your case is special. Graduation is in three weeks and with the accelerated treatment plan you are on you will be able to graduate with all the other children. From what I can see I think you are going to pass with flying colors.” Ms. Mari picked up a syringe as she injected it into Leo's Iv bag. “Three weeks isn't a lot of time though, so you have a lot of work ahead of you.” Ms. Mari said as she then put a hand gently onto Leo shoulder pushing him down onto the bed.

“What did you just give me?” Leo asked becoming nervous at what she had just done.

“It was just something to help with your soreness and to help you fall asleep,” Ms. Mari said pulling the covers up over Leo. “Now try to get some rest, like I said you have a lot of work to do starting tomorrow.

Leo tried to sit back up. His mind was still racing. Yet whatever she had given him was fast acting as he felt his soreness dull and himself become so relaxed that he just couldn't will his body to move.

“You...can't...” Leo uttered before finally succumbing to sleep. The next thing Leo felt was something ice cold on his chest. He opened his eyes to see a woman standing over him. She was wearing a long white coat and she appeared to be some sort of doctor, given that the cold feeling Leo felt was the stethoscope she was using to take his heartbeat.

“Good morning sweetie,” the doctor said with a cheery smile. Leo sat up still groggy.

“What's going on?” Leo asked still not fully awake.

“I'm just giving you a little checkup,” the doctor said proceeding on as she then looked in Leo's mouth and then shined a light in his eyes it was then that Leo finally snapped to attention.

“You gotta help me,” Leo suddenly said.

“Oh honey you are perfectly safe right now, no reason to worry. Not to mention you are a perfectly healthy four year old boy,” The doctor said. Leo blinked for a moment before bowing his head a little remembering where he was. No one

here was going to help him. “You must be hungry though,” the doctor said pushing a side table on a swivel in front of Leo. She lifted up the top of the tray that was placed there revealing French toast sticks and some scrambled eggs.

“Eat up and Ms. Mari will be here soon to get you,” the doctor said before leaving the room. Leo wasted no time in digging into the food. It tasted amazing and Leo had devoured it in no time flat having just finished the last bite as Ms. Mari walked into the room carrying some clothing wrapped up in plastic.

“Did you enjoy your breakfast?” Ms. Mari asked ripping open the package and taking the clothes out as she laid them at the bottom of the bed.

“Yeah it was good,” Leo said deciding to keep things pleasant until he could figure out the full scope of what was going on. “Whats all that?”

“Its your school uniform,” Ms. Mari said holding up a powder blue polo shirt with the Hawthorne crest stitched onto the breast.

“Four year olds don't go to school,” Leo said with a smirk. If she was going to play this game of insisting he was just a kid then he would play right back. Ms. Mari simply smiled.

“Like I told you last night, you are on the accelerated program so you do, now c'mon lets get you dressed so you're not late on your first day.” Leo got out of the bed knowing that he had no option but to comply they would just make

him anyways if he tried to refuse. This was still Hawthorne after all.

Ms. Mari took the hospital gown off of him before pulling the polo shirt over his head. She then helped him into a pair of brown khaki shorts. Ms. Mari then tucked the shirt into the waist before snapping together the plastic buckle of the the built in velcro belt along the waistband. She then gave Leo a pair of socks letting him get them on himself. She then plopped down a pair of light blue crocs onto the ground which Leo stepped into. The clothes were stiff and scratchy yet Leo was not bothered, that's how it had always been at this school and in the years he had spent here had gotten him used to it. Or at least he thought he had, but these clothes felt extra uncomfortable against his skin.

“Alright lets go,” Ms. Mari said in an overly cheery tone as she took Leo's hand leading him out of the room. As they walked down the hall Leo looked around. He didn't recognize any part of this building. He was surprised to even think this place had existed within Hawthorne this whole time. In all his time here he had never seen a kid younger than fourteen walking around. Ms. Mari finally came to a stop in front of a classroom. “Go take a seat and wait for the rest of the kids to arrive,” Ms. Mari instructed. “You think you can do that?”

“Y-yeah,” Leo said happy to get away from the woman. Something about her just rubbed Leo the wrong way. She seemed overly nice which was something he wasn't used to around this place. Most other Hawthorne staff in his experience weren't exactly shy about their contempt that they

held for the students.

Leo took a seat at a desk as he looked around the room. It looked completely normal for a classroom that would house a bunch of little kids. At the front was a whiteboard that already had some writing on it. Some simple math problems and spelling words as well as some funny looking doodles. An illustrated alphabet lined the top of the wall each letter accompanied by a cartoon of some animal or object that started with whatever letter it was supposed to represent. In the corner of the room was a large round carpet surround by some bookshelves and a rocking chair at the head of the circle. Leo was becoming a little more frustrated looking at it all. Did they really expect him to go along with this? As if he would just act like a little kid because they had shrunken him down. Leo put his face into his hands, the reality of his situation setting in. How could any of this be possible? This was some science fiction esque nonsense. Yet as Leo sat feeling his tiny hands against his face and his hands in turn feeling the smaller features it was all too real. What was he to do? Right on the cusp of freedom he had been dragged back, Hawthorne and his parents had seen to that. Leo couldn't wrap his head around it. Just what kind of place was Hawthorne?

It was clear they weren't any simple institution for wayward teens. Leo then though on his parents what would they say? He wondered if they had even hesitated when considering giving their permission. He couldn't imaging they had. In the times that Leo had actually spoken with his parents over the

years they had always seemed dis-interested in whatever he had to say. When he had first tried to bring up how miserable he was they had always hand waived it away saying it was just a part of the process and that if Leo shaped up and behaved as he was supposed to he wouldn't have to anything to worry about. Things would get better. As more time passed Leo came to understand that his parents were none too concerned with how miserable he was. It was clear that to them Leo had turned defective and at some point he would be returned to them fixed up, as if he were damaged goods having been sent out to the repair shop.

Leo was truly on his own now.

“Excuse me, who are you?” a voice asked. Leo jumped a little at the sudden question as he looked up to see a woman standing next to him. She had brown hair pulled back into a ponytail and a pair of black glasses on her face. She was dressed in a denim dress with a white turtle neck underneath. A plastic ID badge denoting her a teacher hung from her neck. She gave him a comforting smile upon seeing that she had startled him.

“Um my name is Leo,” the boy responded.

“Leo?” the woman said her eyebrows flexing for a moment to show that his answer did little to answer her question. “You must be new, I don't think you are in the right spot, how old are you

sweetie?”

“Eighteen,” Leo said a hint of brashness in his voice. The woman simply shook her head.

“This is no time to play,” the woman said her face hardening a little. “I asked you a serious question and I expect a serious answer, is that understood?” Leo pursed his lips, his meager sense of defiance drying up.

“They said I'm...four,” Leo muttered.

“You should be in the nursery,” the woman said nodding her head.

“Nursery!?” Leo said with some alarm. “But Ms. Mari brought me here.”

“Ms. Mari,” the woman said a quizzical look spreading across her face. “Wait here.” the woman said walking over to the desk at the front of the room. She picked up a phone dialing a number. Leo waited for a moment, just what had she meant by nursery? Hadn't Ms. Mari said that they didn't have little kids like Leo around here? Leo puffed his cheeks up a little unnerved that he had just thought of himself as a “little kid” as if it were the truth.

“Oh geez I didn't even see the file here on my desk,” the woman said picking up a folder on her desk with a sort of duh expression on her face. “Sorry to bother you,” the woman said finishing up her conversation before walking back over to Leo while she looked through the folder.

“Leonard Rushton, oh I see you are on the accelerated program,” the woman said snapping the folder shut. “Well

that explains everything, I guess I should introduce myself I'm Mrs. Forsythe and I'm going to be your teacher," she reached out her hand as Leo shook it. "The rest of the class should be here any moment. I'm sure they will be excited to meet you."

Just then Leo heard a shuffling behind him as he watched children start to enter the room. Boys and girls took seats at the desk all of them looked to be around six to seven years old, which only made Leo feel all the more small as they were all bigger than him. As everyone began to get settled Leo couldn't help but notice a lot of the kids were staring at him. Hushed whispers could be heard all around the room. Mrs. Forsythe brought the class's attention on to her as she began morning announcements. Leo wasn't paying attention however. Something felt so off about this class, these kids. Leo could'nt help but wonder were they all like him? Had they all once been older?

"Now I'm sure you all have noticed our newest student. Leonard why don't you stand and introduce yourself." Mrs. Forsythe said. Leo snapped to attention hearing his name as he walked up to the front of the room where the teacher was motioning him towards. "Now Leonard here," Mrs. Forsythe began.

"Its Leo actually," the boy squeaked. Mrs. Forsythe came to an abrupt stop before she looked down at him with a veiled smile.

"We do not interrupt adults while they are talking," she said

issuing a quick reprimand before continuing on yet calling him Leo as she did. Leo pursed his lips as he clenched his fist. The way she had said that word “adults” talking down to him like he were actually a child. The bizarre nature of what had happened was beginning to fade, instead being replaced by anger.

“Would you like to tell the class a little about yourself?” Mrs. Forsythe then asked. As Leo looked out at the rest of the class he put his hands behind his back squirming a little under their gaze, he had never been good in front of a crowd. He still couldn't figure out the vibe in the room. He still couldn't figure out if they were real kids or not. They looked at him expecting him to say something. A girl then raised her hand waiting patiently until Mrs. Forsythe called on her.

“How old are you?” the girl asked looking straight at Leo who looked back at her with wide eyes. Was this confirmation? Did they want him to say his real age, to know that he was like them. Did the teacher allow that or was it something to be treated as a secret?

“I'm eight-” Leo began to say before he felt Mrs. Forsythe put a hand on his head which caused him to pause.

“Leo is four years old,” Mrs. Forsythe said in a way that left Leo feeling as if his attempt at divulging his real age was like a nail sticking out and Mrs. Forsythe had just taken a hammer to it. There were more shushed whispers in the crowd, before the girl who had asked the question spoke up again.

“Isn't he too young to be here?” the girl asked. Leo felt his

stomach drop. It pretty much gave him all the confirmation he needed. These kids did not view him as the same as them. He was an “other” lower than them, just some random little kid.

“Yes Leo maybe a little younger than all of you,” Mrs. Forsythe said bringing the class back under control. “He is a special case and he will be joining us for the remainder of our time here and hopefully will be able to graduate with all of you in three weeks time. So please help him out if you can.” Mrs Forsythe said before turning back to Leo. “Anything else you want to add?”

Leo could only shake his head.

“That's alright,” Mrs. Forsythe said kneeling down with a gentle smile on her face. “Its normal for little kids to be nervous.” Despite the fact that she was smiling, Leo could feel some other motivation behind her words. She wasn't trying to comfort him- she was trying to convince him of whatever new reality they were offering him.

“Okay class why don't you all go line up at the door,” Mrs. Forsythe said. “We're going to the computer lab to work on spelling this morning.”

The class got up from the their seats going and lining up just as the teacher had said. Leo got into the back of the line and followed them down the hall. He felt all alone, not that it was new. All the years at Hawthorne had been the same. The other students were either too angry at their own situation or they had completely fallen in line with the program which Leo found made it hard to form any sort of connection to

them. Leo probably would have been like them as well if it hadn't been for Tanner. He and Tanner had been each other's strength, keeping the hope in each other alive that they would one day leave this awful place behind. Leo wondered what Tanner was doing now? Was he out there trying to find out what happened to Leo after he hadn't shown up. He knew Tanner had been in contact with some woman who dealt with this kind of stuff, would she be able to do something? Leo knew it wasn't worthwhile to put his hopes on that. Mr. Gareth and his parents had him firmly in their clutches. It was just Leo's luck that he just happened to be one of the lucky souls that Hawthorne wasn't going to give up on. Unlike Tanner who had no family Leo had two parents who no doubt were willing to pay whatever the cost to maintain the image of their perfect life. Leo knew he hadn't exactly been apart of their plan but since he had arrived they had decided where his place was to be in their lives, even if that meant pounding him down to fit.

In the computer lab the children were sat at computers. Leo looked at the screen. They were all playing some sort of game on the screens. It was pretty simple to get the gist of it. A picture would appear and all you had to do was type in the word. At first Leo was blazing through them. They were all pretty simplistic words like ball, dog, sun, red.. But as time went on Leo found himself having a harder time with the words and he even started to blank out on how to spell some of them.

“This might be a little tough for you,” Mrs. Forsythe said

noticing Leo was having trouble spelling out the word cat. “Here let me get something your speed.” the teacher said taking control of the mouse and closing out the game before opening another. She then plugged some headphones into the computer putting them on Leo's head. Leo watched an animated cartoon dog come onto the screen. As he listened on the dog was guiding him through some word activities.

“What letter makes the buh sound?” the dog asked as choices came on the screen. Leo moved the cursor over the B. “That's right, good job,” the dog congratulated him. For some reason it made Leo feel good. When was the last time someone had actually praised him? As it continued on Leo lost himself in the activity becoming increasingly unaware of how juvenile the activity was. Leo didn't even realize what he was doing until he clicked on the letter S which sent a snake slithering across the screen eliciting a laugh from Leo. It had been enough to knock Leo out of whatever dreamlike daze he had been in as he looked around the room a little embarrassed he had been actually enjoying himself. As Leo looked around at the rest of the kids it seemed like his outburst hadn't actually drawn any attention to him.

Leo looked across the table at the boy across from himself. Leo noticed that the boy seemed to be concentrating on something. Unlike the other kids who were pecking away at keys with one or two fingers this boy seemed to be typing something rather quickly as he stole glances at Mrs. Forsythe who was sitting in a chair across the room reading a book. Leo wondered what the boy was doing, whatever it was he

didn't want the teacher to notice. Just then the boy looked over and saw Leo staring at him.

The boy had short blonde hair if it was longer it would take on a more wavy appearance as evident by the small tuft a the front. He had two big green eyes that were like saucers on his thin face. A couple of freckles spotted the bridge of his nose.

Leo could almost sense some sort of recognition from the boy. As if they both knew how messed up all this was. Had Leo been mistaken? Had all these kids been older? Were some of them still cognizant of that fact? Leo pushed back his headphones a little and leaned forward.

“Hey um can I ask you question?” Leo said making sure to keep his voice low.

“Shhh,” the other boy said putting a finger to his lips as his eyes darted towards the teacher. “Don't talk to me,” he said before looking back to his own screen.

Leo furrowed his brow as he put the headphones back on. What the heck was that response? Leo tried to focus back in on his game but couldn't get the interaction out of his mind. Mrs. Forsythe then announced it was time to go. The kids were then back in the classroom as Mrs. Forsythe was at the board.

“Okay class so its time to do our values lesson,” Mrs. Forsythe said writing something on the board.

“Now since you all know this stuff so well it shouldn't take long, but its very important to keep these things in mind at all

times. After all its the most important thing for becoming the proper children we all know you are." Mrs. Forsythe then turned to the class. "What is number one?"

"A proper child is obedient," the class responded. Leo felt a shiver go down his spine. The way the kids had responded had been completely bereft of any thought, they had sounded like robots almost as if they had been hardwired to respond as such.

"Oh Leo since this is your first day why don't you come up here," Mrs. Forsythe said waving Leo up to the front. Leo got to his feet and went and stood next to Mrs. Forsythe in front of the class. "Okay when I say something the class will respond and then I want you to copy what they say."

"I don't..." Leo began before he was cut off.

"Its just to help you learn," Mrs. Forsythe said. "Its really easy, okay whats number one again?"

"A proper child is obedient," the class repeated again. All of a sudden things became clear to Leo. He now knew what it all meant. The accelerated program, treatment plan, why they had turned him into a little kid, it was all for this. Leo could guess what the rest of the rules were, he had heard it all before. The reason why he had been sent to Hawthorne in the first place were because of his own shortcomings. He had been branded as rebellious, against authority and he needed to understand that those in charge knew what was best and he needed to follow along lest he become a wayward dreg of society. Thats what they had told all the students over the last

four years, but there was a difference now. Whereas before they had tried to convince Leo of these things- here at this school the conversation was over. They were going to force him.

“Okay Leo whats number one?” Mrs. Forsythe asked with an expectant smile. Leo glared at the woman. The frustration and anger of the last four years along with what they had done to him was coursing through his veins an anger that he could feel in his bones.

“Obedience is for dogs,” Leo said. Mrs. Forsythe's mouth opened a little.

“What did you say?” the teacher asked.

“You heard me bitch,” Leo said. He no longer cared about avoiding trouble. There was no way he was going to go along anymore. He wasn't going to let them make him like the kids sitting in the classroom. He was going to resist, no matter what they did to him, he would keep on resisting while letting them all know exactly what he thought of them. He didn't care how long it took. He was going to stand defiant until someone broke, until they gave up. His parents has already abandoned him twice, what was a third time. Its not like he had any desire to return to them anyways. He was going to hold out until they had no choice but to give up. He didn't care if he looked like a four year old now, he had no thoughts about what he would do when they eventually had no choice but to let him go and they marched him out front with nothing but the clothes on his back and shut the gate behind him. He

would just find some way to fend for himself and if it was between that or going back home having been changed into some blank slate his parents could morph in whatever way they saw fit, then it was an easy choice.

Mrs. Forsythe walked over to the phone picking up the receiver before hitting a single button.

“Yes this is Mrs. Forsythe classroom 2 we have a code 3” she said before hanging up the phone.”Class please open your books to page 33 and read until I tell you to stop.” The kids opened up their desks taking out books and beginning to read. “You just wait right there,” Mrs. Forsythe said looking at Leo.

Just then the door opened as Ms. Mari came walking in.

“Oh Leo I had hoped your first day would go smoothly,” she said a sort of exasperated tone to her voice as she walked down the aisle to the front of the class.

“Back off,” Leo said balling his hands up into fist as he backed away. He felt two hands grab him by the side pinning his arms against his body. Leo looked to see it was Mrs. Forsythe who had him. “Let me go,” Leo screeched as he began to twist and writhe. Mrs. Forsythe hold did not falter as she was easily able to transfer him over to Ms. Mari who picked him up and put him under her arm at her side leaving Leo's legs and arms dangling.

“Put me down, put me down,” Leo continued to yell kicking his feet and arms out wildly yet Ms. Mari said nothing as she carried him out the room. She kept on walking down the hall

seemingly unfazed by the struggling boy under her arm before finally coming to stand in front of a door.

“W-what are you going to do?” Leo asked his voice quivering a little.

“I'm going to put a stop to this little temper tantrum of yours.” Ms. Mari said opening the door. Leo couldn't see anything inside of the inky blackness.

“Now don't worry I'm going to make sure you're nice and calm before you go back to class,” Ms. Mari said as she stepped into the room.

Leo didn't care what they had in store for him. He knew he was all alone in this place but he wasn't going to give into hopelessness yet as the door shut behind him he began to wonder if he was going to be able to stick to his new plan...just how long could he last?

Chapter 3

To Build a Nest: Part 3 - Chapter 3

Chapter 3

Leo looked into the inky darkness still not able to discern anything. A moment later he heard the lights click on. The bright fluorescent glare caused Leo to shut his eyes. He felt himself placed into a soft cushiony spot that seemed to envelope him. As he opened his eyes he found himself sat in a large easy chair. A moment later he felt Ms. Mari pull some straps over his chest clicking them into place. As Leo was still trying to get his bearings he watched Ms. Mari insert a plastic key into the buckle on his chest twisting it in the slot before removing the key. Leo looked down at the straps seeing that they looked like the reins of a a child leash that one would sometimes see small kids wearing while walking out in public. Leo tried to unbuckle the harness but found that the key had locked them together, Leo then struggled against them but found he was secured to the chair. He looked around the room. It was a small room and there only seemed to be two things contained within. One was the chair Leo was sat in and the other was a Tv hung on the wall in front of him.

“Let me go right now,” Leo spat, vitriol lacing his voice.

“I'll undo the harness just as soon as you prove to me that you are capable of controlling yourself,” Ms. Mari said.

“I'm not calming down you can't do this to me,” Leo yelled at the woman.

“Just try to relax,” Ms. Mari said. “Here this should help,” the woman said using a remote to flip on the tv. A video began to play. It was a scene of a beach. White sands shone under sunny sky as cerulean waves splashed before receding calmly back into the ocean. The sound of waves played out over some speakers.

“What is this,” Leo asked looking at the screen somewhat taken aback at what had appeared. This was not what he had been expecting. As he took a moment to catch his breath from all his struggling a thought came to him. This all seemed to nice, especially for Hawthorne. He began to put together the pieces to the conclusion that he was coming too. “This is brainwashing isn't it? This is how you got all those other kids to act like they do, isn't it.” Leo squeezed his eyes shut hoping to stop whatever effect looking at the screen would have on him. It made so much sense, that had to be what was going on, it would certainly explain what had happened in the computer lab. Leo had been perfectly capable of spelling out the simplistic words at first it had only gotten harder the more he did it. It had been the same with the game that Mrs. Forsythe had switched him over too. At first it had been boring but then Leo had actually started to enjoy it. As if the more he did, the more he forgot. Those couldn't have been simple word games.

“That's ridiculous,” Ms. Mari said with a laugh. “We have no such thing like that.” Leo felt hands on his knees.

“Open your eyes dear,” Ms, Mari said in a gentle tone as if she were talking to a scared child. Leo opened his eyes

hesitantly to see Ms. Mari knelt down in front of him. The bright fluorescent lights had been turned off replaced by swirling blue colors lit against the walls. “This is called the calm room. We use this to give our students a safe place when they are experiencing distress. See,” Ms. Mari said moving out of the way to give Leo a better view of screen. “this is just a video to help you relax there is nothing else to it.”

As Leo looked at it he didn't find anything weird about the image, in fact he might even recognize it as a video he had used in the past to meditate, one of the few things his parents had let him use his phone for.

“Now you just focus on relaxing and then I'll check on you in a few moments,” Ms. Mari said as she got up before disappearing from view.

Leo sat in the chair as he let his breathing relax a little, he still kept his eyes shut just in case. As he listened to the calm ocean sounds he did find himself able to get his emotions under control. Maybe he had gone a little overboard. He tried to recount everything that had happened since waking up in his new body, all the information he had been trying to wrap his head around had just seemed to come at him so fast that he had lost control. He remembered Ms. Mari had said something about a graduation in three weeks time. If that was true then he just had to make it till then. Once he was back home he could probably figure something out, maybe try and get into contact with Robert or Tanner. One of them would be able to help him, that is if he was able to convince them who he was in the first place.

As he thought about Robert Leo began to wonder if he still thought about Leo like he still thought of him. Had he given up on him once Leo had disappeared? What had his parents told people about him? The image of Robert's handsome face came to Leo's mind yet he realized that Robert was no longer fourteen and probably didn't look anything like the image that Leo still had of him in his head. Leo let out a sigh as he opened his eyes. One thing was clear to him, it would be best for him to do what he had been doing these last four years. It had been Tanner's advice that the best thing to do would be to fly under the radar as much as possible not give the Hawthorne staff any reason to think that they had not won. Although Tanner hadn't quite always followed that advice himself and in Leo's estimation he hadn't either given his actions that day.

“Well it looks like you've calmed down,” Ms. Mari said appearing back in front of Leo.

“Um yeah,” Leo said. Ms. Mari then reached down with the plastic key unlocking the buckle before releasing the harness from Leo. He went to get up but was stopped when Ms. Mari placed a hand on his chest.

“Lets talk a little first,” Ms. Mari said with her trademark patient smile. “Those were some pretty big feelings we were having huh?”

“Don't talk to me like I'm some little kid,” Leo muttered. Ms. Mari cocked her head a little.

“And just how should I talk to you?” she chuckled a little.

“You are a little kid after all.”

“You made me like this,” Leo countered.

“I guess that is true, your parents and Mr. Gareth got together and made that decision. So why do you think that is?” Ms. Mari asked. Leo looked back at her incredulous.

“I can only guess its because making me a little kid would let them control me more, let them make me into their perfect little obedient child,” Leo said, resentment dripping from his mouth as he uttered the last three words.

“Oh honey, you're thinking about this all wrong,” Ms. Mari said as she knelt down in front of Leo once again. “Your parents only want what is best for you. You were going down a very bad path, and if you had continued on you would have ended up miserable, believe me. Your parents could also see that which is why they sent you here in the first place. We here at Hawthorne know exactly what needs to be done in order to correct those bad paths. But even so there are times when it is simply too late for us to intervene and no amount of help can fix the problem. We simply have to give up on some people, but then there are those who if we could simply turn back the hands of time and erase all those mistakes from we could could raise them back better. You should be grateful that your parents care so much for you, not everyone gets this opportunity.” Ms. Mari smiled giving Leo an eery feeling. She had to realize what she was saying was insane.

“And its not just you who is putting in work,” Ms. Mari continued. “Your parents are doing their own homework as

all our parents are given materials to read, that will give them all the tools they need to meet your needs so those mistakes of the past are not repeated. So its best if you just let go of all those memories of the past, all that resentment and anger doesn't matter anymore. Just concentrate on the new road ahead. You will be much happier once you do, confident in the fact that when you return home your parents will be able to give you all the structure and guidance you need to grow up into the proper adult we all know you can be."

Leo sat in shock for a moment, the whole plan had been laid bare and to his his horror his original thesis hadn't been far off. As he looked at Ms. Mari's smile he felt his chest tighten a little. He wasn't stupid, all her optimistic words of a bright future had fallen flat. Leo knew what she meant, by structure and guidance. Nothing was going to change in how his parents treated him, it was going to be the same. Except this time around they would do it the Hawthorne way and Leo knew he would end up like those kids in the classroom reciting back the teachers words without a hint of recognition completely hardwired into thinking how they were told to.

"You know I think I have to apologize to you Leo," Ms. Mari said bringing Leo back to the present.

Apologize? That certainly hadn't been something that the people here did a whole lot.

"I can understand why you had your little outburst, we wanted to get you on track so fast that we didn't stop to think this might be a bit much for a little guy like you to take in all

at once," Ms. Mari said rubbing Leo's arm a little before standing up to face the tv. "I think you should relax a little more before going back to class, and as an added bonus I'll even turn on something fun for you."

Ms. Mari clicked the remote as the television switched over to a cartoon. "Here why don't you watch this. PJ Masks. Alot of the kids here seem to like this one." Ms. Mari said as she stepped aside.

"Can't I watch something different?" Leo asked.

"I'll be right back with something for you," Ms. Mari said seemingly not hearing Leo's request.

Leo heard her leave the room the click of the door locking behind him. He sat in the chair as the little kids show played on the tv. Leo rested his chin in his hand as he stared at the tv with nothing else to do. He hadn't even noticed Ms. Mari come back into the room a couple minutes later as he had become entranced by the show. For some reason he had been drawn in by the show's premise that was centered around some kids, yet even though they were little kids they were also superheroes who could seemingly do anything they wanted with the power of their costumes without so much as a single adult around. There was something deeply alluring about that idea to Leo.

"Here you go," Ms. Mari said causing Leo to jump a little surprised by her presence. He saw she was offering him a juice box, the straw already poked into the top. Leo took it and began to drink at once as he let his eyes glue back to the

screen. He was grateful for the drink since his throat had gotten a little dry from all the yelling he had been doing.

“You just sit back and enjoy your show, I'll come and get you in a little bit,” Ms. Mari said patting Leo on the head before leaving the room once again.

Upon returning about forty minutes later she found Leo laying across the chair with his head resting on the arm rest having made himself comfortable.

“Okay, that enough for today,” Ms. Mari said switching off the television.

“Awww I want to watch more,” Leo whined a little sitting up.

“Sorry dear, but you have to get back to class, and I think you have an apology to give someone,” Ms. Mari said casting a raised eyebrow down at Leo.

“O-kay,” Leo stuttered a little bowing his head a little. Ms. Mari escorted him back to the classroom and marched him up to Mrs. Forsythe who was sitting at her desk.

“Go on then,” Ms. Mari said pushing Leo a little forward.

“I'm sorry for getting mad,” Leo said feeling genuinely ashamed about his outburst. Mrs. Forsythe wore a stony expression for a moment before her features softened.

“Thank you very much, I can tell your apology is honest” Mrs. Forsythe said. “Proper children are always remorseful when they have been wrong.”

“Now Leo,” Ms. Mari said putting a hand on his shoulder and getting on his level. “Me and Mrs. Forsythe decided to go easy on you since its your first day, but any more problems and we will have no choice but to punish you, is that understood?”

Leo pursed his lips. What did punishment look like in this place? Leo decided not to inquire for any more information. He was getting off easy and in places like this that didn't happen often. Leo quickly nodded his head.

“Good,” Ms. Mari said with a smile as she stood. “I'll leave you all to it then.”

Ms. Mari left the room as Mrs. Forsythe grabbed some paper and a pencil.

“Everyone is working on some math right now,” she said handing the worksheet to Leo. “Just do your best okay.” The teacher said sending Leo back to his desk.

Leo sat down looking over the paper. It looked to be very simple addition and subtraction. Leo began to fill it out but as with the spelling activities that morning it had started out easy but as Leo made his way through things started to get fuzzy. He even had to pause at simple problems like six plus four and using his fingers to count. It should have only taken a second for him to calculate in his head but it just wasn't coming to him like normal. Leo did manage to make it to the end of the paper.

“Done already?” Mrs Forsythe asked as Leo looked over

noticing the teacher standing next to his desk looking a his paper.

“I guess,” Leo said.

“Lets see how you did,” Mrs. Forsythe said picking up the paper and uncapping a red pen. She turned around to a table near the side of the classroom and went through the paper marking it up. Leo wasn't quite sure what was taking so long, this was simple math and despite what they were telling him he was still eighteen in his mind. Even if he had to stop and think about some of the problems that was only because he was feeling a little frazzled at the moment. What would anyone expect if they had the day he'd been having.

“You got a few right,” Mrs. Forsythe said placing the paper back on Leo's desk. “You honestly did better than most kids your age would do.”

Leo looked down at the paper completely flabbergasted at all the red marks denoting a wrong answer on his paper. It showed that Leo had only answered a handful of them correctly. But that couldn't be right, Leo suspected that Mrs. Forsythe had changed his answers in some way to mess with his head. However as Leo examined the paper closer he could see that no such thing had happened. It was his writing, that was undeniable. Leo was so wrapped up at looking at his paper with the wrong answers that he had written down so confidently that he hadn't noticed Mrs. Forsythe go to her desk and returning with another piece of paper.

“I think this will be much easier,”” Mrs. Forsythe said. On the

paper were pictures of apples with a line at the bottom of each set. “Just count how many there are and then write the number, you understand?”

“Yes,” Leo grumbled as he got to work which thankfully got the teacher out of his hair. Leo sat working counting out the apples, he was taking it slow, he didn't want the teacher to come back and grade it and point out that he had gotten one wrong because he had miscounted. A bell than rang as kids started putting things away as Mrs. Forsythe announced that it was time for lunch. The class was lead down to a lunch room area. Leo stood in line at the buffet with his styrofoam tray in his hand moving down the line to get the meal served out to him. Leo was surprised to see Ms. Mari herself behind the line serving out lunch. She seemed to be the leader around here as Mr. Gareth was over at the other place and Leo had never seen him do anything like this. But as Leo turned to go find a table to sit at he could see that the room was sparsely populated, there were only about twenty or so kids around. It seemed that this part of Hawthorne didn't boast the number of students that the high school did, so maybe there wasn't as much staff. Leo went to go sit at one of the tables with some other kids however as he went to set his tray down one of the boys slapped his hand onto the spot.

“Seat saved,” the boy said.

“Oh sorry,” Leo said as he moved down to next available spot.

“That one too,” the boy said.

“Are there any seat not saved?” Leo asked.

“Nope,” the boy said with a smirk. “All of them are saved for big kids, no little babies at this table.”

Leo rolled his eyes as he moved onto an empty table taking a seat. As he looked over at the table he had just tried to sit at he could see the kids there still laughing. He wondered just what the heck was up with this place. He would of thought that if everyone here had been regressed as he had there might be a sense of camraderie about it. Not too mention it had been so childish that Leo wasn't entirely convinced that those kids had ever been older. Then again as Leo remembered his interaction with the other kid in the computer lab it could just be they were all just jerks. There was the other explanation to consider what if the school really was doing some sort of brainwashing type things on the students, they all actually believed they were kids. As Leo was about to stab his fork into the gloopy mass that passed for spaghetti in this place he felt a hand be placed on his shoulder.

“Hang on there kiddo,” Mrs. Forsythe said before she quickly secured a plain white plastic bib around Leo's neck. “There now you don't have to worry about getting sauce on your uniform,” she said with a grin before leaving. Leo noticed the snickers from the nearby table as he glowered looking down at his tray. He knew if he tried to take it off they would just put it right back on.

Leo sat eating not taking his eyes off his tray lest he catch sight of other kids looking at him. He was reflecting on the day trying to find some answer in all of it as to whether the

school was employing something to mess with his head. There was some evidence to suggest such a thing. Such as that morning during the spelling activity, he had already had his suspicions that it was no simple game. Then his experience in that room in the chair. Maybe the video had not been as innocent as he had thought. Leo had sat their happily watching a tv show made for little kids he had even been sad when it was time to go. Not too mention when he had gotten back to the room he had apologized and had felt ashamed of his actions like he had actually been the one in the wrong. If anyone was in the wrong it was the staff that worked here. Yet Leo ran into some trouble when thinking about the math assignment. The same thing had happened as with the spelling but those had just been normal sheets of paper, there was no way he could have been brainwashed by a piece of paper.

It was then Leo heard the sound of someone setting down a styrofoam plate at the spot across from him. Leo looked up to see the blonde haired kid from the computer lab taking a seat.

“You better not sit there,” Leo said. “They'll make fun of you for sitting by the baby.” Leo wasn't saying any of this out of charity. He really just wanted to be alone.

“I know you're not a baby.” the boy said. “Besides I don't really care what they think. I'll sit wherever I please.”

Leo looked at the boy for a moment something about him seemed so familiar.

“That and I'm not going to let my best friends sit by himself,”

the boy said. “You're still in there right Leo?”

Leo let his fork drop from his hand as he blinked a few times out of astonishment.

“Tanner,” Leo whispered. “Is that you?”

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Chapter 4

Reunited

Leo felt his body shaking as he looked at the boy across from him. He just couldn't bring himself to buy into the startling revelation. It was too good to be true, and he didn't want to open himself off to the brutal smack when it turned into a falsehood.

“Yep,” the boy said. “Its me in the flesh.”

“But...how...why,” Leo said shooting up from his seat.

“Easy,” Tanner said holding his hands out as if to ease Leo back down to his seat as his eyes darted to the staff people that were patrolling the lunchroom. Leo for his part took his own cursory glance confirming that they had not been noticed as he sat back down.

“I guess I got here the same way you did,” Tanner said. “Right after we said our goodbyes I walked down to Mr. Gareth's office and demanded my release. He seemed to agree but then he asked me to cheers with him over a glass of water, since there was nothing else available. I obliged and then next thing I knew I woke up like this.”

“It was in the glass,” Leo said as if that bit of knowledge was

in any way important at the moment.

“What about you? Why are you younger than everyone else?” Tanner asked.

“I mean I don't really know for sure, my best guess is that my parents requested it,” Leo said. “I guess they thought if they were going to make me into their good little boy again they might as well go all the way or something.” Tanner gave a nod not seeing any reason to disagree with the hypothesis.

“So when graduation time comes they'll ship you back home,” Tanner said. Leo could see the gears turning in his head as if he were putting some thought together.

“Yeah...back home...with them,” Leo said, the thought of returning back home filled him with a sort of dread. Leo then shook his head not wanting to dwell on the thought of his future.

“But what about you?” Leo said as he looked at Tanner who gave him a sort of probing look. “I mean what are they going to do with you...since you don't have parents?” Leo asked becoming hesitant with his question upon realizing that it may come out a little insensitive.

“Oh yeah,” Tanner said with a far off look. “Apparently I'm getting adopted.”

“Adopted,” Leo repeated back. “Well maybe that won't be so bad, you could get lucky.”

Tanner gave Leo a muddled look before shaking his head

with a dismissive weariness as if Leo had just uttered the worlds lamest joke.

“There is not a chance on this earth that I would ever let myself be adopted,” Tanner said taking a decisive stab into the spaghetti on his tray. “Especially not from anyone this place deems acceptable.” he said before stuffing a forkful of noodles into his mouth.

“Point taken,” Leo said remembering back to Ms. Mari telling him that all the parents also received materials on child rearing from Hawthorne.

“Tell me Leo,” Tanner said his mouth still half full. “Do you want to go back to live with your parents?”

“No way, I'd rather take my chances being adopted than that,” Leo said.

“Good, good,” Tanner said before taking a large swig of milk from the carton on his tray. “Then I guess you'll be on board when I tell you I'm planning on busting out of here.”

“Wait, really,” Leo said as his eyes bulged. “You have a plan?”

“I have some things cooking. I figure the best bet we got is the day of the graduation. They are going to be throwing some ceremony and all the parents will be here to collect their kids. This place will be wide open then.”

“I guess,” Leo said. “But what about after that, it will be a long walk into town from here and well we are a lot smaller now.”

“I've already got that covered,” Tanner said with a confident wave of his hand. “You know that lady I told you about, well I just got into contact with her this morning. She already agreed to meet us here on the day we just got to get past the gate.”

“So that's what you were doing this morning in the computer lab,” Leo said remembering their earlier interaction before suddenly feeling somewhat offended. “What was with you being so flippant towards me anyways?”

“I was trying to keep a low profile duh doi,” Tanner said pointing to his forehead with his finger signaling for Leo to use his head. “I didn't want that banshee to see what I was doing.”

“Oh,” Leo said sitting back a little feeling stupid for not realizing. “Did you tell that lady or whatever about...I mean what they did to us?” Leo asked changing the subject back to the important topic.

“No, she would never believe me and then she probably wouldn't show up.” Tanner said.

“Don't you think that will be a problem when instead of two eighteen year olds show up it will just be two little kids?” Leo said.

“Whats the difference,” Tanner said. “We aren't actually little kids, we're still eighteen.”

Leo shot Tanner a look to show that his reasoning might be a little flawed.

“Look it doesn't matter,” Tanner said. “Whats important is getting as far away from this place as possible.” Leo nodded, Tanner was speaking the truth.

“So anyways, what did they end up doing to you anyways?” Tanner asked.

“What are you talking about?”

“You know after they dragged you out of the room?” Tanner replied.

“Oh..that” Leo said furrowing his brow a little.

“If you don't want to talk about it you don't have to,” Tanner said sensing some discomfort from Leo. “But I gotta say I was impressed. I mean that obedience is for dogs line was great and then you went an called her a bitch,” Tanner then made the chef's kiss motion with his hand. “I don't think I've ever seen you stand up for yourself like that.”

“It was...weird,” Leo said reflecting on what had happened afterwards. He proceeded to tell Tanner all about the room and the tv, yet he left out the part where he had enjoyed watching the tv show for little kids.

“They must have been brainwashing you,” Tanner said with some urgency.

“I don't know,” Leo said still dubious about whether it was true or not. “I sorta said the same thing and Ms. Mari seemed to think it was funny.”

“As if you can believe anything that comes out of these

people's mouths," Tanner said an incredulous look on his face.

"I know," Leo said defensively. "I'm just saying it seemed...normal."

Just then one of the teachers rang a bell bringing the attention of the room onto her as she told the students it was time to clean up.

"Oh great," Tanner said with a sigh. "That means its time for recital practice."

"What's that?" Leo asked.

"You'll see," Tanner said with a groan as he got up from his seat with his tray in hand over to some trashcans.

As Leo made his way up to the trashcans with his own tray he was met by Mrs. Forsythe.

"Leo it looks like you barely touched your lunch," she said looking down at the tray.

"I.. um.. sorry," Leo said becoming nervous that she was going to punish him in some way never having forgotten his first interaction with Bruce all those years ago. She took the tray from his hand tossing it into the trash. "Next time lets concentrate on eating instead of talking with our friends the whole time," Mrs. Forsythe said with raised eyebrow.

"O-okay," Leo stammered a little as he turned around to walk away relieved that nothing had happened.

"Leo," Mrs. Forsythe called out. Leo froze for a moment,

feeling stupid that he thought he was going to skirt by with just a simple reprimand. Mrs. Forsythe walked over to him reaching her hand out as Leo braced himself before she simply grabbed at the plastic bib around his neck removing it. “Don't want to be walking around with this all day do you silly?” she asked with smirk.

“I-I guess not,” Leo said completely having forgotten he had been wearing it. “Thank you.”

“You're welcome,” Mrs. Forsythe said giving him a few pats to his head. “I'm happy to hear that you have found your manners. Now hurry up and get in line.”

Leo scurried over to the waiting line of children. It seemed that when he thought he had this place figured out they always seemed to surprise him.

The kids were then all lead into a gymnasium that had a stage. The kids all seemed to break off into groups leaving Leo standing by himself. Mrs. Forsythe approached Leo with another man in tow. The man wore a brown vest over a white shirt. He had a scraggly beard and was bald in a horseshoe pattern atop his head.

“Leo this is Mr. Hewett he is going to give you a part for the recital,” Mrs. Forsythe said.

“Recital?” Leo questioned back.

“At the graduation ceremony we are going to put on a little show for the parents,” Mr. Hewett said before he began to rub his chin with his hand looking at Leo as if he were in deep

thought. “Lets see where would be a good spot for you?” Mr. Hewett continued thinking as he brought a clipboard up to look over Mrs. Forsythe was at his side as they seemed to be quietly discussing something.

“He could join the puppy group,” Mr. Hewett then said. “There are only two kids currently, so adding another would be helpful.”

“You hear that Leo?” Mrs. Forsythe said with a big smile. “You get to be a puppy!”

Leo gave no reaction, he had no clue what was even happening so he didn't no how to feel, it was all gibberish to him.

“I'm working with that group today anyways so that's perfect,” Mr. Hewett said before motioning for Leo to follow him. Leo was lead over to a group of two other kids a girl and a boy. The other two kids regarded Leo with some apprehension as Mr. Hewett told them he would be joining them but as they got started they seemed to be fine with him, Leo was just grateful that they seemed ok and he was not going to have another interaction similar to the lunchroom. Mr. Hewett sat down at a piano and began to play through a song teaching the kids how the song went. The song itself was about how great it was to be a puppy and how they liked to wag their tails and play, a little dance routine went along with it that would have the kids acting out all the actions they would be singing about, like wagging their butts, begging with their best puppy dog eyes and even a part where Leo

would have to leapfrog over the other two.

At one point Leo looked out and spotted Tanner in his own group who were also rehearsing some sort of song and dance routine. Leo could tell Tanner was hating it as he looked un-enthused and went through the routine with a half-hearted approach. Leo felt a little silly about all of it but if Tanner was going along with it then it didn't seem to be all that bad. As the rehearsal went on Leo was getting into it a little. Learning the song hadn't been all that hard and back in school before Hawthorne Leo had been in the choir and had quite enjoyed it. He did seem to like music when it he wasn't being drilled for it. They finished up the last part of the song as Mr. Hewett played the last few notes before coming to a stop

“Hey Leo you're a pretty good singer,” Mr. Hewett said.

“Really?” Leo said feeling a tad bit shy with the sudden praise.

“For sure, especially for your age.” Mr. Hewett added. Which sort of had Leo feeling two ways. Happy for the compliment but annoyed with the comment about his new perceived age. But before Leo could even come up with a response Ms. Mari appeared.

“Hey Mr. Hewett, think I could steal Leo for a bit” Ms. Mari asked.

“If you must take my star, then I guess,” Mr. Hewett said with a shrug. Ms. Mari took Leo by the hand leading him out of the auditorium. As they walked down the halls she was

asking Leo all sorts of questions about the rehearsal. As much as Leo didn't trust her as far as he could throw- which given his new body wasn't very far, he still remained somewhat excited by the activity and was replying with some fondness.

They walked into a room which had three sets of bunk beds set up.

“Figured now would be a good time to show you around the room,” Ms. Mari said. She proceeded to show him a trunk at the foot of one of the beds that had been assigned to him opening it up to show him some clothing had already been placed inside. Before going over to the bottom bunk and pulling back the cover.

“And this is your bed,” she said patting the mattress. “Try it out.” Leo took a seat bouncing a little to find that it was the same overly firm mattress that he had been sleeping on for the last four years.

“Okey dokey so would you like to keep your shorts on or would you rather take them off?” Ms. Mari asked.

“W-wha?” Leo stuttered not sure if he had heard her right.

“For your nap,” Ms. Mari replied.

“Nap,” Leo squeaked jumping to his feet.

“Of course silly billy. Everyday at two o'clock I want you to rest.” Ms. Mari said.

“I'm not taking a nap, I'm not a little kid,” Leo spat back

crossing his arm looking more like a petulant toddler than anything else.

“This is not a discussion,” Ms. Mari said taking a stern tone. “Either you listen to the adults here or you can have yourself a time out until you decide to cooperate, either way you will be getting into the bed.”

“Fine, but I'm keeping my shorts on,” Leo growled sitting back on the bed. He knew there was no fighting back, not here, not now.

“There now see how much easier it is when we listen,” Ms. Mari said pulling the covers up over him. “I do suggest you try to get some rest, its been a long day already.”

Leo was then left alone with a final reminder to stay in the bed until someone came and got him. Leo let his eyes close, he hated to admit it but he was rather tired it had been a trying day, yet he fell asleep with some hope now that he and Tanner had reunited.

Leo came too some time later, yet had not opened his eyes, he had not awaken out of sleep because his body had decided to naturally come out of his peaceful respite, rather it had been because something was causing it too be too hard to stay asleep. Leo rolled over in an attempt to dispel whatever the feeling was yet found that did not help as it seemed to follow. Whatever it could be was cold and he could feel it almost sticking to his clothes. Leo finally opened his eyes to be met with a large dark spot on the white blanket. Leo at first didn't understand what he was even looking at, a second later the

pieces snapped together as Leo shirked off the blanket in horror. Almost as if the universe was doing everything in its power to make his situation all the worse Ms. Mari walked into the room.

“Okay Leo time to get up from nappy time,” she said before coming to a stop upon discovering what Leo had done. He was in the middle of a dark spot and it had completely spread through his shorts. An incredibly deep sense of shame welled up in no doubt something that had embedded itself in him at an early age with his parents who had been none too understanding of such things and as Leo looked at the woman he could only imagine the attitude would persist here. Yet to Leo's shock Ms. Mari gave him a small sympathetic look.

“Looks like someone made a little oopsy,” she said gathering up the sheets and tossing it onto the ground. “Up we go,” Ms. Mari said grabbing Leo by the wrist and pulling him up onto his feet. “Lets see what we are working with,” Ms. Mari said unbuckling the belt on Leo's shorts before pulling them down to his ankles. Ms. Mari made a couple of clicking sounds with her tongue as she looked at damage. Leo's undies were of course soaked and the bottom of his shirt as well.

“If only you had chosen to go without the shorts,” Ms. Mari said not meaning it has a condemnation yet Leo took it as one all the same. Ms. Mari took Leo's shirt off and then hooked her thumbs into the waistband of the underwear pulling them down quickly causing Leo to let out a squeak of shock as the cold air hit his skin. Ms. Mari then went to the trunk that she had pointed out at being Leo's earlier as she began to pull out

another set of clothes, leaving Leo red faced and shivering a little unable to do anything but wait. She returned with a new uniform and a towel as she took to wiping Leo down which caused him to freeze up a little.

“At least your socks are okay,” Ms. Mari said as she held out a new pair of the plain white briefs for Leo to step into. “I think I can trust you to keep these dry, hmm?” Ms. Mari questioned.

“S-sure,” Leo stuttered as Ms. Mari put the shirt on him before getting his short on and buckled.

“Okay, good as new,” Ms. Mari said pulling at Leo's tucked in shirt a little to give it some slack in the tummy area.

“I'm sorry I don't know what happened.” Leo said. Ms. Mari cocked her head a little.

“You don't need to apologize for something like this,” Ms. Mari said. “Its perfectly normal for little boys to have accidents like that, especially when they are asleep and can't help it.”

As much as Leo wanted to take her words at face value it hit him that it almost felt like she was using this against him, a further blow on his eighteen year old ego. It was yet another reason to add to the ever growing list of evidence that all pointed to one conclusion- that he was no longer anything more than a little four year old boy. As Ms. Mari took his hand again and began walking out of the room Leo began to think it was time to give up. No amount of resistance was

going to be able to stop this. Perhaps it was time to accept what they were intent on getting him to see as the truth. If he just let go and let himself become like those other kids tacitly accepting of everything Hawthorne was drilling into their heads maybe in some ways it would make his life so much easier. Leo had felt overwhelmed living with his parents because there expectations had been butting against his thirst for independence. If he let that erode from him maybe he just might be able to get along in the life they had planned for him.

Ms. Mari walked Leo into another room. Leo was so absorbed in his thoughts that he had taken no glance at his surroundings.

“Hey where did you go?” The words knocking Leo straight out of his swirling thoughts. Leo looked up to see that it had been Tanner, all of sudden every thought that had just run through his head seemed crazy. Hell no he wasn't going to become like that! Besides it would never have worked anyways. Leo almost wanted to slap himself for even entertaining such ideas.

“Nowhere special,” Leo muttered as if saying anything more would somehow clue Tanner into the ideas that had just been washing over him.

“Really?” Tanner said. “You were gone awhile, they didn't do anything weird to you did they?”

“I'm fine,” Leo said giving Tanner an assured smirk. “Really nothing to worry about.” Tanner gave a half nod deciding to take his friend's word for it.

Leo then looked around the room for the first time. There were about ten or so other kids. The room was large. There was a large table near the back that had art supplies set up on it. There was a corner set up with beanbag chairs and a couple of bookshelves In another corner there were some cubbies filled with an assortment of toys, like action figures and lego and some board games. Near the front of the room was a couch with a tv set up that was currently playing some cartoons.

“What is this place?” Leo asked looking around.

“Its the playroom, at least that what they call it. There are two of them but they are identical, this is pretty much where we go when school is over for the day, although sometimes they take us outside to a playground.” Tanner explained.

“There's a playground here,” Leo said surprised. “I never saw anything like that when we were back at the high school.”

“Yeah, we are on a completely different part of the property. I've been scoping things out, I saw a spot where the fence is lower and it leads into some pretty dense woods, if I'm right it should lead us out to a road, that's where I told the lady to meet us come graduation day.” Tanner said. “Here check this out,” Tanner said leading Leo over to the art table. He took a quick glance around the room making sure no one was watching before taking a folded up piece of paper out from a some of the metal supports underneath the table. He laid the paper out.

“I've been mapping out everything,” Tanner said as he started

to go through the paper pointing out all the rooms he had labeled in the facility like the classrooms and the lunchroom, although some rooms were'nt labeled yet as Tanner hadn't figured out what was in them yet. The map was clearly unfinished in many respects which was to be expected, its not like the kids had free reign over the building.

A staff member came into the room as Tanner folded up the paper hiding it from view.

“Okay I need groups 2 and 3 today,” the staff person said. Some of the kids let out groans as they made their way over to the door lining up before being lead out.

“What was that all about?” Leo asked.

“Chore groups,” Tanner said. “Don't worry I already switched your name so you're in a group with me,” Tanner said flashing Leo a cheeky smile.

“Wow you've been busy,” Leo said thoroughly impressed by Tanner's planning.

“Well I've been here for four days already with nothing better to do,” Tanner replied. Leo felt himself starting to feel sorry for Tanner. He remembered how absolutely scared and anxious he had felt that morning before meeting up with Tanner, he couldn't imagine going through all this without him but that's exactly what Tanner had been doing- facing all of this alone.

“That must have sucked,” Leo said careful not to use a word like scared thinking it would liken Tanner to a little kid.

“Having to be here all alone like that.”

“Yeah,” Tanner said his voice doused with melancholy. “But you know I got through it, and hey now you're here and that's awesome,” Tanner said. “I mean its not awesome that you're here but its is and...um well...you know what I mean,” Tanner said becoming flustered.

“Yeah I get it,” Leo said with a chuckle. “I think its awesome that you're here too.”

The time passed in the room slowly, it seemed Tanner was none too keen to engage in any of the activities that were available in the room. Leo couldn't help but steal glances at the tv that was currently playing an episode of Sesame Street.

“Want to watch tv?” Leo asked.

“Why would you wan to watch that?” Tanner asked dismissively. “That show is for little kids, its the only type of stuff they play here.”

“I've never seen it before so I guess I didn't know,” Leo said deciding to play dumb but it had been the truth the he had never watched it before.

“Really?” Tanner said. “I thought your parents would have been all over educational television.”

“The only tv I've ever watched has been at school,” Leo said. “At home the tv was in my parents room and I was not allowed in there.” Leo gave Tanner another look. “It was just a suggestion to pass the time,” Tanner threw up a hand as if to

say lead the way. The boys took a seat on the couch when they were approached by another boy with glasses. Leo recognized him as one of the kids that was sitting at the table from lunch.

“Babies on the floor,” the boy said pointing. “Couch is for big kids.”

Leo didn't even give much thought as he let out a little grumble beginning to slide off the couch

before he was stopped as Tanner shot out an arm to block him.

“He's with me,” Tanner said with a growl. “And if anyone in here wants to pick on him some more they'll have to answer to me.”

The boy with glasses looked to become nervous at Tanner's threat and inched away before turning heel and retreating back to the lego area.

“Um thanks,” Leo said. Tanner gave Leo a half smile.

“Really Leo c'mon,” Tanner said. The three words communicating a whole conversation that Tanner had with Leo many times in the past. He had always told Leo to grow a spine and stop letting people walk all over him. It was easier said than done for Leo however he didn't want to cause trouble. His whole life he had been made to feel like a burden. It was a natural response to try and get out of people's way.

Leo watched the television and just as he had earlier he

started to get pulled in. He could only imagine its because it was all so new to him, he didn't have much to compare it too. The only thing Hawthorne had let them watch previously was a sports game every once in a while.

“Do you know what letter this is,” Elmo said holding up a E. Leo was about to answer out loud before catching sight of Tanner resting his head up against his his hand looking bored out of this mind. Leo was unaware of how long they had been watching television. Maybe he was letting himself get too into it?

“Lets do something else,” Leo said getting off the couch. Before long he and Tanner were sitting by some Lego's passing the time clicking together some blocks though neither boy was taking much joy in it. Time seemed to be crawling. Thankfully a staff member came in and announced that it was dinner time which was a welcome reprieve from the boredom. Leo and Tanner sat together again. The meal that night was grilled cheese and chicken noodle soup and of course Leo had been made to wear a bib once again. Afterwards they were sent back to the play room however this time was much shorter of a stint as another staff member came into the room about thirty minutes later.

“Alright kids its that time of night,” he said clapping his hands together. The kids all got up and headed for the doors.

“What time is it?” Leo asked pulling on Tanner's shirt to get his attention. Tanner turned to him with an annoyed look on his face.

“Shower time.”

Leo entered into his room to see that his bunk mates were stripping off their uniforms. Unfortunately it seemed Leo and Tanner had been assigned different rooms. He noticed that the others were donning towels after getting undressed. Some of them wrapping them around their waist while others were just pulling them around their bodies. Leo decided to wrap it around his waist but upon finding it difficult to get it to stay he opted just to wrap it around himself. With his small body the towel was big enough to cover him with little issue. Leo followed along meeting back up with Tanner. They found themselves standing in line outside of the showers. Leo noticed none of the girls were around figuring that it was one of the times girls and boys were separated here. Tanner explained that there were only four shower heads so they had to wait their turn. Leo was beginning to get a little nervous. Group showers had been the norm back at the high school and Leo had been initially a little nervous back then at first as well. Yet after getting over the initial awkwardness he had gotten used to it. Yet now something seemed different. He felt out of place. Even though the kids were not much older than he was the difference between four and six seemed to be a much larger gap. Being the only four year old made Leo more than a little self conscious.

A woman with red hair that cascaded down her back was walking up the line of boys. She stopped in front of Leo.

“You're Leo Rushton correct?” she asked.

“Yes,” Leo said nervous. It was rarely a good thing when he was singled out around here.

“I'm Ms. Klay, I'm the person in charge at night when Ms. Mari is gone.” the woman said. Leo nodded not having much to say at meeting this woman. “You're going to come with me,” Ms. Klay said placing a hand on Leo's back to start leading him a way.

“But don't I have to take a shower?” Leo asked becoming suspicious. What could be so important that he had to go with this woman right at this moment, he was only wearing a towel for goodness sakes! Ms. Klay smiled and proceeded to scoop a surprised Leo up into her arms.

“We want to make sure you get properly cleaned up so I'll be helping you out by giving you a bath.”

“B-bb-bath,” Leo sputtered.

“Of course sweetie,” Ms. Klay said. “Shower's can be dangerous for little guys like you. We wouldn't want you to slip and fall and we also need to make sure you get all those hard to reach spots cleaned like your back and also those sneaky little spots like behind your ears,” Ms. Klay said giving Leo a boop to his nose. Leo tried to say something but his tongue had become so tied up that it sounded like gibberish.

“I'll help him,” Tanner piped up. “I'll make sure he doesn't slip or nothing.”

“That's a very nice offer Tanner,” Ms. Klay said patting

Tanner on top of his head. “But you are still a little too young for me to be able to give you that responsibility.” With that declaration Ms. Klay began to walk away. Leo's face was that of shock, this was really happening. Tanner could only stare back with a look of worry as he bit his lower lip. Both of them knew there was nothing either one of them could do to stop this, they were powerless.

Leo was taken down several hallways before Ms. Klay walked into another room before setting Leo down. He looked around seeing they were in a large bathroom like room. There were no toilets however. Instead three bathtubs sat against the wall as well as a counter area with some sinks. Ms. Klay began to fill one of the tubs up with water.

“You're lucky to have come along when you did, we were about to renovate this room,” Ms. Klay said in an off handed manner.

“What do you mean?” Leo asked still holding his towel tightly around himself shivering a little, partly from nerves and partly due to the fact he was starting to get a little chilly standing around in just a towel.

“This is where we would bathe the toddlers, but we don't really have much use for it, since we stopped taking in little kids like that.”

Leo cocked his head a little. Did that mean what they had done to Leo was not normal that he had somehow won maybe the worst lottery ever? As Leo thought on it more he sort of pieced together the fact that if his parents had insisted on this

that must of meant they had thrown around some good money. For a moment Leo felt some happiness knowing that his parents had seen fit to incur such an expense on his behalf. He could actually see that they had gone above and beyond for him in some way. Leo then felt a chill go through his body as he shook his head. The thought stirring something in him. For the briefest moment he had actually started thinking like Hawthorne had wanted him too. Not seeing his parents as the authoritarian control freaks they were and as two loving parents who would go to any lengths to give him the best. Leo gripped his hand in a fist. He and Tanner were getting out of here, he couldn't let them get into his head before that.

“Okey dokey, time to get into the water,” Ms. Klay said approaching Leo who backed away a little as he focused on the problem in front of him. Leo was going to protest but Ms. Klay wasted no time in scooping him back up shirking the towel off of him in one motion before taking him over to the tub and plopping him into the warm water. She took a louffa that she squeezed some soap onto. “Arm's up high in the sky,” Ms. Klay said in a sing song voice.

“No,” Leo said summoning up all his courage. “I can do it myself, I don't need help.”

“Now, now, we aren't going to be all grumpy during bath time.” Ms. Klay tutted. “All little boys need help, especially during bath time.”

“I'm not a little boy, I'm eighteen.” Leo spat. “And you know

that," Leo said hitting the point directly on the head.

"Oh really," Ms. Klay said. "That's not what I see. You know I poked my head into the playroom this afternoon and I saw you watching Sesame Street with some other kids, look like you were enjoying it. . Which is perfectly fine I'm not trying to make you feel bad. All I'm saying is that you are perfectly normal for a little boy. Including being fussy at bath time."

"That's not true," Leo yelped. "I'm not stupid. It was because of you people. I know you're messing with my head, I know you are trying to brainwash me or something."

"Leo that's very silly," Ms. Klay said exhibiting a sort of patience appropriate for arguing with a little kid. "I know you've been experiencing some different thoughts and feelings today but no one here is making you feel that way."

Leo was a little taken aback for a moment. The way she was talking to him now was more like a doctor talking to a patient about their health. "You're doing that all on your own."

"That can't be," Leo said looking a little confused as if he wasn't as confident in his assertion as he had been a moment ago. "Its part of the treatment that you all say I'm on."

"I can explain it to you more if you want," Ms. Klay said. "But if I do then you gotta be extra cooperative for me right now, so what's it going to be?"

Leo furrowed his brow for a moment. He didn't want to play her game but knew this was a good opportunity to maybe pump her for some information. He lifted up his arms

begrudgingly.

“Good boy,” she chimed as she took one of his arms to begin scrubbing him down. “You see the body is a funny thing sometimes. Your body went through some changes but it takes some time for the brain to catch up. All those new feelings you are having is just your brain acclimating. We are simply helping you along and making the transition less stressful. That is all we mean by treatment.” Ms. Klay had gotten Leo scrubbed down and had put a dollop of shampoo into her hand before looking at him with a gentle smile.

“It would happen no matter what, we just want to make it as easy as possible.” She said as she began to lather up his hair. Leo said nothing. Could it really be true? It was in line with what Ms. Mari had told him earlier, it also seemed to explain away a lot of Leo's doubts about the things he had experienced that day. Why he had reacted the way he did when watching little kids tv shows and also his trouble with the math assignment despite it being a piece of paper with no way to subliminally manipulate him. It also seemed to explain why the rest of the kids were acting the way they did. Why they seemed to act so childlike and immature. Making them all younger and more malleable would certainly be helpful in instilling in them all the ideas that Leo had been exposed to at Hawthorne for the last four years. Yet even as the pieces seemed to be falling into place Leo thought about Tanner. He certainly didn't act like the rest of the kids and he hadn't even shown signs of slipping into a more childish mindset. He had been completely bored watching the show

with Leo that day. He had not even shown an inkling of letting himself become interested in any of the toys either. If what Ms. Klay was saying was true, that this was all a natural outcome of the regression than surely Tanner should be exhibiting the same signs, yet Leo could not use that to argue against her, it would only serve to put more attention on his friend.

Ms. Klay was finished with the process of getting Leo cleaned. She had been quick and efficient leaving the feeling that she wasn't caring for a small child merely doing a job. She got Leo out of the tub and dried him off before taking him over to a counter. She hoisted him up to sit next to the sink letting his towel remain draped over him before she put some toothpaste on a toothbrush.

“Open wide crocodile,” she cooed.

“I can do it,” Leo said reaching out for the toothbrush.

“That wasn't the deal,” Ms. Klay said pulling the toothbrush back. “You promised to be extra cooperative remember?”

Leo frowned seeing the pointlessness of resisting as he opened his mouth to let her brush his teeth for him. As Leo spit into the sink and rinsed his mouth out he could only be grateful that she had been quick about it.

“Lets get you situated for bed,” Ms. Klay said as she turned towards Leo holding something in her hands. Leo felt his heart drop upon seeing in her hand was a pair of training pants. The papery garment decorated with little stars all over

the front.

“W-what is that?” Leo stammered as she held it out. Of course he knew what it was, but she couldn't actually be suggesting he wear it. Ms. Klay gave him a sympathetic look.

“Ms. Mari told me you might be having some trouble with accidents while you sleep, so we got some protection to help,” she said starting to thread his legs into it.

“B-but it was just one time,” Leo said trying to pull his legs back but being perched on the edge of the counter made it hard.

“If you keep it dry tonight then we'll think more about whether or not you need it,” Ms. Klay said getting up Leo's legs before moving him off the counter to fully pull it up around his waist. “But you gotta wear it for tonight.”

Leo looked down at the training pants around his waist. They felt bulky and every little movement caused them to crinkle. Ms. Klay then threw a shirt on him. Leo saw she had him dressed in a plain white nightshirt that extended down past his knees.

“Lets go,” Ms. Klay said taking his hand as they walked towards the door.

“What about pants?” Leo squeaked expecting the pajamas to be like the ones that he had worn at the high school.

“You don't need pants, its a nightshirt,” Ms. Klay said. “Just like all the other kids.”

Leo was lead to his room where other kids already were getting into their assigned bunks. Leo could see that it was true everyone had on just a nightshirt however there's only went to right above the knees, which made Leo look all the smaller in his. Ms. Klay pulled back his blankets as Leo scurried to get under the covers. The crinkle of his pull-ups seemed so loud to him, he was appreciative for the chattering of the other kids at that moment if only to cover the sound. . Leo laid back onto the pillow a little disappointed that he and Tanner were separated before feeling a little relieved that Tanner would not have a chance to notice what he was wearing under his nightshirt. Ms. Klay then told the rest of the kids to get into bed. Once she was satisfied she flipped off the light switch leaving the room dark except for a nightlight in the corner of the room. A voice then came on the intercom.

“Good evening children,” the voice of a woman said. “Tonight's bedtime story is called the Dragon Who Ate Too Much,”

Leo sat with his eyes closed as he listened to the woman read out a story, although he couldn't concentrate on the tale. He was exhausted as his mind swirled with everything that he had gone through that day. As he thought upon what Ms. Klay had told him he started to become less convinced of the truth in her words than he had been. He couldn't believe them, everything they said was a lie. Maybe his mind was acclimating to match his body he had to hope he still had control over it.

It was still his brain, he just had to stick to the truth, resist

whatever they were trying to do to him. Surely that was what Tanner was doing. Leo fell asleep soon after hanging on to the hope that he was going to get through this. Tanner already had a plan, Leo just had to do whatever he could to help. Tanner was going to get them out of this, of that Leo was sure.

Chapter 5

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Chapter 5

Naughty Naughty

Leo sat in the playroom at a table surrounded by other kids. It was the weekend so no classes had been held, but that didn't mean the kids were left to their own devices as the weekend staff had plenty of planned activities to keep them all busy. Leo fidgeted with the marker in his hand as he stared down at the smiling bear depicted on the page in front of him. Only half of the bear's brown fur coat had been colored in, Leo the artist however was in no mood to continue his work–he was starting to get nervous. It had happened ten minutes ago when someone had stopped in the room and had called for Tanner. Leo was starting to think it had something to do with what had happened yesterday, when Tanner and Leo had been doing their chore duties sweeping a hallway. They had been alone just the two of them. Tanner had noticed it first. One of the doors in the hallway was ever so slightly left ajar.

“What do we have here?” Tanner had inquired sounding like some sitcom detective as he had slipped into the room.

“Tanner get out of there,” Leo had hissed. “You'll get us in trouble.”

“Whaddya talking about,” Tanner had said sticking his head back out the door. “There aren't even any cameras here, come

in you should see this." Tanner then had reached his hand out grasping onto Leo's shirt pulling him into the room. Inside there were shelves with a myriad of bins stacked on them. The boys began to walk along one of the shelves before Tanner came to a stop.

"This one's got your name," Tanner said before pulling one of the bins off of the shelf setting it on the ground between the two of them. Leo had seen the masking tape with the writing on top of it. Much to his dismay his ability to read had been ebbing away with each passing day and he was still unsure of whether or not it was due to his brain reverting back to its pre-literate state or if Hawthorne was in some way responsible. Even with all that he still had enough knowledge yet to recognize his own name spelled out Leonard Rushton #43850 across the top. Tanner opened the top of the bin which had elicited a gasp from Leo as if Tanner had just unearthed some ancient relic and for what was in the bin it was an apt comparison.

It was Leo's suitcase, the very same one he had arrived at Hawthorne with before they had confiscated it. Leo got on his knee's unzipping it to find the clothes he had packed contain within. He held up a shirt letting it unfold in front of him looking to be massive now. Leo then spied his cellphone. He had snatched it up trying at once to turn it on, but the phone remained lifeless long since having its battery drained.

"What's this?" Tanner had said picking up a small leather case.

“My lock picks,” Leo had exclaimed grabbing them from Tanner's hand as he unsnapped the case to look at the shiny metal instruments held within.

“Lockpicks?” Tanner had echoed back confused. Leo had totally forgotten that he had brought them having thrown them in his bag at the last minute, not that he had plans for them or anything.

“It was just a hobby,” Leo explained. “I only got them in secret just to mess around with the lock they came with, but they kind of ended up getting me into a lot more trouble than it was worth,” Leo said starting to put them back into the bag.

“Keep' em,” Tanner had said grabbing Leo's hand. “Your phone too, they might come in handy.”

Leo nodded. They then had put Leo's bin back as Tanner went in search of his own finding it further down. Tanner's bin had been rather meager compared to Leo's. A simple black canvas bag with some clothes in it had been all that had been in there. Tanner had dug through it before pulling out a singular key.

“Whats that?” Leo had asked.

“Just something of mine I really needed back,” Tanner said nodding with relief as he slipped the key into his pocket.

“Great,” Leo then said. “Can we get out of here now.”

“Yes yes,” Tanner assented replacing his bin on the shelf before the boys scurried out of the room.

Back in the present Leo shifted in his seat the training pants he was wearing under his shorts letting out a crinkle–a reminder of perhaps the most worrying change that had happened.

Leo had become a bed wetter. Accidents while he was awake had thankfully not become a thing. The nights however were disastrous. The only time he managed to keep dry was at nap-time and even then there was no guarantee. If Leo was being honest he sometimes felt it was almost better to wet them as after the first time he had woken up dry Ms. Mari had simply put his shorts back on him. The reasoning that there was really no point in letting him change back into underwear if the training pants were dry since they didn't make him unable to use the bathroom normally. It sometimes felt like Leo was being punished for not wetting the bed. Thankfully he had managed to keep it a secret so far from the other kids, especially Tanner. Leo didn't really think it would be the end of the world if the other kids found out, they already thought he was a baby anyways. Tanner was somehow different–somehow it felt like Leo would be letting him down if he knew.

The kids were released into a free time after a bit and Leo made his way over to a corner where a small cage sat. He had discovered that the one difference between the playrooms was that one of them contained a pet rabbit. Leo took the white and black spotted rabbit dubbed Mr. Timothy Tibbles into his lap. Cuddling the ball of fluff close always gave a Leo a sense of calm which he needed right now as he was

becoming increasingly worried by Tanner's long absence. Leo talked to Timothy for awhile about nothing in particular, he knew Timothy couldn't understand him but he got the sense that they enjoyed each others company. Leo felt himself chuckle a little upon realizing he really only had two friends in the world and one of them was a rabbit. What was wrong with that though? Tanner and Timothy liked him exactly as he was and weren't out to change him into something else.

On that subject Leo still wasn't sure what was going on. He couldn't seem to decide whether or not Hawthorne were playing a more direct role in the changes he was going through than they seemed to admit. Most of the time it just seemed like they were making Leo engage in normal kid stuff. Of which Leo seemed to get it worse than anyone else. For instance Leo's attachment towards Timothy had not gone unnoticed and Leo was given the “special” job of caring for the rabbit. Everyday he was to check whether there was food and water in the cage. Yet he wasn't allowed to get those things he had to tell one of the adults and they would do it all the while praising Leo for being so responsible. Leo knew they had given him the littlest task appropriate for very young kids, but he tried to not let it bother him he was happy to help out his friend in whatever small way he could.

Tanner however was seemingly more paranoid by the day. Every little thing seemed to jump out at him as some sort of brainwashing attempt. Tanner had even snuck some cotton balls to Leo one night telling him to put them in his ears when he slept. When Leo had questioned why Tanner had

posited that they were playing something over the speakers over night while the children slept. Leo had tried to listen one night. It was true that every so often he could hear a slight scratchiness coming out of the speaker, but Leo also knew it was normal for old speakers to sometimes do that. Besides Leo had already come to the conclusion that there was no brainwashing going on. He had read about hypnosis once in the book. The idea being that someone could not be hypnotized against their will. Then again Leo also wouldn't have thought there was stuff out there that could make someone younger and here he was living proof. Leo has still worn the cotton balls but had been discovered the next morning as the staff always woke him up to take him to a private restroom to get him changed and cleaned up before helping him get dressed. Something Leo had tried to assert he could do himself yet his protest fell on deaf ears. When Leo had been questioned about the cotton balls he had made up some lie about being worried about ear worms since he had overheard someone say something like that. His lie had been met with amusement that an adult would have when a small child would say something funny. For once Leo's perceived age had worked in his favor.

Leo had opted not to tell Tanner that he had lost his cotton balls. He didn't want Tanner to get mad at him for messing up, that and he didn't necessarily buy into the need for them in the first place. If anything Leo had come to the idea that if Hawthorne was doing anything it was some sort of conditioning, to get the kids to accept their new mindsets wholeheartedly and without question. However contrary to

what Ms. Klay had told him that this was all natural and inevitable, Leo had come to the conclusion that he could fight against it. It seemed Tanner was, so why not him? There was only a week left until graduation, all Leo had to do was hang on until then. Once he was out with his eighteen year old mind intact he would surely be able to figure out something.

Tanner finally came walking into the room. He had a stormy expression on his face as he took a seat at the table before putting his head down on the table. Leo was now sure he was about to be called out of the room next, yet no such announcement came. Leo put Timothy back before approaching Tanner at the table.

“Hey Tan –“ Leo began.

“Not right now,” Tanner said cutting Leo off not even lifting his head up from the table. Leo pursed his lips for a moment knowing that something had obviously happened, especially to put Tanner in such a state. Leo was going to try and coax him a little but was denied his chance when a staff member came in announcing it was rehearsal time. Tanner got up with a groan moving past Leo and going and standing in line with the rest of the kids. Leo followed suit. He just needed to give Tanner some space it seemed. Tanner had always been like this when something got too him. But Leo found eventually he would come around.

In the auditorium Leo tried his best to focus on the rehearsal. He had actually come to enjoy it. Thanks in large part to the praise and encouragement he was getting from Mr. Hewett

who had even seen fit to give Leo a solo part in the song. Leo had not received much praise in the past from the myriad of teachers and instructors he had had. Most of them would only chide him it being perfectly clear that he was not practicing much outside of practice, which wasn't necessarily their fault. None of them had known how thinly stretched Leo had been. Yet now that Leo was able to concentrate on one thing he liked, he seemed to be able to excel at it. Leo had even begun to think on Mr. Hewett with some fondness, eager to impress the music teacher. Tanner had been quick to remind him of where Mr. Hewett worked. Leo hated to think of the kind teacher as part of Hawthorne. Yet he couldn't deny that Mr. Hewett was one of them, he knew exactly what was going on and who his students really were.

A little later on Ms. Klay had gathered all the children in front her while she sat in a chair going over some notes.

“We also are going to need someone to read our welcome message,” Ms. Klay said scanning the crowd of children, before her gaze rested on Tanner who seemed to be staring off into space.

“Tanner you're a pretty good reader and you have a pretty big voice why don't you do it.”

Tanner blinked a moment coming to attention.

“No thank you,” Tanner said in a gloomy monotone.

“I think you will do perfect, why don't you come up here and try it,” Ms. Klay said not taking Tanner's refusal as an answer.

“Your new parents would love to see you up there as well.”

Tanner's face twisted up, Ms. Klay's last comment seemingly striking some sort of chord within him.

“I'm not doing it,” Tanner now shouted. “I'm not going to listen anymore. Not to you or those people. You're all a bunch of psychopaths,” Tanner said his face flushing with anger. Tanner then turned to the rest of the kids. “What the hell is going on with you all. Why am I the only one that realizes what is going on here? These people have fucked us over and you all just go along with it. Pull your heads out of your asses and lets do something,” Tanner shouted looking out at the kids who seemed stunned at the display.

Ms. Klay rose from her seat without a word and walked over to Tanner grabbing him by the arm and leading him back over to her chair as she took a seat. She then pulled Tanner across her lap which caused Tanner to start kicking and struggling demanding her to get her hands off of him. Ms. Klay pulled Tanner's shorts down before rearing back her hand and bringing it down on his backside. Tanner froze up. Ms. Klay then pulled the back of his underwear down before delivering another strike which seemed to cause Tanner to start to call her every expletive laced name in the book. Several more blows later however and Tanner had gotten quiet seemingly running out of steam to scream and shout,only able to let a yip escape from his mouth with each new smack. The whole thing had only lasted maybe ten seconds yet Leo hadn't been able to watch as he had averted his eyes. Ms. Klay then pulled up Tanner's underwear and shorts before hoisting him

up so that he was sitting on her lap as she wrapped her arms around him patting his back gently as if to comfort him. Tanner looked stunned his mouth hanging open a little, his eyes looking wet and wide.

“I think now is a good time for a little discussion,” Ms. Klay said. “Can anyone tell me why I had to do that, I know some of you know the answer having experienced this yourselves?” Ms. Klay asked with the sort of tone one would expect from a teacher asking students questions about spelling.

“Because Tanner was naughty,” a boy shouted out.

“Yeah Tanner was super naughty.”

“Naughty naughty Tanner.” the last response sending some snickers through the crowd causing some of the kids to begin chanting it repeatedly. Ms. Klay brought her hand up to silence the crowd. The boy who had initially said the last comment was standing in front of Leo and and it took all of Leo's strength to resist pulling back a fist and punching the kid in the back of the head.

“Yes Tanner was naughty,” Ms. Klay said. “In all of your lives you will find times when you misbehave and it is our duty as adults to correct that behavior. Its not something we enjoy but we care enough to want to see you all become proper members of society.” Ms. Klay then used her finger lifting Tanner's face up to meet hers. “If we didn't care then we might as well send you away to fend for yourself, you understand? You wouldn't want to be alone out there in the world would you?” she asked a sickly sweet smile on her

face. Tanner gave a slow shake of his head with an expression still displaying the same far off look. It was unclear whether he was answering her question or denying the entire sentiment outright.

“Its also important to understand what we did wrong,” Ms. Klay said continuing on. “So who can tell me what rules Tanner broke?”

“A proper child is obedient,” a girl said.

“Certainly,” Ms. Klay nodded.

“A proper child always listens to adults,” another boy said.

“Quite right,” Ms. Klay responded. “Now why don't we see if Tanner can tell us the last rule he broke here today.” Tanner was quiet for a long moment.

“A proper child always shows respect to adults,” he said completely dejected.

“Very good,” Ms. Klay said “It seems you are following the rule that a proper child show remorse when they are wrong. That's three rules you broke so I'll say that gets you three minutes in the corner and we'll have to add another three for all the nasty language as well.”

Another staff member came over lifting Tanner up off Ms. Klay's lap under his armpits. Leo watched Tanner get carried off towards a corner of the auditorium his legs like dangling wet noodles. Ms. Klay continued on with the meeting.

Afterwards Leo had been eager to get back to the playroom

however he had been waylaid by a staff member insisting on taking him to the bathroom. Leo finally made it back afterwards. He spotted Tanner off in a private corner of the room with his knees up against chest. Leo went over and sat down on the ground next to him. Tanner looked over at him for a moment before turning his head back to look straight ahead a melancholic expression painted on his face. Leo wasn't sure what to do. He had never quite seen Tanner like this before. He had also never seen him lose his cool like he had in the auditorium. Tanner was a hothead sometimes to be sure but not like this, never like this.

“Tanner,” Leo said softly deciding to break the silence. Yet Tanner said nothing in reply, instead he hid his face away and started to weep softly. Leo was taken aback for a moment as if by uttering the single word had somehow broke whatever fragile mechanism had been holding Tanner's emotions in check. Leo scooted closer to his friend and put an arm around him. He didn't say a word, there was nothing to say, no words that could make any of this better.

After a few minutes Tanner stopped crying unfurling from his cocoon.

“Thanks,” Tanner said giving another sniffle as he wiped some remaining tears from his eyes looking somewhat embarrassed at Leo.

“It's cool,” Leo said with a nod. “I mean that was pretty messed up back there.”

“Yeah I guess,” Tanner said shrugging his shoulders a little.

Leo cocked his head a little. It seemed a rather muted response. Tanner straightened himself up as he crossed his legs. “I guess I should tell you about some stuff.”

Leo leaned forward with intrigue.

“Today they took me into a room and put me on a video call,” Tanner said. “I met my parents.”

“The people who are adopting you?”

“Yeah,” Tanner nodded looking off to the side.

“So what was it like, I mean what did you talk about?” Leo asked.

“They just asked me some questions and then told me about themselves.” Tanner replied picking at the carpet a little as he did so. “They live out in the county on some farm in Idaho with their three other kids of which I would be the youngest. They just talked a lot about how lucky they were to have found a place like Hawthorne and how excited they were to welcome me into their family. The Dad joked about how great it was going to be to have another pair of hands for the farm and the Mom was telling me about all the land they have and how much fun I would have playing in the woods and she was showing me pictures of their dogs and cats”

“Honestly it doesn't sound bad,” Leo said. Compared to his parents at least it sounded like night and day.

“You're right it didn't,” Tanner agreed. “And if I was actually that same six year old me living in a group home it would

have sounded like paradise," Tanner paused a moment before looking up at Leo. "But I'm not six and they knew that."

"You mean they said that?" Leo asked as his eyes went wide for a moment.

"No, at least not directly," Tanner said. "But it was just little things like them telling me I was going to fit right in because of what I had been learning at Hawthorne and how I surely had a good head on my shoulders since I was coming from here. But what really sealed the deal was when they mentioned how when they had seen my picture they just knew I was the one for them."

"I mean isn't it normal for prospective parents to look at pictures of kids up for adoption?" Leo questioned. Tanner generally had a pretty good read on people but Leo felt that Tanner was making some pretty big leaps.

"Yeah it is," Tanner nodded. "But Hawthorne only has one picture of me, the one they took on my first day, when I was fourteen."

Leo felt a chill go down his spine. Tanner was right. At no point could Leo remember ever having his picture taken here except for the day he had arrived.

"People don't end up in this place by chance," Tanner said. "Your parents made the call for you and now I guess I know who made the call for me. They chose this place for a reason. So you see if we get caught and you go back home and I get sent along with those people, it doesn't stop." Tanner said his

voice rising with a mix of panic and anger. “We're going to become exactly what they wanted. Perfect obedient little children ready to be programmed to think like they want us too...and we won't ever see each other again.”

“Tanner stop,” Leo yelped grabbing onto Tanner's shoulders. It was apparent Tanner was right there was no doubt about it. He had caught a glimpse of the true nature of the forces at play and it had terrified him. Leo knew there was only one option. “I don't want to hear you say that ever again. Because we are not going to fail.” Tanner sat a little out of breath as he regarded Leo before sitting up a little.

“Yeah you're right Leo,” Tanner said the vigor returning to his eyes. “We are getting out of here.”

Chapter 6

To Build a Nest : Chapter 6 - Chapter 6

First Flight

Leo could feel butterflies in his stomach. He couldn't tell what was making him more nervous, the fact that they were about to step out onto the stage in front of the audience or the fact that tonight was the night that everything depended on. Leo rubbed his face with the soft furry paws that encased his hands. He felt himself sweating a little in the big furry bodysuit. It was white with black dots, a tail attached at the back and a his face poking out from under a hood with floppy black ears making him look like a dalmatian. His two other cohorts were dressed in similar costumes, one as a black lab and the other a golden retriever. Leo just hoped that Tanner wasn't going to make him try to escape wearing this get up. With his hands trapped behind the paws he could barely pick anything, up he couldn't even unzip the costume himself.

Mr. Hewett then gave Leo's group the signal that it was now their turn. Leo took a big breath before taking a step out onto the stage. Standing underneath the bright lights made it hard to see out into the crowd. Leo was grateful as it probably would make this easier. He had been somewhat anxious all day knowing that his parents would be in the crowd. It had honestly been awhile since he had talked to them. His feelings for them had only grown colder over the years – and

now knowing the full scope of what they had done to him, he would be happy to never see them again. Yet standing on the stage knowing they could see him, Leo was somehow determined to do a good job – if only to show them that he could be good at something. The music began as the three kids began their routine.

ÿýWe puppies as happy as can be

ÿýwaggin our tails with glee

ÿýDon't you think we are cute

ÿýAs happy as can be

*ÿý*The song continued on as the three pups danced and sang lyrics talking about running around and fetching sticks and balls and barking and wanting cuddles all the while wagging their tails and going through the rest of the well practiced choreography, the laughter from the audience indicating that the number was going off marvelously. Then the song slowed down as Leo took a step forward to take center stage for his solo, his moment.

ÿýIts been a lot fun for a little puppy like me

ÿýBut I'm much too tired to go on

ÿýSo I'm sad to say its time for the song to end

ÿýMaybe if I'm a good puppy

Leo sang out before crouching down and bringing his paws just below his chin and putting on the biggest most pleading

look he could muster

ÿýPerhaps there just might be a bone for me?

Leo could hear a cacophony of sweet coo's and chuckles come from the audience. With the song ended Leo and the two other kids took a bow before scurrying off the stage to the sound of enthusiastic applause from the audience.

Mr. Hewett was there to tell the group they had done a great job. “Leo you did really good with your solo I think its the biggest reaction we got all night.” the man said patting Leo atop his head. Leo knew he should feel stupid. He should have feel mortified to have to take part in such a performance – at eighteen years old it was beneath him. Yet Leo could feel no such thing. He had taken on the role with all the seriousness and professionalism of a performer and he had been praised as such.

The recital came to an end and the kids were released out into the crowd to greet their families. Leo's anxiety came on at the prospect of seeing his parents again after so long. He had imagined this moment for a long time. Although in all the scenarios he had thought about he had never seen himself doing it dressed in a puppy costume and having the appearance of a four year old boy. He wondered how they would react to seeing him again. Leo spotted them standing in the middle of one of the rows of chairs. It seemed he was about to get his answer as they spotted him, two big smiles coming to their faces. Leo walked up to them struck at first by how much taller they were now.

“There is our big guy,” Dad said wasting no time in picking Leo up off the ground and putting him on his hip. Leo's Mom pulled back his hood.

“We've missed you so much,” she said stroking the side of his head a little. “We can't tell you how excited we are to take our little Leo home” she said before kissing him on the cheek. Leo shirked back a little. He couldn't remember the last time either of them had kissed him or the when they had been this affectionate towards him not too mention being held in his Dad's arms – it was incredibly overwhelming.

“We've heard from some of the staff that you've been behaving yourself,” Dad said. “That's good to hear.”

“Of course he did,” Mom said. “Leo is a very good boy, we didn't expect any less.”

Leo furrowed his brow a little. There was so much he wanted to say to them but he found himself holding back. It seemed impossible to even find a good place to start.

“Um Mom...” Leo began before he saw his Mom look at his Dad for a moment.

“That's Mommy,” Dad said with a smirk. “And I'm Daddy.”

“S-sure,” Leo squeaked a little. “Mommy did you see me on the stage?” he asked looking as bashful as could be.

“Of course I did,” Mom cooed a little.

“So what did you think?” Leo asked his heart beating a little.

“Oh it was very silly,” Mom said with a laugh. “But I guess it was supposed to be.”

“You were getting some big laughs out there,” Dad said ruffling Leo's hair a little.

“Did you think I did good, though?” Leo asked not sure how to take his parent's appraisal.

“Why wouldn't we.” Mom said “You did what was asked of you.”

“That's what we expect of you,” Dad said nodding his head. Leo felt his heart drop a little.

Leo wasn't sure exactly what he had been hoping to hear from them, but this wasn't what he had been searching for. They were praising him sure, but not for his performance. No they were happy that he had done what he was told to do–that he had obeyed. Leo looked out across the auditorium at the other kids with their families. There were a lot of sweet scenes of kids getting hugged by their parents or their new adoptive parents. Some of them excitedly talking. But to Leo the whole thing had taken on an insidious tint. After Tanner's revelation with his own adoptive parents things had become clear that Leo had more in common with the kids here than he could have imagined. Leo could only feel pity for all of them now. They all had been placed here for a reason. None of them had been given a choice. All of them had been warped and changed to only satisfy the desires of parents who only wanted children that could be be easily controlled. To Leo it didn't matter what they had been like before

whether they had been delinquents like Tanner or been labeled lost causes like himself, no one deserved this.

“I think they want you to kids to gather up to take off costumes and get your gowns on,” Dad said setting Leo back onto his feet.

“When you come back you can sit with us,” Mom said. “Afterwards me and Daddy have to sign some papers with Mr. Gareth while we do that we prepared a special video you can watch.”

“Video?” Leo repeated.

“They wanted all the parents to prepare little welcome home video,” Dad explained. “We decided to show you your new room at our new house.”

“You moved,” Leo exclaimed.

“We decided we wanted to be closer to the ocean,” Mom chuckled. “Doesn't that sound great, we'll have to get you some swimming lessons now. But before that you better hurry up I think everyone already lined up.”

Leo still couldn't believe it as he walked over to the line of kids that had gathered by the door. As he walked with the line of kids towards a room they could get changed in he figured it must have been apart of his parents plan. It must have been how they got around questions from people asking about what had happened to Leo. It would certainly also help them avoid suspicion when they suddenly appeared with a four year old kid. Leo was wrapped up in a swirl of thoughts when

he felt someone grab him from behind. Leo spun around to see Tanner.

“You ready?” Tanner asked giving Leo a backpack emblazoned with the Hawthorne crest that the facility had given all the kids yesterday as a going away gift. Tanner was also still in his costume from the recital yet unlike Leo's his was less involved and consisted of a bright yellow t-shirt with a paper sun paper clipped onto the front and some black sweatpants.

“Yeah,” Leo said with a nod. “Could you help me with this thing first though,” Leo said fiddling with the zipper of his costume that he couldn't unzip thanks to the paws.

“Keep it on,” Tanner said with a smirk. “You make such a cute widdle puppy after all,” Tanner said in a mocking syrupy voice.

“Tanner,” Leo huffed.

“Yeah, yeah,” Tanner said giggling a little as he unzipped Leo. As Leo pulled off the costume the air felt chilly against his white t-shirt and blue fabric shorts that had become slightly damp with sweat from the warm costume. Tanner then gave a look around before putting the backpack on his back as Leo followed suit. They started off down a hallway making there way to the front entrance. Leo couldn't help but shake a little with nerves. At any moment they could be discovered– and then everything would be for naught. They came upon the front entryway but Tanner walked right past it.

“Where are you going,” Leo hissed with alarm.

“We gotta make one stop,” Tanner said pulling Leo along. Tanner finally came to a stop in front of a door, as Leo stood a little out of breath finding it hard to keep up with Tanner running.

“You got those lockpicks still, right?” Tanner asked.

“Of course,” Leo said going into his own backpack and pulling them out. Leo gave a sort of confused frown not sure why Tanner wanted the door open, but he didn't feel they had time for questions. He took out the tools and started to attack the door's lock. He had been a little worried that he might not remember how to do it or that he would not have the skill required, he had after all only practiced on the lock that had come with the kit – that and his parents liquor cabinet the one time. Much to to both of the boys surprise a loud click rang out as Leo twisted the handle and the door lurched forward a little. Tanner let out a small laugh of surprise as he walked into the room making a comment that he couldn't believe that had worked. Leo felt just a bit offended with remark but he was honestly just as surprised as Tanner.

“What is this place?” Leo asked stepping into the darkened room that was lit up only by a screensaver on a computer monitor.

“That lady told me that it would be helpful if I could get my hands on whatever files those people had on us.” Tanner noted looking around the room. “She said not to worry about it too much though since they probably wouldn't hand them

over anyways. But I thought we should at least try since its going to be pretty hard to convince anyone that we aren't real kids without them."

"You really think their here?" Leo asked looking around to see they were in an office.

"This is Ms. Mari's office," Tanner said. "If their anywhere its here." He came upon a filing cabinet pulling out one of the drawers. "Jackpot!" he exclaimed pulling out one of the folders contained within. Searching a little more before pulling out another and stuffing both of them into his backpack. "Okay lets get out of here." The boys made their way out of the office shutting the door behind them as they ran back to the front entrance.

"Here we go moment of truth," Tanner said approaching the double doors. Leo looked out the windows of the doors seeing the outside blanketed by night. They were so close to freedom. Tanner pushed on the metal bar as it pushed forward with a loud clang as the door opened a night breeze blowing into both of their faces. "Its open we're free," Tanner said as he turned to look back at Leo. "You ready?"

Leo gave a look back. Looking at the place that had been nothing but a source of misery for him. He felt like he should be happy but instead he felt a mix of sadness and guilt brought on upon all that he now knew.

"I feel bad about the other kids," Leo whispered. Tanner gave him a solemn look and a nod of understanding knowing what Leo meant

“I wish we could do something more, but we can't save everyone. Right now we have to think of ourselves.” Tanner said.

Just then Leo felt his stomach twist up a little as he looked at Tanner with bulging eyes.

“I forgot someone,” Leo yelped before taking off down the hallway.

“Leo wait,” Tanner hissed but upon seeing that Leo was off he groaned with a roll of his eyes and took off after him. Tanner ran fast trying to catch up to him before seeing Leo dart into the playroom. Tanner came into the room a moment later to see Leo lifting up the cage of Timothy the rabbit in his arms.

“Leo you can't be serious,” Tanner said with a frustrated sigh.

“I'm the only one that takes care of him,” Leo said puffing up his cheeks a little “I'm not leaving him behind.” Tanner crossed his arms for a moment before letting out another sigh.

“Fine, but you can't take the whole cage.” Tanner went over and opened the cage gathering up the frazzled animal before going behind Leo and stowing him into the backpack on Leo's back. “Now can we go?” Tanner asked with some annoyance.

“Yep,” Leo said with a smile as he gripped the straps pulling his back pack up a little to make sure it was extra secure on his back. The boys took off into a sprint towards the entrance way it was a miracle that they hadn't been caught yet, surely

by now somebody had noticed they were missing. They wasted no time bursting through the front doors both boys imagining the sounds of alarm sirens wailing and spotlights cutting through the darkness of the front lawn as they ran. They got to the fence as Tanner began to climb it. Leo balked a little. To his small height the fence looked tall and intimidating. Summoning up all his courage Leo grasped onto the chain link fence as he began his ascent. Near the top he felt his foot slip. Tanner who was already saddled at the top of the fence reached down grabbing the back of Leo's shirt. Thankfully Leo manged to hang on lest both boys be sent falling down.

“You got this,” Tanner encouraged giving a tug at Leo's shirt. Leo gritted his teeth as he got his footing back finally mounting up to the top. Tanner flashed him a toothy smile before looking over at the security camera that was perched nearby. Tanner stuck out his tongue and flipped it off before leaping down hitting the ground and tumbling over. He got up dusting himself off a little before motioning for Leo to do the same.

“I-I can't,” Leo stammered gripping onto the top bar of the fence. It had been one thing to look up from the bottom but now that he was up top looking down he felt a little dizzy.

“Throw your backpack down first,” Tanner suggested. Leo took the bag off and tossed it down to Tanner who caught it gingerly to ensure that the bag's occupant would not be harmed. “Okay just close your eyes and jump,” Tanner said.

“Nooo,” Leo whined. “I told you I can't.”

“Yes you can,” Tanner said holding his arms out “I'll catch you.”

Leo could only give Tanner a wearied look at his ridiculous assertion that he was in anyway strong enough to catch Leo in his arms. Leo loosened his grip taking a look back towards the facility. He had no choice. It was this or going back to his parents. Leo closed his eyes and swung his leg around the other side before leaping off. He could only tell himself it wasn't going to hurt that bad. Leo felt himself fall onto Tanner who as Leo had suspected had no chance of catching him sending both of the boys to ground. Leo could feel himself on top of Tanner's body, his arms were wrapped around Leo. Unclenching his eyes Leo looked up to see Tanner smiling at him with a goofy grin.

“Told ya,” Tanner said. As Leo looked up at Tanner feeling his arms around him a whole whirl of strange emotions came over him. He felt at complete ease for the moment feeling that it had been stupid to have been scared. Tanner was there to protect him so he didn't need to worry. Leo shook off the emotions at once sitting upright before getting to his feet still a little off put by the emotions that had just entered into his head. For a moment it he had really felt like some little kid looking up to some older boy as if Tanner was his big brother or something. Leo shook his head as if to dislodge any lingering from his brain, reminding himself that he and Tanner were in fact the same age. Leo checked on Timothy in the backpack ensuring that the fluffy companion was safe

before zipping it back up and replacing it back onto his back.

“Now where,” Leo asked looking around seeing nothing but woods before them.

“I think that way,” Tanner said pointing off into some shrubs that lead into the woods. Leo nodded as both boys began to run once again feeling the the breeze behind them as if it were pushing them along towards a new world of freedom both of them laughing freely as they descended into the safety of the woods.

Chapter 7

To Build a Nest: Chapter 7 - Chapter 7

A Helping Hand

Desiree sat in the drivers seat of her car watching the misting of the slight drizzle pass through the beams of light coming from the headlights. She took a look at the clock on her dash noting the time. Desiree looked over to the passenger seat at her husband RJ who was currently watching some videos on his phone. He looked up at her giving her a little smile.

“So what time were these guys supposed to show up” he asked returning his gaze back to his phone.

“Around seven,” Desiree answered taking another cursory glance at the clock to see it was currently eight thirty.

“Must be running late,” RJ said.

“Must be,” Desiree replied. She picked up her own phone checking to see if there was perhaps a message waiting, but no such luck. Desiree instead sent a text message off to her mother in law who was watching the couple's one year old daughter Kaylee for the night, letting the woman know they were going to be later than anticipated. A minute later she received a text back that her mother in law would just take the baby back to her house for the night. Desiree set her phone back down looking at the time again.

“Tanner has thirty more minutes to show up,” Desiree then announced. “Then we'll leave.”

“You sure this is the spot?” RJ asked. “Maybe it was further up the trail.”

“This is the exact spot he told me to meet them,” Desiree said.

“Guess they got held up,” RJ said with a shrug. “Before we leave lets just take a look around a little.”

Desiree nodded a little, it was an alright plan although she was starting to get the feeling she was getting stood up...again.

She had first gotten an e-mail from Tanner a couple of months ago. He had given her his story and situation and nothing about it had struck her as strange. She had been doing this long enough to know how these places operated. Yet on the day Tanner had told her he was to be released he had never called her. Desiree had merely chalked it up to Tanner finding other arrangements which sometimes happened. Then out of the blue a couple of weeks ago she had gotten another message from him. The message had definitely been weird. It was short only asking if they could still have her help and if she could meet them at a certain location. Desiree had of course agreed, yet finding it strange that Tanner had not offered any explanation for the change.

Sitting there now Desiree was starting to get nervous that things might get complicated. She looked over at the metal baseball bat sitting between RJ's legs. Her husband didn't usually come along for these things but after a harrowing

experience at one place she had gone to meet up with a client where the staff had been stand-offish with her, RJ insisted that he come along if she had to actually go to the place. Desiree was thankful of course remembering one such instance of being faced with about four or five belligerent staff at one location She was a short woman with brown hair that made her look like some country girl come to the big city and overwhelmed by the enormity of it all, this was all only to say she wasn't going to be intimidating anyone anytime soon. Yet when RJ had stepped out of the car with his 6'2 burly frame and baseball bat in hand they had become much more agreeable. She just hoped this wouldn't be one such instance where she would have to call upon her husband.

She knew nothing about the Hawthorne Woods school having never heard of it before. She was surprised to find that it existed not to far from her home. Looking at their website it had seemed rather normal although there were a couple of signs that she had picked up on to see that it was similar to the places her clients usually came from. Yet now being just outside of the property she was a little taken aback. Driving in they had gone past the front gate seeing the nondescript building but what had struck Desiree the most was that the property seemed bigger than she had seen from the website. They were a ways off from the main gate yet she could still see a fence far off in the distance and she could have sworn she saw a playground that was meant for little kids. If Hawthorne was a high school as their website stated, why did they have such a thing on their property? Desiree didn't think too much about it, reasoning that it was just a re-purposed

building and the playground was probably a remnant from the previous occupants.

Desiree leaned back in her seat rubbing her temples. She couldn't shake the feeling that something about this whole situation was fishy. It was starting to give her some stress and that was the last thing she needed. At thirty years old Desiree had certainly had enough of that in her life. She had started out her professional career as a social worker yet her optimism and enthusiasm for the job had been sucked out of her by the workload that never seemed to stop piling up and the realization that she wasn't able to help out in the ways she wanted everything seemed to be half-measures or utter failure. Something needed to change in her life. She wanted to help people who needed it and after dealing with a few cases of people who came out of places specifically for wayward teens she felt she had found an area she could really do that. Most of these places sent these kids out into the world with nothing. Most of them didn't have driver licenses, ID, or a penny to their name. All they really needed was someone to help them navigate all the bureaucracy and get them some support to keep them off the streets. Desiree had this knowledge and decided she could be the one to do it. It wasn't lucrative that was for sure, half of the time she made nothing but her husband made enough with his construction company that she didn't need to worry, she could just concentrate on making the world a better place even if it was ever so slightly. She knew she couldn't help everyone but for those that she was able too it was life-changing. Unfortunately for her it was starting to become apparent that

this particular job was not going to be a success story. It was just going to be another failure.

“Okay lets get out and look around,” Desiree said noticing that the time limit was fast approaching. RJ nodded grabbing the bat as they got out of the car. Desiree walked towards the thick overgrowth near the forest's edge as she fiddled with the flashlight in her hand trying to turn it on before they walked down the trail when she stopped. She could hear a large rustling and it was getting louder as if something was coming right towards her and would pounce on her. Desiree took a step back trying to get the flashlight on to inspect the overgrown bushes.

Her flashlight turned on just as a dark shape came sliding out of the bushes. Desiree let out a small yip as RJ was already at her side bat held up in the air to defend against the attacking shape yet he brought the bat down to his side once the light of the flashlight revealed the shape to be nothing more than a blonde haired boy on his back grasping a backpack on his front. Another rustling was heard as Desiree moved the flashlight over to watch another boy come tumbling out of the bushes. He looked up a little dazed causing RJ to got to his side to help him get to his feet. The smaller boy picked a leaf out of hair before turning with a scowl towards the blonde haired boy.

“I told you there was a dropoff.” the younger boy shouted.

“Okay, okay so you were right,” the blonde boy said sitting up. “Give me a break it was dark and I couldn't see.” The

blond boy then turned to look at Desiree

“Desiree, right?” the blonde haired boy said getting to his own feet and dusting himself off.

“Yeee-ah,” Desiree said slightly taken aback. “And you are?”

“I'm Tanner,” the blonde boy said holding out his hand which Desiree shook still completely befuddled. “And that's Leo, we're the guys you're here to pick up.”

“And one other person,” Leo piped up running over to Tanner and unzipping the backpack on his front before the head of a rabbit popped out.

“Leo not now,” Tanner groaned pushing the rabbit back into the bag.

“What, we can't hide him forever,” Leo said looking askance.

“Time and place,” Tanner said shaking his head. “What is up with you today anyways, you've been acting weird.”

“What do you mean?” Leo asked. Tanner looked like he was about to answer before he held back merely shaking head.

“Hang on,” Desiree finally said holding her hands up. “You're telling me you're Tanner?”

“Yep,” Tanner said looking a little nervous.

“Tanner,” Desiree stated. “The eighteen year old guy that attended Hawthorne Woods High School.”

“Um yeah,” Tanner said.

“Listen kid, I don't know who put you up to this, but you can't expect me to believe that.” Desiree said crossing her arms.

“I can prove it,” Tanner yelped taking a backpack off of his back and pulling out two large folders and handing them to Desiree. “These are our files. I know how things look, but despite what we look like I assure you we are not little kids. It was Hawthorne they did this to us.”

Desiree opened the first file looking at the first page that appeared to be a basic information form the name across the top reading “Tanner Beck” along with the sheet was a single picture paper- clipped to the top of a boy who looked to be around thirteen or fourteen years old. Desiree then looked in the other file that belonged to Leo looking at the picture of a boy who also appeared to be a young teenager. Desiree couldn't deny that there was a resemblance to the two boys in front of her. Perhaps these could be their little brothers, the only question now being why were they were here and not the older boys.

“You really expect me to believe that? C'mon kid even you have to know that wasn't going to work,” Desiree said turning back to Tanner. It was ridiculous, exactly the kind of far fetched story one could expect from a child. Was he actually trying to claim that they had been turned into kids?

“You didn't read the files at all,” Tanner protested.

“You think I can just sit here reading through these things all night?” Desiree said slapping the top of one of the thick files.

“I guess not,” Tanner said seeing the logic to Desiree's statement. “It would be better to get out of here first, then we can sort this out.”

“I can't take you with me,” Desiree said with an incredulous tone. “Absolutely not, we'll take you guys back where I'm sure you both have parents who are looking for you, but that's it.” Desiree held fast. She was sure upon meeting whoever was in charge of these kids would give her all the answers she needed. There was definitely something more serious going on here, but she needed more info to figure out exactly what that was.

“You're taking us back?” Leo said

“I have too,” Desiree said. These kids were minor's after all she knew how few and far between her options were at this point.

“B-But I can't go back,” Leo said becoming choked up as tears began to fill his eyes. “They'll take me away.” Leo then busted into tears. RJ leaned down putting his arm around the crying boy which caused Leo to burrow himself into the man as if it didn't matter who was offering comfort to him he was going to take it from wherever he could. RJ then lifted Leo up into his arms bouncing Leo up and down a little as he patted him on the back doing whatever he could to try and calm the small boy.

“You can't take us back,” Tanner said his voice shaking. “We'll be done for. If you don't want to take us then just pretend you never saw us, we'll go somewhere else.”

Desiree was stunned for a moment. It seemed whatever had caused these boys to run was enough for them to do whatever it took to not go back. It was RJ who finally spoke.

“Desi whats the play here?” RJ said still holding the crying Leo in his arms. Desiree wasn't sure what to do. She didn't believe these kids for a second, yet something about this whole situation was setting off red flags in her mind at an alarming rate. She looked at the files on the trunk of the car. How in the world had they even gotten them? No institution would have just handed them over. She looked back at the Tanner he was looking at her wide pleading eyes. She had seen it enough in the past to know one thing for certain, he was scared to death.

“Answer me one question,” Desiree said. “Do you feel like you are in imminent danger if we take you back?” She half expected Tanner to ask what the word imminent meant.

“Yes we would be in grave danger,” Tanner replied back.

“Leo what about you,” she said turning towards Leo who had managed to stop his crying.

“Mhmm,” Leo said nodding his head as he wiped some tears from his eyes. Desiree finally shook her head.

“Okay,” she said gathering up the files. “Get in the car.”

“You mean it really?” Tanner asked. “You won't take us back there?”

“If you guys feel you are in danger then I can't ignore that,”

Desiree stated as she opened the back passenger door. Once the boys were loaded in she went to walk to the drivers seat before RJ caught her.

“You sure this is okay?” he asked.

“I'm not okay with any of this,” Desiree admitted. “But there is something going on here and I can't help but shake the feeling that whatever it is its bad.”

“Yeah, okay,” RJ said knowing his wife well enough that when he saw her in one of these moods her gut instincts were usually on the money.

As they drove along Tanner and Desiree had been going in circles with one another. Tanner had just kept insisting that Hawthorne had changed them into little kids while Desiree and RJ kept trying to get some sort of truth out of the boys as to what was really going on. Eventually both sides had exhausted themselves. Leo opened up his bag to pet Timothy who seemed to be in good spirits. He really couldn't believe that things had worked out like this. Even if the two people upfront didn't believe them the important part was that he and Tanner had escaped, they had actually pulled it off. Leo looked over at Tanner who was staring out the window. Tanner had really done so much for him. If it had been Leo alone he knew what would've happened–he would have given up long ago.

Tanner suddenly seemed to sit up with an alarmed look.

“Are we near Meadowlark Drive?” Tanner asked. It was RJ

who turned around with curious look on his face.

“Yeah I guess, why?” he asked.

“If its not too much trouble do you think we could make a stop?”

“Sure,” Desiree said.

“Are you serious!” RJ exclaimed. “At this time of night?”

“I'm well aware,” Desiree said. The place Tanner wanted to go was in a rougher area and it was certainly not a place that anyone would really want to be around at night. Yet Desiree's curiosity was piqued. What a six year old kid could want there was certainly anyone's guess, perhaps it might just give her a clue as to what was going on here. The car made its way down some streets playing host to run down old warehouses and store fronts before turning down a residential street.

“1439,” Tanner said from the back seat. Desiree slowed down to a crawl looking at house numbers before finally pulling up to a rather dilapidated house. Bringing the car to a stop Tanner got out without word as he began to walk across the lawn to the back of the house.

“Well go with him,” Desiree said giving RJ and incredulous look as if it should have been apparent for him to follow. RJ gave a groan as he got out of the car and followed Tanner around the back of the house.

“What are we doing here?” RJ asked catching up to the boy

who was at the backdoor of the house.

“This is my house or at least it used to be,” Tanner said fishing a key out of his pocket and putting it into the keyhole unlocking the door.

“Hey, Tanner,” RJ said but was too late to grab the boy as he had already gone into the house. RJ followed in after him regretting for a moment that he had not brought the bat with him. This was definitely a prime place for squatters to take up residence. Tanner walked on with purpose seemingly knowing exactly where he was going. RJ followed him down a hallway into a room. Looking around, the room had seen better days. The wallpaper was peeling off the walls and there was water damage on the ceiling. To someone in house construction RJ felt qualified to say that the house should have been condemned. Tanner walked over to a closet disappearing inside for a moment before walking out with a cardboard box in his arms.

“What is that?” RJ asked looking at the beat up cardboard box.

“Its my stuff,” Tanner replied.

“What stuff?” RJ asked with some skepticism though a little curious at what was in the box.

“Didn't you want to leave?” Tanner asked curtly before walking out of the room. RJ couldn't argue.

Back in the car Tanner didn't say anything not wanting to reveal what was in the box. Desiree and RJ both decided not

to push the issue. At this point both of them knew if they were going to get these kids to tell them the truth they were going to have to earn their trust.

As Desiree drove on she was beginning to regret her decision feeling as though she had really stepped into something bad. However her feelings were dashed upon looking up into the rear view mirror to see the two boys asleep. Tanner's head was back and his mouth was wide open while Leo's head was against Tanner's shoulder his mouth twitching every so often. All the worries about legalities and mystery surrounding the situation seemed to fall to the wayside. These boys needed someone to help, and she was going to be the one to do so.

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Leo awoke with a start. It took him a moment to remember where he was. The car they were riding in had come to a stop as the lights inside had come on. Leo looked around to see them parked in a driveway. Suddenly upon realizing he had been asleep he looked down feeling his shorts with some urgency, thankfully he was dry. He let out a sigh of relief. He had managed to keep it a secret from Tanner and he wasn't too keen of being discovered at this point, especially by Desiree and RJ. If it became known that Leo was a bed wetter that certainly wouldn't do the two boys any favors in convincing the other two that they were indeed not real children. Leo looked over shaking Tanner awake. Getting out of the car Leo could see they were surrounded by woods. The house in front of them seemed to loom in the darkness. It was a two story farmhouse with a brick exterior.

“Its not much but its home,” RJ said. “The inside looks a lot better, I just haven't gotten around to the outside yet.”

Leo nodded. His own parents would have never lived in such a place. The slightly shabby lawn a far cry from his parents well manicured lawn they paid a landscaping company to upkeep. Walking into the house Leo could see RJ had been telling the truth. The living room had a cozy rustic feeling to it with shawls and blankets covering a couch. Baby toys and other accessories littered the floor with a portable playpen set in the corner.

“I suppose you boys are tired,” Desiree said setting the files onto a coffee table.

“I guess we could be,” Tanner said letting out a yawn.

“Think you can keep your eyes open long enough to hop into the shower?” Desiree said. “You guys are absolutely filthy including those clothes of yours.”

Leo looked at himself and Tanner. Tanner's entire backside had a dirt streak going down it and Leo could feel dirt and grime caked onto his face and his hair. Adding onto the dirty state of their outfits was the fact that both boys were damp having trounced through the woods while it had been raining.

“I don't suppose you boys have extra clothes in those backpacks?” Desiree asked. Leo and Tanner shook their heads with some nervousness. “I thought so,” Desiree said with a sigh. “Unfortunately I don't have any clothes for you. I was hoping to stop at a store and let you guys pick some stuff

out, but well you know our schedule got a little messed up."

"I probably got something these guys could use to sleep in," RJ chimed in.

"That'll work, lets do this," Desiree said with a clap of her hands. "You guys go take off those clothes and hop in the shower. I'll wash them so you can wear them tomorrow when we can go to the store and get stuff for you."

Tanner and Leo gave no objection as they went to follow RJ up the stairs before Desiree stopped Leo.

"You probably need someone to help you wash up, why don't you come with me and I can help you in the bathtub."

Leo felt his face flush red a little. He had thought his days of being bathed were behind him. Before Leo could try to reply Tanner placed a hand on his shoulder.

"He can do it himself, need I remind you we aren't actual children?" Tanner said annoyed.

"So you say," Desiree tutted. "Need I remind you that I still don't exactly believe that?"

"He can shower with me then," Tanner huffed. "Will that make you feel better?"

"I don't know..." Desiree said a little wary of the arrangement.

Desi," RJ interjected. "Just let them do what they want," he said giving her a reminding look that they were supposed to be building trust between them and the boys.

“Okay if that's what you want,” Desiree said giving the boys an apologetic look. She supposed if they were capable enough of escaping through some woods then a shower should be no problem.

Tanner and Leo then followed RJ up to the bathroom. He told the boys where the towels were and to meet him in a room when they were done.

“Wait,” Leo suddenly yelped as RJ was about to walk off. RJ stopped giving Leo a concerned look. “Its Timothy,” Leo said taking the bag off of his back. “He's gonna need someplace to sleep too.”

“I'll figure something out,” RJ smiled taking the bag from Leo. Satisfied Leo followed Tanner into the bathroom.

“I can't wait to get this dirt off of me,” Tanner said wasting no time as he began to get undressed. Leo stood back a little feeling a little awkward with the arrangement. It was true that he and Tanner had showered together plenty of times, but that had been when they were older. Looking at Tanner's body now gave Leo pause. Tanner's well toned physique had of course been replaced by a scrawny build befitting the new age of his body. Yet it only bothered Leo to look as it filled him with some anxiety looking down at himself. It seemed so different now when compared to Tanner. He looked at Tanner's flat stomach putting a hand on his own stomach that held onto some traces of baby fat. Leo had never had the toned and muscular physique that Tanner did but the differences between them now seemed more pronounced.

“Are you just going to stare at me all day?” Tanner asked noticing Leo standing against the wall.

“Oh no,” Leo yipped taking off his shirt as Tanner stepped into the tub where the shower was already running. Leo got completely undressed before stepping into join Tanner. Standing in the tub Leo closed his eyes.

“What are you doing?” Tanner asked wholly confused by Leo's reaction.

“I don't want to look,” Leo said.

“Why?” Tanner questioned. “We've seen each other naked plenty of times before.”

“It's different now,” Leo mewled a little. “I-I look like a baby. If I look at you its just going to make me feel worse about it.” Leo expected some admonishment from Tanner telling him to stop being stupid yet Tanner only grunted a little before telling him to suit himself. As Leo stood there he felt some shampoo be poured onto his head.

“Shampoo, for your hair,” Tanner noted. Leo lifted his hands as he started to spread it around. He was finding it somewhat difficult though. He knew his hair was a mess caked with dirt but his little fingers didn't seem to have the dexterity required to really lather up his hair and pull the dirt out. Leo then felt Tanner push his hands away before he started to lather Leo's hair himself.

“W-what are you –“ Leo squeaked.

“You'll never get all the dirt out of your hair, especially if you are insisting on keeping your eyes closed.” Tanner said having taken on a lecturing tone. “I'll help you out this one time, but you gotta do the rest yourself.

“O-kay,” Leo said in a hushed tone letting Tanner take over. Although it certainly didn't help his feelings of being so diminished when compared to Tanner. Leo then felt Tanner move him under the water as the water washed the shampoo out.

“I'm getting out now, so hurry up.” Tanner said as Leo heard the shower curtain be pulled back. Leo opened his eyes to see that Tanner had departed. Leo looked over at all the bottles of soaps. He found that his ability to read had completely dissipated. Leo grabbed a random bottle. It felt huge in his hands and he found it hard to squeeze out the contents without dropping the bottle more than a couple of times, Tanner asking if he was okay after the third time.

“I'm fine,” Leo yipped as he started to hurriedly wash his body. He wasn't sure if he had grabbed the soap but whatever it was seemed to do the job as Leo watched the dirt and grime color the water heading towards the drain. Leo felt like he had done the best he could. He decided that he had gotten far too used to having someone else bathe him which caused some of his difficulties now, that and he was really tired. His limbs felt just about ready to fall off.

Leo pulled back the shower curtain after shutting off the water. He let out another embarrassed squeak as his hands

shot down to cover himself upon seeing Tanner standing with a towel wrapped around his waist.

“Quit being a doofus,” Tanner laughed throwing a towel at Leo's face. Leo unfurled the towel quickly and went to wrap it around his waist yet try as he might he just couldn't seem to get it to stay tight around his waist fumbling with it fruitlessly before he lost grip of it as it fell to the ground. Tanner let out a breath from his nostrils before grabbing the towel from the ground and tying it around Leo himself.

“I'm sorry,” Leo said as he bowed his head feeling completely mortified with how helpless he was appearing in front of Tanner. “You must think I'm a total baby, a real dork.”

“Leo listen,” Tanner said giving him a serious look. “They did something to us back at Hawthorne so I know your having some difficulty with stuff, I am too.”

Leo looked up a little shocked to hear this from Tanner. He had always thought that Tanner had been pretty much unscathed.

“Like what?” Leo asked. Tanner gave him a sort of hesitant look before shaking his head.

“It doesn't matter. All I'm saying is that I don't think you're a baby. Now that we are out of there I'm sure we'll be back to normal in no time...but I still think you're a dork,” Tanner said with a grin. “But we can't blame Hawthorne for that, that was all you.”

Leo laughed a little feeling a bit better about everything. It

honestly took some weight off his shoulders to know that Tanner was going through some of this with him.

The boys walked into the room where they had been told to come to find RJ waiting for them. The room was mostly unadorned. There were two beds with built in drawers on the bottom in an L shape against two walls with a bedside table in between them with an alarm clock placed on top, other than that there wasn't much else.

“Hey guys I got some old jerseys I think will work out,” RJ said holding up a pin striped baseball jersey in his hands.

“The cougars,” Tanner said scrunching up his face.

“Oh no don't tell me,” RJ said with a groan.

“I'm a dragons fan,” Tanner said with a smug look. RJ laughed a little before tossing the jersey on top of Tanner's head.

“Well for tonight you are wearing Cougar colors,” RJ said. “Out of curiosity though you got a favorite player?”

“Jimenez,” Tanner replied pulling the jersey over his head.

“Hector Jimenez,” RJ said in with surprise. “He's pretty old, interesting pick for a kid like yourself.”

“I became a fan when he hit the game winning homer in game seven of the world series,” Tanner said.

“That was like ten years ago,” RJ said. “Did you see a replay or something?”

“No I watched it live,” Tanner huffed. “I was with my Dad,” he added more quietly as he looked down at the ground with his brow furrowed. RJ bit his lower lip a little seeing that some nerve in Tanner had been hit.

“Anyways,” Tanner said shaking his head a little. “I haven't been able to watch a game in awhile is he still on the Dragons? Or well is he even still playing?”

“Yep still on the team,” RJ said. “Although he is injured at the moment.”

“Well I hope he gets better,” Tanner said. “It would be cool to see him play again.” Tanner then let his towel fall to the ground as the jersey came down to his knees giving him ample coverage. He then hopped onto one of the beds in the room bouncing up and down on it a little.

“Here Leo you can wear this one,” RJ said unfolding another jersey except this one was black. Leo took it and pulled it on over his head. Looking down he could see that only two of the buttons at the bottom were done up leaving pretty much all of his body exposed since the jersey reached down just past his shins. Leo went to do up the rest of the buttons but was having difficulty trying to get the buttons to go into the holes.

“Let me help you out,” RJ said kneeling down and quickly buttoning the jersey up for him.

“T-thanks,” Leo stammered embarrassed that he had shown himself to not be competent enough to do them himself.

“Don't mention it bud,” RJ said mussing up Leo's hair a little before looking as if something popped into his head suddenly. “Check this out,” RJ said as he motioned Leo over to a wooden crate in the corner of the room. Leo peered inside to find Timothy happily munching away on a large carrot.

“We can pick up a proper cage for him tomorrow,” RJ said. “But I think he'll be pretty happy for tonight.”

“Thanks,” Leo said. “I appreciate it. I think Timothy will sleep good tonight.”

“Speaking of sleeping, why don't you try out your own bed,” RJ said. Leo nodded going and crawling under the covers of his own bed. “Comfy?” RJ asked.

“Yeah,” Leo said flopping down onto the pillow. It was the most comfortable bed Leo had ever been in. Certainly better than the beds he had become accustomed to sleeping in at Hawthorne.

“Good to hear it,” RJ said with a chuckle as he made his way to the door. “I'll leave you two to it then, more fun tomorrow I'm sure,” he said before leaving the room. Leo closed his eyes feeling like he was on a cloud, that was until a thought crossed his mind causing him to sit up suddenly. Leo knew he had been lucky in the car yet if he fell asleep now he would inevitably wake up wet. What would Desi and RJ say? They would probably be mad at him. There was also Tanner. What would he say finding out that Leo had become a bedwetter? Leo looked over at the alarm clock getting an idea. He

crawled over to it. Even if he couldn't read it seemed he was still able to tell time. He set the alarm to go off an hour from now. His plan being to wake up every hour and use the bathroom that way there would be little chance for an accident. Leo then stuffed the alarm clock under his pillow hoping it would muffle the sound enough to wake him up but not disturb Tanner. Leo then looked over at Tanner who didn't seem to notice what Leo had been doing as he was laying on his back staring up at the ceiling seemingly deep in thought.

“Hey Tanner,” Leo said causing Tanner to sit up. “Do you really think that we'll be able to get back to normal? I mean mentally.”

Tanner got out of the bed and walked over to the light switch by the door.

“I do,” Tanner said definitively before shutting off the light. Leo got under the covers closing his eyes. He was just going to have to trust Tanner as he always had.

Chapter 8

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Chapter 8

For Myself

Desiree let out a sigh as she gathered up the papers she had strewn about the bed. She had stayed up into the wee hours of the morning going through both of the files Tanner had brought. She had thought that she would find something in them that made all this make sense – she had been unsuccessful. If anything she was more confused now than she had been at the start. Nothing about the files made any sense. At some points it seemed like they were referring to two older kids while at others they seemed to be talking about the kids that were now sitting downstairs at her table eating breakfast. She had read many strange notes and baffling legalese contracts and strange medical records that didn't make a lick of sense. She had seen the term “accelerated program” pop up many times in Leo's file and their had been a part that had said “responds well to age appropriate activities and praise” which seemed strange to Desiree at the time. What kid doesn't respond well to those things she had wondered, which made it all the more mystifying as to why they would take the time to note such things. Yet the strangest thing she had found was something tucked away in both boy's files, there had been birth certificates. Each one had the boys

first names only and a doctors signature as well as a date of birth three days apart from one another. Tanner was six while Leo had been four – but that had been all that had been filled out. No official weight or height and strangest of all no parent signatures on either of them. Desiree was baffled, why weren't the birth certificates filled out and what was more curious is why Hawthorne even had them in the first place. Desiree had come to one conclusion that somehow Tanner and Leo must have pulled random papers and stuffed them into the folders. But why would they do that? To make it look like their story of being shrunken eighteen year olds more plausible? Yet as Desiree thought on this she began to see that it was a pretty big fabrication for someone as young as Leo to do, even for Tanner it was a monumental stretch. How would they even know what to take?

Desiree couldn't bring herself to believe such a tale. It was something out of science fiction. Even if there was someway to make someone younger what in the world would a place like Hawthorne Woods be doing with such technology?

Desiree got up from the bed and went digging through some of her old files before pulling out two pieces of paper. Tanner and Leo were going to stick to their story and as long as they did that, the truth would never come out. Desiree had only one option. It was time to put them to the test. She was going to poke holes in their explanation until they couldn't hold on to it any longer – she knew then they would have to tell the truth.

Leo sat at the kitchen table eating some scrambled eggs and

bacon that RJ had whipped up for the boys. Leo was enjoying the food. He realized it was the first home cooked meal he had in a long time.

“You guys like the eggs?” RJ asked taking a seat at the table with a mug of coffee.

“They're really good,” Leo said shooting off a toothy smile before taking another big bite.

“Yeah, they're good,” Tanner said quietly as he ate staring down at his plate.

“Tanner you okay?” RJ asked. “You get enough sleep?”

“Yeah just fine,” Tanner said nodding his head. RJ gave a smirk as he took a drink of his coffee. Leo observed Tanner for a moment wondering what was going on with him. Was he tired? If anyone should be tired it was Leo, as his night of vigilance waking up every hour had left him feeling rather sleepy himself. Though Tanner didn't exactly looked tired to Leo. He knew the look only too well. Tanner was thinking about something. Leo wanted to ask him about what but thought better of it with RJ being there. Desiree then came walking into the kitchen.

“Good morning,” she said in a sunny tone as she sat down at the table. “So I know its early but I was wondering if you boys could fill these out for me,” she said wasting no time as she passed the papers down to the boys.

“What is this?” Tanner asked. As he scrunched up his face.

“This looks like a test for little kids.”

“You should have no problem with it then right?” Desiree said putting a pencil down in front of each boy.

“We're not doing this,” Tanner said pushing the paper away. “We came here to get help, you are supposed to be getting us money and stuff like that.”

“You're completely right,” Desiree said. “I am going to help you but for me to get stuff like that for you their going to want certain things. When I ask for stuff like this it isn't for fun. This isn't a one way street where I can just hand you everything you want. You gotta work with me a little too.”

Tanner pursed his lips a little as he stared at Desiree before he shook his head.

“Whatever,” he said pulling the paper back towards him before he started filling it out.

“You too Leo,” Desiree said as she pushed the paper closer to him. “Just do what you can, there are no wrong answers,” she said with a smile. Leo picked up the pencil and began to look over the questions. There were some math problems up at the top. Some of them like one plus one were simple for him, yet as they started getting more complex he found himself struggling and using his fingers to count despite them being problems he should have been able to do in his head. Leo glanced over at Tanner who seemed to be doing a lot better and had already moved on to the backside. Leo took it slow getting through the best he could. It however got really

difficult when he got to the multiplication questions.

Leo let out a grunt as he tried to work through them. He had known this stuff only two weeks ago. Two time two, five times six. He should have just been able to answer them no problem, but looking at the problems now the answers just didn't seem to come to him, no matter how hard he tried to remember them. He eventually gave up completely on the math turning over the page where he was met with lots of words. Apparently he was supposed to read the passage at the top and then answer questions about it at the bottom. Leo looked at the words taking time to try as hard as he could. The letters seemed to meld together into an indecipherable chain of letters that made no sense. Leo switched tactics taking each word on its own. Like this Leo was finding he could read a couple of the small words but it didn't help with the big ones. Leo let out a little huff. He didn't want to let himself get too upset though. Tanner had been right, something had been done to them at Hawthorne and it was going to take time to reverse it, Leo just had to take it slow.

Even though Leo could read a few of the words, at least enough to get the jist of what was being asked, writing seemed to be a whole other ball game. He could not for the life of him recall how to spell. With all his difficulties he did manage to make it to the end. Leo looked up to see that Tanner was already done and everyone was waiting on him.

“Thanks a lot boys,” Desiree said with a smile as she gathered up the papers. “I put your clean clothes in your

room. So why don't you go get dressed and then we can be off.” The boys got up from the table. Leo looked a little bothered while Tanner looked flat out annoyed. Desiree sat at the table looking over the papers that the boys had filled out. Her brow was furrowed. A minute later she let the papers fall from her hands as she put her head back.

“Something wrong?” RJ asked as he looked at his wife.

“I don't know yet,” Desiree said.

“How did they do?” RJ asked as he got up looking at the papers from behind.

“Leo got most of the math questions wrong, and his handwriting is pretty much illegible. What little of it I can read also shows me he can't really spell. Tanner did okay with the math as well as reading but he's not much of a speller either.”

“So is that bad?” RJ asked. “I mean they're both pretty young.”

“Thats exactly my point,” Desiree said folding her hands as she looked down back at the papers. “I was sort of hoping they would both be able to do this test with ease, like any other eighteen year old.”

“Hang on,” RJ said with a sort of laugh. “Are you telling me you actually believe their story?”

“No,” Desiree said. “But honestly going through those files last night didn't exactly give me a whole lot of answers, just

more questions. .Yet in a weird way if they were actually telling the truth it would make things make a whole lot more sense. Seeing these test though kind of confirm they are just kids, which also means we are far from getting to any kind of understanding about their situation."

"What exactly was in those files?" RJ asked knowing that if Desiree had even toyed around with the idea that the boys crazy story was in any way true their must have been something in those files that had shocked her.

"There was a lot..." Desiree began to say before pausing as she heard the boys coming back into the kitchen. "You guys ready?" Desiree asked changing the subject as she looked at the boys now wearing the same clothes from yesterday.

"Yeah I'm ready to get out of these stupid clothes," Tanner said as he shifted uncomfortably pulling at the collar of his shirt. He then followed RJ out to the car. Desiree got up from the table grabbing her purse from the counter before turning around to see Leo still standing at the table looking at the papers.

"Is something wrong?" Desiree asked noticing the worried look on Leo's face.

"I was just wondering how I did?" Leo asked. "I mean did I do okay on the test?"

"You did great," Desiree said kneeling down in front of him. "It really helped me out."

"Oh," Leo said with some surprise. "That's good," he then

said as his lips curled up into a smile. Desiree couldn't help but smirk a little seeing the relief wash over Leo's face. She remembered in his file that it had mentioned he responded well to praise – and she was seeing first hand that the statement was true.

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The group arrived at the department store as Tanner broke off immediately and began heading into the men's section.

“Where are you going?” Desiree called after him.

“To get clothes,” Tanner said with some annoyance as he turned around.

“That's the men's section,” Desiree stated. “I don't think you are going to find anything that will fit you there.” Tanner looked back towards the clothing section his mouth twisting up a little.

“I guess you're right,” he muttered. Desiree took the lead as the rest of the group followed her further back into the store coming to a stop in front of another section. Tanner looked up at the large sign that said “Boys” and had two smiling kids on either side of the word. Tanner furrowed his brow as he looked at the sign, the reality of the situation hitting him.

“There are plenty of clothes here,” Desiree said putting a hand on his shoulder. “You'll be able to find something that even an eighteen year old would wear.”

“Don't act like you believe us,” Tanner grumbled shirking off Desiree's hand.

“Give me some time to come around,” Desiree said with a smile. “Besides even if I don't believe you its not like I'm not here to help.”

Tanner crossed his arms a little giving Desiree a stony stare before shrugging. Leo watched on feeling that Tanner was being a little difficult. Although he could certainly sympathize with him. Leo himself wasn't exactly too enthused at the idea of shopping in the kids section either as he imagined all the juvenile clothes Desiree was going to pick out for him to wear.

“So what size do you guys wear?” Desiree asked her question being met by unsure and mystified stares of the boys. RJ reached down a little and pulled back Leo's shirt collar in search of a tag yet found none. Desiree looked at Tanner for a moment noting his black shirt was very baggy on him and was probably two sizes to big to begin with. “Well why don't you guys each pick out an outfit that you think would fit, then you can try it on in the dressing rooms and we'll go from there,” Desiree suggested.

Tanner nodded as he walked off a little. Leo however stood still looking around a little warily. He certainly hadn't expected this. For the first time in his life he was going to be able to pick out his own clothes. Leo began to wander up the racks looking at the options before him. To anyone else it would have seemed a simple task to pick out one or two

things to make an outfit but to Leo it was overwhelming. He found some clothes hanging up that were in a set with shirts and pants. It would probably be easier to pick out one of these rather than separately. As he looked at the options in front of him though he was a little put off by the fact that they were all themed around children's tv shows and imagery, there wasn't anything neutral on display. That's when Leo spotted it.

Hanging up was a long sleeve shirt and sweatpants combo. The pants were black and on the leg were three portraits with the faces of the three members of the Pj mask on it. The shirt had black sleeves and a white body with the three titular heroes in action poses on the front with the words “Heroes Rule” emblazoned across the top. As he looked at it something in him was pulling him towards grabbing it. The thought of wearing it made him excited in a way. He had come to like the show a great deal. In fact he had come to like many of the shows that had played on the playroom tv back at Hawthorne. Something he had kept hidden from Tanner and had only indulged in watching them when Tanner had been out of the room, and even during the times when Tanner had been around Leo found it hard not to steal glances at the tv.

He knew he shouldn't like these types of things. He was eighteen after all. Try as he might to resist though he had always found something deeply alluring in the shows that seemed to effortlessly grab his attention and hold it hostage. Leo could only reason that it was because it was all new to him not having been a regular tv watcher. Surely if they had

played something more appropriate for his age he would have been just as mesmerized by it. Maybe he would then have been able to see how simplistic and boring the other shows were.

“You like that?” Desiree asked coming up behind Leo which caused him to sort of jump a little from

the surprise.

“I was just looking,” Leo squeaked a little. Desiree seemed to pay no mind as she unhooked it off off the rack.

“This looks like it would fit you,” Desiree said holding the outfit up against Leo.

“Oh well I don't know,” Leo said taking a step back. “I don't think its really for me.” Desiree looked at Leo for a moment taking note of his nervous sort of posture.

“Why don't you just try it on, just so we can get your size and then we can get other stuff.” Desiree said.

“If you think I should,” Leo said in a small voice as he took the outfit into his hands looking at the faces of the characters staring back at him. He then looked up with a startled look. “Where's Tanner?” he asked as his eyes darted around. He was worried what Tanner would say if he saw him holding such a thing in his hands.

“He's already in the changing room,” Desiree said. “C'mon I'll show you where they are.” she said.

Leo followed her still holding the outfit in his arms. They

came to a doorway leading into the changing rooms. RJ was already sitting on a bench facing the entrance. Leo was apprehensive to go in. He was fighting with himself. On one hand he did want to put on the clothes but on the other hand he was worried he was giving into something he shouldn't.

“You need help?” Desiree then asked.

“Wh-what,” Leo stammered.

“Getting dressed,” Desiree said a matter of factly.”

“No I got it,” Leo squeaked as he quickly scuttled off into the dressing room. Desiree watched as her face furrowed a little. She sat down on the bench next to RJ a concerned look still on her face.

“Something the matter?” RJ asked noticing his wife's expression.

“I'm getting the feeling that Leo is a follower,” Desiree said. “I don't think he has a lot of confidence.”

“I mean he is just a little guy,” RJ said. “Isn't that normal?” Desiree shook her head a little.

“Listen when he comes back out just be really nice about the clothes,” Desiree said.

“What are you saying?” RJ said with a guffaw. “As if I wouldn't be.”

Just then Tanner came walking back out wearing the same clothes he had been wearing when he entered. He went and

dropped the shorts and shirt he had picked out into the cart.

“Did you try them on?” Desiree asked. Tanner looked up at her with a befuddled look as if her question had somehow offended him.

“Of course I did,” Tanner said. “They fit fine.”

“I kind of wanted to see them on you myself just to make sure,” Desiree said with a raised eyebrow. The comment was met with Tanner's annoyed look intensifying.

“I can tell if my own clothes fit,” Tanner said. Desiree stared at Tanner for a moment. If Leo was a follower than Tanner was definitely the leader. She wasn't sure if he was always so obstinate or if he was just in a particular mood that day.

“Okay,” Desiree said with sigh. As much as she wanted to insist she knew it would only start another fight – something she was keen to avoid that day. “If you are confident than why don't you go pick out some more stuff. I'll give you a fifty dollar budget.”

“Fifty dollars,” Tanner exclaimed a little taken aback.

“You're just getting a couple of things not a whole new wardrobe,” Desiree said.

“No its not that,” Tanner said looking a little meek for the first time since Desiree had known him.

“Fifty dollars will be fine,” Tanner then said before making a hasty exit back towards the clothing racks.

Just then Desiree's phone rang, she fished it out of her purse to see it was her friend Cindy calling. Desiree had sent her a message last night about the situation. Cindy was a social worker who would hopefully be taking the boy's cases over. Desiree took a deep breath before answering the call.

“Hello,” she said.

“Hey Desi,” Cindy greeted her cheerfully on the other side. “I got you message and I've already gone ahead and got a file on those boys opened,”

“Sorry for having to call you,” Desiree said. “I know you probably are busy with other things.”

“Not much has changed since you and I worked together,” Cindy chuckled. “But its no problem. But I do gotta say this is all a little surprising. I mean to hear that you just happened to find two kids wandering around outside, you're sure they came from that school what was it...Hawthorn Woods?”

“I'm pretty positive yes,” Desiree said biting her lower lip a little. She had given Cindy most of the story in the message but she had chosen to withhold the reason why she had been there in the first place and had not told her about Tanner and Leo's claims about being eighteen years old.

“Little hasty of you just to take the kids on the spot without talking to anyone don't you think?” Cindy said although her tone was not in any way accusatory. It was friendly as if they were talking about Desiree making some expensive purchase and then having buyers remorse.

“Yeah I know,” Desiree said. “But I don't know I just had one of those feelings that something was up.”

“Maybe that feeling was right, this whole thing does feel slightly off,” Cindy said in agreement.

“What do you mean?” Desiree asked with some curiosity.

“I called the police this morning to report that we had opened a file up on the boys. I thought for sure someone must be looking for them, the school, parents, whatever. The police told me that they had received no such report of missing kids, they even checked statewide, there was absolutely nothing.”

“Really?” Desiree asked not fully able to believe what Cindy was telling her. Surely someone should be looking for these kids.

“That's what they say,” Cindy said sounding suspicious of it herself. “Anyways the police say that since CPS is already on the case they won't need to get involved, that is unless someone calls looking.” Cindy said. “As for your other question about placement I have some good news. I already have a foster home looking for a kid around Tanner's age so I can get him placed there quickly. As for the younger one I don't have anything. He's probably going to have to go to a group home for younger kids until something else comes up.”

“I don't know if that's going to work,” Desiree said becoming instantly uncomfortable by the logistics of the situation. If Leo went to a group home that meant he would get put on a long list. It could be years before he finally got a placement

with a family. “It would probably be best not to separate them.”

“We don't get to pick and choose,” Cindy then said sounding a little morose.

“Yeah I know,” Desiree said knowing full well that Cindy was right. She understood how things worked yet the thought of Leo in a group home all alone did cause her heart to drop a little.

“Anyways,” Cindy continued. “I still need to interview the boys and it will be about a week before placements are finalized so who knows maybe something will come up that will allow them to stay together.”

“Maybe,” Desiree said knowing it was a false hope. Miracles like that didn't happen. “Thanks for everything though.” Desiree and Cindy finished up their conversation. Desiree then looked over after putting her phone away to see Tanner was still picking out stuff for himself. Satisfied that he was getting along on his own she went and took a seat back on the bench next to RJ.

Meanwhile Leo had been getting dressed in the changing room. Getting the shirt on had been a little difficult at one point he had found himself trying to put his head through one of the sleeves and then when trying to pull a simple pair of sweatpants on he he had found himself stumbling all over the place trying to get his feet through the cuffs. He had fallen down onto his butt where he was finally able to work his feet

through. Leo then stood up. He turned to look at himself in the mirror discovering he had put the shirt on backwards. With a sigh he worked it around the right way. Apparently all the time at Hawthorne that the staff had insisted on dressing him had taken some sort of toll on him. Leo then heard a knock on the door.

“Everything going okay in there?” Desiree asked from the other side.

“I'll be out in a minute,” Leo replied back. He heard Desiree then walk off. Leo then turned back to the mirror. He looked at himself in the outfit he had picked out. He frowned a little. It wasn't that the clothes looked bad or anything, in fact they fit him perfectly and they felt so soft and comfortable. Certainly different than the stiff and sometimes scratchy clothes Hawthorne had supplied. Yet Leo was left feeling indecisive. Should he really be wearing something like this? He probably looked stupid in them. He looked at the characters on the shirt and he felt a sort of thrill at seeing them in the mirror. He told himself he was just trying them on. It was'nt like he was actually going to buy them.

Leo went to the door opening it slightly to make sure the coast was clear. He knew Desiree wanted to see the clothes on him to see if they fit. He felt a little nervous. Clothes shopping had always been a rather arduous task with his own mother. She had always made him try on piles of clothes and had looked them over extensively. One time Leo had complained and asked to pick out his own clothes but his

Mom had shut him down completely. She was paying for them so she was going to get things that made him look how she wanted. At the time it had made sense to Leo. Even now it seemed reasonable enough. Desiree was paying for the clothes so he was just going to get whatever she told him too.

Leo came around the corner and saw Desiree and RJ sitting on the bench he looked around a little cautiously but didn't see Tanner anywhere. Which was good, he somehow knew Tanner would be none too pleased to see him wearing clothes that matched his new age. Leo took some cautious steps out of the changing rooms.

“Umm so I'm done,” he squeaked a little. Desiree and RJ looked up and for a moment they wore blank less expressions. “D-do they look okay?” Leo asked holding his arms out a little. Desiree and RJ made no change in their expressions. Leo felt his tummy twist up a little. They were probably moments away from breaking out in laughter. Then Desiree smiled a little.

“Oh Leo they look great, right RJ?” Desiree said as she gave RJ a nudge.

“Yeah totally,” RJ enthused. “They look really comfy.”

“Ya-ya think,” Leo stuttered a little.

“Absolutely,” Desiree said. “So should we throw them in the cart?”

“Huh?” Leo asked looking back at her.

“She's asking if you want to get them,” RJ said. Leo blinked a few times. No one had ever asked him for his opinion on his clothes before, much less actually leave the decision up to him.

“I can have them?” Leo asked looking rather shocked.

“Of course,” Desiree said with a chuckle. “If you want them that is.”

Leo bit his lower lip a little as he looked down at the shirt. The characters on the shirt smiling back at him as if they were telling him to say yes. Leo could feel the corners of his mouth start to curl up into a little smile. Desiree watched with some interest. From what little she had seen from Leo being anxious upon looking at the outfit on the rack and how unsure he had been coming out of the dressing rooms she could tell this seemed a little overwhelming for him. She wondered if he had ever been clothes shopping before. He was young enough that it would certainly be possible that he had never done this sort of thing before and had only wore what adults had given him without much thought to it. She thought for a moment that perhaps she should just pick stuff out for him since it looked like he didn't really know where to start. Yet her worries were dashed away as soon as she saw the cute little smile on his face as he looked up at her, a certain glint of happiness glimmering in his eyes. This was a big deal for him. Just as he was about to say yes though Tanner's voice cut through.

“What are you wearing?” Tanner asked with a chortle as he

deposited the pile of clothes in his arms into the cart before going and standing before Leo with his hands on his hips. Desiree watched Leo's face morph to take on an expression overcome with nervousness and shame.

“I-I ju-just tried it on to see if it fit,” Leo stammered a little.

“Well do they?” Tanner asked picking a piece of fabric off of Leo's shoulder.

“Y-yeah,” Leo said as his eyes darted to the ground.

“Great,” Tanner said. “Hurry up and take those off so you can go get some real clothes,” Tanner said before going and taking a seat on another bench. Leo didn't say a word as he slunk back off into the changing rooms. Desiree frowned a little. She could tell Leo had been happy with the clothes and he had also been over the moon when she and RJ had responded positively to them. Yet in one fell swoop Tanner had completely shut him down. She looked at Tanner for a moment and wondered if he even realized what he had done – if he did he certainly didn't look it. He was sat looking off into the distance completely oblivious.

“Tanner,” Desiree said getting his attention. “Don't you think that was kind of mean?”

“What are you talking about?” Tanner asked looking back with complete innocence.

“Leo really liked that outfit,” Desiree explained. “But your comments made him feel bad about it.”

“He shouldn't be wearing stuff like that,” Tanner said as if he were some authority on what Leo should do. “We aren't little kids.”

“If it makes Leo happy don't you think you should let him wear whatever he wants?” Desiree then reasoned.

“He can't,” Tanner shouted jumping up from his seat with a scowl on his face. “They did something to him, he needs help so he doesn't forget.” Tanner said with a desperate sense of fear tinging his voice. “I..I have to save him.”

Desiree was taken aback a little at the serious declaration. She tried to come up with something to say in response but before she could Leo came out of the dressing room.

“I can't get it back on the hanger,” he said holding the clothes bunched up in one hand and the hanger in the other. Desiree got up and took the clothes and got them back on the hanger.

“You're sure?” she asked one last time.

“Yeah,” Leo said with a sad little squeak. Desiree then put the clothes on the return rack in the dressing room hallway. Tanner had lead Leo away and was now walking through the clothing section with him. Tanner had stopped in front of some solid colored Nike shirts.

“You can get this one,” Tanner said taking a blue shirt of the rack and holding it up against Leo who only looked down at it with a gloomy look. “It suits you,” Tanner said taking notice of Leo's expression and trying to get him to react in some way. Desiree walked over and started going through

some of the other shirts.

“Hey Leo whats your favorite color?” she asked.

“Huh?” Leo asked looking up at her. “Orange I guess,” he said with a shrug. Desiree then grabbed an orange Nike shirt of the rack in Leo's size.

“Would you like to get this one?” she asked displaying the shirt for him. Leo reached out rubbing the fabric in between his fingers.

“Maybe,” Leo said looking to Tanner who gave him a little nod. “I guess its good,” Leo said a halfhearted smile on his face. Leo didn't hate the shirt it was just that it didn't exactly give him the same feeling as the previous outfit. Though he supposed that was okay. Tanner had been right. He was eighteen he shouldn't want clothing meant for a little kid. He convinced himself that he had just gotten caught up in the moment. They were just clothes after all, nothing to get excited about.

Desiree continued to help out, picking out some more shirts as well as some shorts and pants as well. She was trying her best to at least make Leo feel like he was having some say in the process yet she could tell Leo was always looking to Tanner for permission on what he could agree to. Desiree then spotted another shirt not far from where they were. She really wanted Leo to agree to something even if Tanner was in opposition to it.

“You like superheroes?” she asked grabbing a shirt off the

rack. “How do you feel about Spiderman?” she asked showing Leo a shirt that made it look like the wearer was wearing the web crawler's costume.

“I don't know a lot of superheroes,” Leo said. Yet despite that Desiree could see that he was looking at the shirt with a little more interest than he had at any the other clothes they had picked out.

“I don't know Leo,” Tanner said with a leading tone. “Don't ya think that s kind of a little kids shirt.

“Um well maybe,” Leo said shirking down a little.

“Woah woah, what are you saying?” RJ interjected. “Spiderman is not just for kids. I have a spider man shirt too and I'm not a little kid.

“You do?” Leo asked a surprised look coming to his face.

“Oh yeah,” RJ enthused. “Even I would wear something like that.” Leo looked back at the shirt a hint of a smile on his face.

“I mean...I guess,” he said before nodding. “Okay I'll get this then.”

“Great choice,” Desiree said with a grin as she took it off the rack and put it into the cart. Tanner's mouth twisted up a little before he finally shrugged.

“Its okay I guess,” he said. He could tell Leo hadn't exactly been thrilled with the other stuff and the Spiderman shirt was certainly better than the PJ Mask outfit from earlier. He figured if Leo really wanted it he wouldn't get all up arms

about it.

“Okay I think we should grab you guys some necessities and then we'll move on to shoes,” Desiree said taking a look at the rubbery clogs both boys were wearing that looked like they were on the verge of falling apart, no doubt from the boys escapades in the woods. Desiree lead the way to the underwear and sock aisle grabbing two packages of white socks off the shelf before turning back towards the boys.

“So what are we thinking in terms of undies?” she asked smirking a little as she looked at the boys who had awkward expressions on their faces. Neither one of them said anything. “These are similar to what you currently got,” Desiree said grabbing a package of whitey tighties and holding it up.

“Not those,” Tanner yipped a little as his face went a little red grabbing the package out of her hands and placing it back on the rack. Tanner then scanned the displays grabbing a package of solid colored boxer briefs. “These will be fine,” he said handing them over. Desiree frowned a little looking at the size on the package and then back to the shelf.

“These are like three sizes too big for you,” Desiree said. She scanned the shelf a little more closely and noticed they didn't have any in either Tanner or Leo's size. She then saw another package that would fit. They were a multi pack of briefs. Some of them were solid colored neons of green and yellow. While others were striped only and one of them had images of footballs, basketballs and baseballs on them. They were certainly the most mature option available. She handed them

to Tanner who looked a them with a little hesitancy.

“These are...colorful,” he said.

“It doesn't look like there are a whole lot of options,” Desiree said looking over at the displays and seeing they were a little under stocked. “That is unless you would want something like these,” she said picking up a package that contained colorful dinosaur themed underwear in them. She saw Tanner frown a little.

“These are fine,” Tanner said looking away as he handed the original package back to her. She grabbed them back. She was going to make some sort of comment that no one would be able to see them anyways yet held back seeing that Tanner was becoming a little uncomfortable with the conversation. She grabbed another package that was similar in Leo's size.

“Leo you good with this?” she asked and noticed that Leo was staring at the more colorful options that had the designs on them with some intrigue. Desiree called Leo's name again grabbing his attention.

“Uh yeah those are fine,” Leo said as his cheeks went a tad bit red upon realizing what he had been staring at. Desiree threw the package into the cart hiding her frown. She wanted to ask Leo if he wanted something else, but it had already been hard enough to get him to agree to the other clothes. If she suggested Leo get some underwear plastered with cartoon characters that would surely set Tanner off again.

“Can we get out of here already,” Tanner said. “This shit is

weird.

“Tanner,” Desiree gasped a little. “Please watch your language.”

“I can talk however I want,” Tanner said with a scowl. “I'm an adult you know.”

“Doesn't mean you need to spout off like that,” Desiree said as they began walking. “Talking like that will only make people think you are just some naughty little kid.” she tutted. Leo giggled a little.

“Tanner's always naughty,” Leo said. “Naughty naughty Tanner.”

Tanner's face screwed up into a look of pure fury as he grabbed Leo by the collar and shoved him up against the wall.

“Don't you ever say that again,” Tanner barked baring his teeth. Leo looked back completely stunned with a fearful expression on his face.

“Y-y-you're right...sorry,” Leo stammered as his voice quivered. Desiree and RJ had been caught completely off guard by the outburst. It was RJ who acted first. He put a hand on Tanner's shoulder gently.

“Easy Tanner,” RJ said softly. “He didn't mean anything by it.” RJ's soft tone seemed to quell Tanner's anger just enough for him to unclasp his grip from Leo.

“Whatever,” Tanner huffed as he turned away.

“Lets just go get those shoes,” Desiree said slowly as she began to push the cart along hoping to move on from whatever had just happened. As they walked she stole a glance back towards Leo and could see him lagging a little behind. He was shaking slightly and was starting to sniffle a little. He was trying his darnedest to wipe away some stray tears in his eyes. Desiree knew she had to do something. She then came to a stop and picked up a pair of pants inside of the cart.

“Oh Leo,” she said. “We grabbed the wrong size of pants.” she said making a big frown on her face.

“RJ why don't you and Tanner go on ahead while me and Leo go switch these out.”

“Suure,” RJ said. “We'll meet you in the shoe department.” Tanner gave a derisive look towards Leo before he spun around walking off with RJ.

“Won't take long,” Desiree said putting a sympathetic hand on Leo's shoulder.

As they walked back towards the clothing section Leo was feeling like the biggest jerk in the world. How could he have said that to Tanner? What could have possibly possessed him to think that had been in any way okay. It had been terrible enough to just have witnessed Tanner getting punished, it would have been worse to actually have been on the receiving end. Even though Tanner had claimed it wasn't that big of deal to him and at the time he had been more upset with

everything surrounding his adoption, Leo should have been smart enough to know that Tanner had been acting tough. Leo shut his eyes tightly to hold back the tears. Some friend he was, he was surely just as bad as the rest of the kids at Hawthorne.

Desiree came to a stop and took a seat on a bench in a more secluded part of the store where there wasn't much foot traffic.

“C'mon,” she said patting the seat next to her. “Lets talk.” Leo nodded as he took a seat next to her. She was surely going to admonish him for teasing Tanner. In fact he deserved worse. Yet Desiree simply put an arm around him and pulled him closer as she rubbed his arm gently. “That was pretty scary back there huh?” she said softly. “Tanner gets mad sometimes doesn't he?”

“Its my fault,” Leo said. “I shouldn't have said that.”

“Oh Leo,” Desiree cooed a little. “It wasn't even that bad, Tanner is just in a bad mood.”

“Noo,” Leo mewled before hiding his face into his hands. “It was really bad.”

Desiree went to try and say something to downplay Leo's assertion but the boy just shook his head.

“You just don't understand.” Leo said still hiding his face away.

“Then help me understand,” Desiree said. Leo looked up at her his eyes wet.

“Tanner would probably get mad if I told you the whole story,” Leo said. “They did something really awful to him though.”

“Back at Hawthorne?” Desiree asked.

“Mhmm,” Leo said nodding his head slowly not even wanting to recall the event in his own head. “They hit him,” Leo said in a whisper. Desiree felt her stomach lurch a little. This was the hard part of the job but she was about to broach the topic of all the terrible things theses boys had to endure. There was nothing to do but go full steam ahead. It wasn't an uncommon thing to hear about from these types of places. She had to know how far it had gone though.

“Did they hit you too?” Desiree asked. Leo shook his head. “I tried to stay out of trouble,” Leo said.

“Like I always do, just let everybody just tell me what to do,” Leo added with some gloominess.

“I can certainly see that,” Desiree said. Leo looked at her questioningly for a moment. “I just noticed when we were picking out stuff. You were letting Tanner do it all for you.”

“Oh yeah,” Leo said frowning a little. “I've never been able to get my own stuff before so Tanner is better at it than me,” Leo said.

“I don't think that is true,” Desiree said standing up. “I think you should start making some of your own decisions, starting with the clothes you actually want.”

“No that's okay,” Leo said putting his hands up a little. “We already got stuff for me, they're fine.”

“Oh c'mon now,” Desiree said with a smirk. “You really going to stand here and try and tell me you are completely happy with what was picked out for you.”

“It's not like I hate it or nuthin,” Leo said kicking the ground a little.

“Leo you know when you wear clothes you picked out for yourself it will actually make you feel happier,” she said as she knelt down and put a reassuring hand onto Leo's shoulder. “And I think a little happiness is just the thing you need right now.” The boy looked up at her. His expression filled with hesitancy to actually agree. “We won't put everything back, but I think you should pick out a couple of things all on your own.”

Desiree began making her way to the dressing rooms. She knew just the place to start. As she arrived she smiled seeing the outfit from earlier was still hanging up. She took it off the rack and went back out to Leo.

“Lets start with this. Should we put it in the cart?” Desiree asked. Leo looked at the outfit with a nervous look.

“I don't want it,” Leo finally said shaking his head. Desiree let her shoulders slump as she looked at Leo who had his head hung down low.

“Leo,” she said softly drawing his attention back on her. “I'm here to help you and Tanner the best I can do. But in order for

that to happen we need to be completely honest with each other starting now. So look at me and tell me what you really want and not thinking about other people."

Leo gulped a little. He looked at the outfit the same feeling coming back as he felt his desire grow. He really wanted to be honest yet part of him felt like he couldn't. He locked into Desiree's eyes which seemed to fill him with a weird sort of confidence and reassurance.

"I...I want it," he finally said in an impossibly small voice.

"I'm very proud of you," Desiree said as she gave him a quick side hug before putting the outfit into the cart. Leo felt some breath go out of his chest. She was proud of him? Leo felt his heart flutter a little. This feeling he had was so different than at Hawthorne. Leo had been praised at Hawthorne no doubt, yet there was always some darker hidden meaning behind it. There was none of that in Desiree's words however. She wasn't trying to force him to act certain way or get him to do something that she wanted him too for some insidious reason. She was genuinely happy for him to be honest with himself. That he was making a decision that was his own to make.

Desire then lead Leo back over to some of the shirts. She put some of them back but kept the orange athletic shirt that Leo had said was his favorite color. She picked up the Spiderman shirt to go and put it back figuring she and RJ had sort of convinced Leo to get it in the first place. She was stopped by Leo shooting a hand out to grab her arm.

"Um I would like to keep that one," Leo said. "If that's okay."

he quickly added.

“Of course,” Desiree said with a smile placing the shirt back into the cart. “Why don't you pick out three more shirts though.”

Leo walked up and down the aisle. He saw all sorts of shirts that seemed to jump out at him with colorful characters. He was finding this new freedom a little hard to handle. He was a little doubtful if this was really alright. His eyes darted around not really being able to settle on anyone thing. He then came to a stop on a shirt that had a rabbit on it. The rabbit was wearing shades and was doing a mid air jump with a skateboard.

“It looks like Timothy,” Leo said pointing at the shirt. The rabbit displayed reminding him of his furry pet.

“There is certainly a resemblance,” Desiree said with a chuckle. “And look he is skateboarding. You ever see one of those before?”

“Of course,” Leo said feeling her comment to be a little condescending. “Back in middle school I traded a kid once for his skateboard.” Leo said eager to prove that he knew what a skateboard was.

“Oh,” Desiree said with a intriguing look. “Were you any good.”

“I don't know,” Leo said his expression falling down. “Before I could even really try it out my Dad took it away and broke it in half before throwing it in the garbage can.”

Desiree was a little taken aback. Of course she didn't believe that Leo had ever been in middle school. Yet the story had seemed off to her. It had seemed a little too elaborate for an off the cuff lie. Especially too intricate of a story for a four year old to come up with. Still as Desiree looked at Leo looking at the shirt she could see a look of disappointment on his face and it sort of unnerved her. For her to wave away this as part of some ruse would have her claiming that this little boy was a skilled actor.

“I can see the resemblance to Timothy,” Desiree said turning the conversation in another direction.

“He would probably be amused to see it.”

“I'll show it to him when we get back,” Leo said somewhat pleased with the prospect. Desiree took the shirt down and put it into the cart taking Leo's enthusiasm as agreement.

“Anything else catch your eye?” Desiree asked. Leo looked around a little. There was a Paw Patrol shirt that had caught his eye. It was one of the shows he had come to have some interest in but felt like he couldn't really pull the trigger on it. He was already pushing it with the other outfit which caused him to hesitate. He then saw a blue t-shirt with a multicolored electric guitar on it that had music notes coming out of it. Leo had always thought it might be fun to learn how to play the guitar, yet he simply never had the time. Piano and violin had taken up so much of his time already. His parents would have probably disapproved anyways. That seemed to be all the justification Leo needed.

“That one is cool,” Leo said pointing the shirt out. Desiree nodded taking one in his size off the rack.

“One more,” Desiree then announced. Leo once again looked at the Paw Patrol shirt. He was trying to resist as much as he could but it was the same as with the other outfit. The thought of wearing the shirt was eliciting an excited response. Leo pointed.

“That one,” he said pointing his chin down a little.

“You're sure?” Desiree asked taking the shirt of the rack.

“Y-yeah,” Leo muttered.

“Good choice,” Desiree said. As they walked out of the clothing section Desiree could almost swear that Leo had a little more pep in his step. It was going so well that they even went ahead and got some different pajamas for Leo to wear. She then turned the cart in another direction. There was one last place she wanted to go. Things had been tense before but she felt like she was on such a roll with the boy at the moment that it was time to really test him. She was going to forge some independence in Leo whether he liked it or not.

They arrived back in the underwear section. Just as before an awkward feeling took hold of Leo again.

“Are these really the ones you want,” Desiree said holding up the package Leo had agreed to earlier.

“Because it looked like to me you were looking at some different options,” she said motioning towards the more

colorful selections.

“Um maybe,” Leo said as he fidgeted with the bottom of his shirt a little.

“Why don't you pick out two packs,” Desiree said. “Whichever ones you want.” As Leo looked at them he started to get a little anxious. The clothes were one thing but this seemed different. This was real little kid stuff. He pulled two packages into his hand. Each pack contained several pairs of underwear, one of them was train themed while the other had Paw Patrol. Holding them Leo was trying to tell himself it was wrong to want such things.

“Those the ones you want,” Desiree said kneeling down next to him. Leo turned to face her. His anxiety finally broke and Leo began to tear up. Desiree was surprised at first before she quickly did the only thing she felt she could and wrapped him up into a hug. She felt bad, blaming herself at once for pushing things with him. She released him a moment later.

“Its not a big deal really,” she said. “If you don't want those its fine.”

“That's the problem,” Leo sniffled a little. “I do want them.”

“How is that a problem?” Desiree said with a confused look.

“I shouldn't,” Leo said as he let his head droop. “Its not right.”

“You're the one making the decision.” Desiree said. “As long as you are honest about it then its okay.”

Leo didn't respond. Desiree's words had set his mind racing.

If he was honest with himself than he would have to admit that he liked the clothes he had picked out for himself. Certainly his time at Hawthorne had changed him. Yet as he thought about it more, could it be said that they had done this to him? Snippets of conversations then played out in his mind. The talks he had with Ms. Klay coming to the forefront. She had told him that they were not making him like certain things, that had been all his doing. He was just acclimating to a new mindset. Hawthorne had changed him into a little kid, not to make him like things like PJ mask and playing with toys, but because it would be easier to mold him into their idea of a proper child. Their objective had been to instill certain attitudes and values into him. Things that even now Leo resisted. All the other stuff had been merely side affects of their treatment. Leo didn't like this stuff because they had told him too, it was because the person he was now liked them. If he accepted that then maybe what Desiree said was true. It really was okay, he was still himself, his taste were just a little different.

Leo felt a little relief from this thought. He thought that maybe with a little time he would simply feel himself start to think more normally, maybe it wasn't worth it to stress out about it. As long as the important things remained perhaps he could regain some semblance of normality back slowly. Tanner of course would see it differently, but Leo was ready to hold his ground. He was making his own decisions now – he had to decide what was best for him. He needed to find out the best way to get back everything he had lost.

“If I change my mind we can get different stuff right?” Leo asked. “I mean like if I don't like it in like a week you won't force me to keep them?” Desiree grinned a little.

“Tell ya what,” Desiree said taking the packages out of Leo's hands. “When we get home and you try on some of this stuff and you decide you would rather wear suits and ties I'll come right back here with you and get you a whole closet full, no questions asked.”

“Really?” Leo asked smirking a little.

“Really,” Desiree assured. “But I have a feeling that's not going to happen. I think when you try on this stuff you're going to feel super cool.”

“Promise,” Leo said.

“Promise,” Desiree said holding out her pinky which Leo wrapped his own around. “Now how about some shoes.”

Chapter 9

To Build a Nest: Chapter 9 - Chapter 9

Perspective

RJ walked a little behind Tanner. The boy had seemed to calm down a little as he walked with a lighter step than he had a moment before. As they got to the shoe section Tanner went and stood in front of some shelves. He looked up at the display shoes at top before letting out a huff.

“Something the matter?” RJ asked looking at Tanner's frustrated expression.

“I can't see the stupid shoes, I'm too short,” Tanner grumbled. RJ looked around a little. In another section RJ saw a movable set of stairs. It was the perfect size. RJ went and grabbed it wheeling it into the shoe section. He patted the top platform. Tanner smirked a little as he climbed the three steps up onto the platform. RJ then pushed him along the aisle letting Tanner get a good view of all his options.

“Um sir,” an employee said appearing in the aisle. “We ask that you not let your son on the equipment,” she said.

“Sorry about that,” RJ said apologetically as he lifted Tanner off the of the stairs setting him on the ground. The employee grabbed the stairs with a forced smile wheeling them out of the aisle. “Busted,” RJ chuckled.

“Its fine, I saw the ones I want,” Tanner said walking back down the aisle and standing in front of boxes for a pair of black addidas. Tanner stood looking at the boxes his brow a little furrowed.

“You know your size?” RJ asked. Tanner shook his head a little. RJ motioned for Tanner to follow him and had him sit on a bench. RJ pulled a foot scale out from under the bench. Tanner let him slip off one of his shoes and measure his foot. Once they had gotten his size RJ went and grabbed the corresponding box. He pulled one of the shoes out handing it to Tanner who proceeded to put it on.

“You know how to tie your shoes?” RJ asked.

“Yes,” Tanner said gruffly as he began to do up the laces. After Tanner had gotten both shoes on he got up taking some steps in them before sitting back down. He stared at the shoes letting his feet sway a little.

“They okay?” RJ asked.

“They're fine,” Tanner said looking somewhat glum. RJ looked at him for a moment coming to the conclusion that after some time to cool off Tanner was now regretting his earlier outburst.

“You want to talk about it?” RJ asked although a little hesitant knowing that even making mention of it might be enough to set Tanner off once again.

“About what?” Tanner asked defensively.

“You know,” RJ said bracing himself a little.

“Oh that,” Tanner said looking away. “Not really, you wouldn't get it anyways.”

“I'm all ears,” RJ said. The corner of Tanner's mouth twisted up a little as he stared at RJ.

“I'm not mad about what he said, alright,” Tanner said throwing his arms up a little.

“It didn't look like that?” RJ questioned sensing that Tanner was too proud to admit it. There was a pause of silence.

“I know you don't believe us and I get it,” Tanner said his voice small and quiet. “I wouldn't believe it either. What they did to us, Leo got it worse than anyone. Even before he arrived at Hawthorne. I just need to help him.”

“I'm not sure I understand everything you're saying,” RJ said. “But I can see you care about Leo but don't you think you're taking off more than you can chew. You've been through a lot too.”

“I don't care what happens to me,” Tanner said shooting up from his seat. “I can handle myself, I'm used to it, I don't need anyone. But Leo is different he's never gotten the chance if I don't do anything he's just going to go back and let himself become what they wanted him to be. He doesn't deserve that. They messed him up, you know he's smart too, way smarter than me and...and they took that from him because they knew they couldn't beat him. I would have never survived without him,He's a good person, better than anyone

I've known and I'll be damned to let them win." Tanner let the words fall from himself in rapid succession finally coming to a stop when he had finally run out of breath.

RJ got up from the ground and took a seat on the bench. He patted the seat next to him. Tanner sat down still catching his breath.

"You're a good person too you know," RJ said.

"No offense," Tanner laughed a little. "But you don't know me."

"True," RJ said. "But like I said before I can see you care about Leo and you have good intentions I just think you are not looking at the big picture."

"What do you mean?" Tanner asked looking genuinely curious.

"You've been going on and on about how Leo has to be a certain way, he has to act a certain way, but isn't that the same thing you claim they were doing at Hawthorne? While you guys were picking out clothes you didn't let Leo have a single choice."

"He was picking stuff that was for little kids," Tanner yelped shooting to his feet once again. "It isn't the same, I wasn't trying to control him."

"Tanner," RJ said crossing his arms a little. "If you think it is so important for Leo to get to make his own choices then you have to let him, even if you don't agree with it."

“But what if its the wrong choice,” Tanner said his face in a muddled expression.

“It won't be,” RJ said reaching out his hand to ruffle up Tanner's blonde hair. “As long as he makes the choice, he'll still be himself.” Tanner pulled his head away giving a small sneer.

“Don't do that,” Tanner said. RJ held his hand up giving a small apology. He had pushed it a little too far. Still he was rather surprised and perhaps even a little troubled. His first impression of Tanner had been of a kid who had some rough edges with a huge chip on his shoulder, yet he could see that had been a showy tough exterior. Tanner had pulled the world onto his shoulders and it was a heavy burden.

Desiree and Leo then came walking into the shoe aisle. RJ noticed that Leo had a little pep in his step. Something had certainly changed since the last time he had seen the kid.

“How's shoe shopping going?” Desiree asked.

“Great,” RJ said. “You find some pants that fit?” RJ asked looking at Leo.

“Yep,” Leo said with a smile. RJ watched as Leo's gaze then moved to Tanner who was standing some distance behind him. Leo's smile disappeared being replaced with a demure look.

“Tanner already picked out some shoes,” RJ said grabbing the scale. “Leo come sit here so I can measure your foot.” After

they got Leo's size RJ lead him down the aisle. Just like Tanner Leo wasn't able to see the display models. Seeing no other option RJ lifted him up under his arm pits to give him a good view. He felt Leo tense up a little.

“Sorry bud, me and Tanner had a ladder earlier but we got in trouble and they took it away from us,” RJ chuckled.

“Oh,” Leo said with a nervous laugh.

“Anything look good?” RJ asked. Leo focused on the shoes in front of him. He felt awkward being lifted like this so he decided to go as quickly as possible. There were lots of options before him. He then spotted a blue pair of shoes that had Spiderman on the side.

“Spiderman,” Leo yelped out involuntarily. RJ then shifted Leo onto his hip as he used his free hand to pick up the display model.

“You like these?” RJ asked handing it to Leo. “They would match that shirt of yours.”

As Leo looked at them more closely he saw that they had a large velcro tab with the spider emblem in the middle instead of laces. There were also led's on the sides that came to life blinking blue.

“They light up,” Leo said with some surprise. The blinking lights eliciting some awe in him.

“I guess they do,” RJ chuckled seeing a little wonderment in Leo's eyes.

“My mom never let me get the ones that light up,” Leo said with some melancholy in his voice upon remembering his strict upbringing.

“That's no fun,” RJ said as he set Leo on the ground. “Why don't you try them on.”

Leo looked up at RJ with a smile. The idea of wearing these shoes seemed to give him that same sense of excitement that he had gotten from the clothes. He was about to agree, that was until he saw Tanner watching him from the end of the aisle leaned up against a shelf.

“Actually I saw a different pair I liked better,” Leo said setting the shoe onto a box before he quickly walked past RJ. Looking at the pictures on the boxes he grabbed a different box that contained a pair of Chuck Taylors. “These are better,” Leo said picking up the box.

“Try' em on,” RJ said with a half smile not for minute being fooled that Leo actually preferred these shoes. Leo went and sat on the bench, he opened the box looking at what he had selected. They weren't terrible or nothing and they were something his Mom would have raised some objection too, more importantly he knew that Tanner wouldn't have a problem with them either. Leo got one out slipping it on his foot. He grabbed the laces and then paused. He realized for the first time that he had no idea how to tie them. He shook his head a little perplexed. It was the same with reading and math. He had tied his shoes so many times in the past he knew he had, yet in the moment he couldn't recall how to do

it. This feeling never seemed to get any more normal feeling.

“Do you know how to tie your shoes?” Desiree asked. Leo tried to say something as he held the laces in his hands but only let out a little groan.

“I guess not,” Leo said as a gloomy expression came to his face. He looked over at Tanner who shook his head before disappearing into the aisle.

“Let me help,” Desiree said kneeling down. Leo pulled his foot back grabbing the laces again.

“Let me try,” Leo said “I know this...I know I do.” Desiree put her hands up backing off a little. She watched Leo fruitlessly try to tie the strings together. It was apparent to her that he had no clue what he was doing. She could see that Leo was becoming increasingly agitated and she was getting ready to jump in when Tanner appeared.

“Try these,” Tanner said plopping a box down onto the bench that had Spiderman's face on top of it.

“Those ones are no good.” Tanner then walked away.

Leo was stunned for a moment. He had never known Tanner to change his mind like this. Once he had decided on something there was little Leo could do to convince him otherwise. Tanner was hardheaded that way. Leo didn't move. He didn't know how to process what had just happened. Was Tanner okay with him choosing such things now, or did he just no longer care because Leo was a lost cause in his eyes?

“Take a walk, try them out,” Desiree said bringing Leo back to attention. He had been so caught up in his own thoughts he hadn't even noticed that Desiree had put both shoes on his feet. Leo got to his feet walking around a bit. The shoes were certainly a massive improvement over the rubbery clogs. Leo felt like he could sprint in them even. Yet he held back from doing just that, thinking it might make him look too much like a little kid. He certainly hadn't done himself any favors in that department.

“So are we getting them?” Desiree asked fully expecting Leo to smile back in the affirmative, yet he didn't.

“I guess,” Leo said kicking the ground a little activating the flashing lights.

“We can try on other ones if you don't like those,” Desiree said.

“No these are fine,” Leo said somewhat glumly. Its not that he didn't like the shoes, it was just he felt like in some way he had let down Tanner. Desiree asked him one more time if he was sure which Leo just nodded.

“Okay,” Desiree said rubbing his shoulder a little with a sympathetic smile. “Tanner is wearing his shoes out so you can too,” she said gathering up the chewed up rubber clogs. “And we can throw these in trash,” she said tossing the shoes into a trash can.

After the shopping trip they made a quick stop at a pet store to get things for Timothy and then finally swung by RJ's

mom's house to collect Kaylee, RJ and Desiree's infant daughter. Back at the house RJ helped Leo set up Timothy's new cage while Desiree packed the boys clothes away into the dresser's that were located in their room. She came downstairs to find Tanner knelt in front of Kaylee who in her bouncer. Tanner was making funny faces at her causing her to laugh and gurgle. Desiree smiled a little. She was a little relieved to see that even Tanner had a softer side to him. Watching with some interest Desiree began to think she had been wrong about Tanner. She had just assumed that the reason Leo followed him around all the time was because Tanner had more or less adopted Leo as more of a sidekick. Tanner happy to have a younger kid to boss around and Leo happy that an older kid paid attention to him. Normal kid behavior for sure.

She had thought about what was going to happen to the boys when it came time for them to go to a more permanent placement. She had adopted the opinion that it might be good for Leo to get away from Tanner. Leo seemed to care a great deal about Tanner's opinion and Tanner seemed to hold some steadfast opinions on how Leo should act. In that kind of relationship Leo would have trouble forming independence. However if Desiree was wrong and a kid like Leo who seemed to be hard up for some affection and care had found someone who gave that to him in Tanner than the boys impending separation only filled Desiree with some worry. Her phone beeped drawing her away.

She picked it up to find some texts from Cindy wanting to set

up a time to do some assessments with the boys. She was requesting to do them separately as well. Desiree responded back that she could bring Tanner around tomorrow if that worked out. She reasoned that since Tanner was older he would be able to give Cindy a more clear picture of the boy's history.

The rest of the day passed without much incident. Leo and Tanner had busied themselves with other things separate from one another. Tanner had spent much of the afternoon on the couch watching a baseball game with RJ taking the opportunity to catch up on everything he had missed. He was only a little disappointed to learn that the Dragons were not playing that day. Leo on the other hand at some point had grabbed a magazine and was sitting in the boy's room on floor flipping through it. They had just gotten done eating a quick dinner, in which nobody had talked much, each of them unsure of how to start a conversation with one another. Leo had spotted the magazine and decided now was a good time to try and solve his problems. He was trying to force himself to be able to read. But no matter how hard he tried he wasn't making much progress. With a huff Leo tossed the magazine aside.

He then looked over at the dresser in the room. He got up and opened up one of the drawers seeing some of the clothes he had picked out. Despite Desiree asking if he wanted to change as soon as they got home Leo had refused. He had been filled with confidence when he had picked them out but now that they were back at the house the thought of Tanner

seeing what he had chosen gave Leo pause. He was just a little curious though. Desiree had said it would make him happy to wear clothes he had picked out, Leo wondered if that was true. He grabbed the shirt with the skateboarding rabbit and a pair of the paw patrol underwear. He got undressed and put on the underwear first standing in front of the full length mirror on the wall of the room. The underwear was white with a red waistband and piping. There were two paw prints on the front. The back had three of the pups on it with words that said “On Patrol” spelled out. Leo found some delight in seeing himself wear the undies. But he was a little put off looking at his body. He still couldn't shake the weird feeling of seeing himself like this. The little bits of residual baby fat were just too off putting to him. Especially around his tummy. He squeezed the little pudge wondering if going on a diet would get rid of it. Leo then pulled on the blue shorts he had been wearing and the shirt. Covering up his body seemed to help things a little as Leo looked in the mirror spinning around a little trying to get a good look at himself from all angles. Before long he was turning his back to the mirror before spinning around to strike a new pose in the mirror. Desiree had been right, he was actually feeling good about the clothes.

“Having fun?” Tanner asked. Leo let out a startled yip to see Tanner walking into the room with just a towel around his waist and his hair still damp. Leo had been so caught up in playing in the mirror that he hadn't even noticed the door open.

“Oh...hey,” Leo said feeling a little awkward to be standing in front of Tanner in one of his new outfits which had not gone unnoticed by Tanner.

“You buy this at the store?” Tanner asked stepping towards Leo as he looked at the shirt. Leo cringed a little ready for Tanner to lay into him for picking out something so juvenile. “Its a nice shirt,” Tanner said before walking past Leo over to the dresser to grab out some clothes of his own. Leo whirled around with a shocked look for a moment as he watched Tanner pull out a pair of lime green briefs with a bright orange waistband and piping before discarding his towel and pulling the underwear on. Leo couldn't help but once again look on little enviously. Despite Tanner's scrawnier and smaller physique not to mention looking like a total kid in just his underwear Leo knew that he still looked a good deal more mature and developed than himself. Tanner looked behind him to see Leo's gaze locked on to him.

“Uhhh something I can help you with?” Tanner said making Leo realize he had been staring.

“No,” Leo yipped turning his back to Tanner, his cheeks blushing a little. “I'm just surprised is all,” Leo said. “I thought you would be mad about what I'm wearing.” Tanner threw his head back a little with a roll of his eyes directed at himself and not Leo.

“Hey look,” Tanner said spinning Leo around so they were looking at each other. “I'm sorry, I was a jerk at the store today. I was being kind of controlling and that wasn't cool.”

Leo gave a half-hearted smile for a second before frowning as he went and took a seat on the bed.

“Maybe you should have been,” Leo said with a morose look.

“What do you mean?” Tanner asked cocking his head to the side and putting a hand on his hip.

“I just couldn't seem to help myself. I tried I really did, but I just couldn't seem to not like all that little kid stuff. I'm getting kind of scared,” Leo said pulling his knees up to his chest and wrapping himself tightly. “I can't read or do simple math anymore, and then I said that thing to you just like all those other kids did...I think I'm becoming more like them everyday. What if it doesn't stop? What if I really do change into some little kid? What if I start believing all that crap they tried to teach us?”

Leo hid his face starting to feel some tears work into the corner of his eyes. Tanner looked at Leo for a moment. He felt a incredible pang of guilt. He had known Leo and even himself were working through somethings but he didn't realize how bad it was for Leo or rather how aware Leo was of it all. Tanner grabbed some black sweats and put them on before going and sitting on the bed next to Leo.

“You picked out all those clothes by yourself, right?” Tanner asked. “Nobody told you what to get?” Leo nodded his head yet still kept it nestled in his ball. “Then maybe that's okay.” Tanner said. Leo lifted his head to look at Tanner. “I mean look, at Hawthorne they made all these decisions for us, they

forced us to think a certain way. But maybe as long as you make your own decisions it would be good. Like as long as you think for yourself the less influence all that stuff they did to you will have."

"You think?" Leo asked.

"Well its worth a shot," Tanner said shooting to his feet with some enthusiasm. "Tell ya what why don't you go take a shower and clear your head a little. I'll think about some of that other stuff you said and we can come up with a plan."

Leo nodded unfurling from his ball. A hot shower sounded good and it always did help him clear his mind. He got up going to the dresser and grabbing some of the pajamas he had bought that day before exiting the room. Honestly he was feeling pretty good about everything. He was relieved to hear that Tanner was still in his corner and as Leo thought more on their conversation the more it seemed to make sense. Tanner just had to be right. Leo was so wrapped up in the hopeful thoughts on his mind that he didn't notice Desiree standing in the hallway until he collided straight into her.

"Oh Leo, you okay?" she asked.

"Y-yeah fine," Leo stammered a little getting his bearings back.

"Where you headed to with your heads in the clouds?" Desiree then asked noticing the pajamas he was holding.

"Just to the bathroom to umm –," Leo began still a little frazzled.

“ – take a bath.” Desiree said finishing his sentence for him yet not correct in what he was about to say. “Sound like a great plan, C'mon I'll help you in there.” Desiree said. Before Leo could he even respond she had taken off towards the bathroom. By the time Leo made it to the bathroom she already had the tub filling up for him. “Alright raise those arms high and lets get that shirt off,” Desiree said with a smile. Leo wanted to clarify and say he was going to take a shower but shook his head a little, after all she already had the tub filling with water. Part of him was about to actually just go along with it, to not cause any problems yet the conversation about making his own choices resounded in his head.

“Actually I would like a little privacy,” Leo stated although his confidence faltered a little just as he said it. “I mean if that's okay with you.”

Desiree looked at him with a weary look. She was somewhat pleased to see him advocate for himself. Yet the idea of leaving a four year old unsupervised in the bathtub did giver her a little pause out of concern for his safety.

“Okay tell you what,” Desiree said. “I'll let you do this by yourself and I'll sit out in the hallway as long as you promise that if you need help you'll call for me.”

Leo pursed his lips a little. He didn't like the idea of someone supervising his bathing even if from afar, but at least she wouldn't be in the room. This would also be a good chance to prove himself a little. He could take this opportunity to show

Desiree that he wasn't some helpless little kid. Leo nodded as Desiree left the room leaving the bathroom door cracked an inch. Leo got undressed and into the tub. The water was just the right temperature. He used his hands to rub some water onto his face. Next he dunked his head into the water wetting his hair. Leo then turned to look at all the bottles of product lining the shelf. He concentrated a little trying to see if he could decipher any of the labels but couldn't make it out any of it. Leo grabbed one thinking it probably didn't matter. He opened the top and gave it smell. It smelled pleasant enough. He lathered up his body. He then splashed as much water as he could to rinse off. After he was confident he had gotten all of it off he looked around feeling like he was doing a good enough job, it had after all been awhile since he had bathed himself.

Leo grimaced however upon noticing he had splashed a lot of water out of the tub onto the floor. He made a mental note to clean it up afterwards, he didn't want Desi thinking he been playing in the tub by splashing water about. Leo then grabbed another bottle from the ledge. It took a little doing but he managed to pour some of it in his hair. He did his best to get a good lather. He just needed to figure out how to rinse it now. If he he tried to rinse it like he had with his body he was just going to get more water everywhere. Leo then decided just lean back and dunk his head into the water. What he hadn't taken into consideration was how slippery the floor of the tub had become after rinsing off the soap. As he leaned back he felt his bottom slip on the tub surface sending his whole body back into the water. As Leo submerged he felt

water go up his nose. After a moment he had gotten himself back up right. He was hacking up some water he had swallowed and his eyes stung a little.

“You okay in there,” Desiree called out from outside the door a hint of worry in her voice.

“I'm fine,” Leo croaked before setting off into another coughing fit. After he had caught his breath a little he decided he had done enough. He released the drain and got himself out of the tub. He grabbed the towel first wiping his eyes before moving onto the rest. He then set about sopping up all the water on the floor. By the time he was done the towel had become completely waterlogged sitting in a puddle. Leo grabbed some toilet paper to try and get up the rest of the water which only made things worse as the thin paper seemed to disintegrate in his hands as soon as it got a little wet. Leo let out a small frustrated grunt realizing he was just making a bigger mess. Leo cleaned up the best he could having to settle for containing his mess as best as possible. He then went and grabbed his pajamas. They were a dark blue short and button up shirt combo with little white dots. He had gotten them thinking they were somewhat mature. Even if Tanner said he was accepting of Leo's wardrobe choice he still felt a little nervous about him seeing dressed like this, and as Leo looked down at the Paw Patrol undies he was currently wearing he knew Tanner hadn't known just how juvenile Leo had allowed himself to get at the store. Leo got on the shorts and then went to get the shirt on. As he moved on to buttoning it up he found himself having a rather difficult time. He had managed

to get one of the buttons into a hole before discovering it was in the wrong spot as the bottom of the shirt stretched across him to meet in the middle. His pudgy little tummy sticking out all the more prominently.

“You've been in there awhile you sure you're al–,” Desiree began to say poking her head into the bathroom coming to a stop upon seeing what had been causing the hold up. Leo looked up at her with a depressed look as he slumped onto the toilet.

“I can't do it right,” he said completely deflated by his feeling on ineptitude. Desiree gave him a sympathetic smile as she walked into the bathroom. She knelt down in front of him. She looked a little past him smirking a little seeing the watery mess he had made on the floor. Still she was a little impressed that he had managed as well as he had on his own.

“Can I help you with those buttons?” she asked.

“Please,” Leo said his lips pushed out in a little pout. As Desiree went to do up the first button she caught sight of his hair.

“Oh Leo I don't think you washed your hair out completely,” she said touching a spot on his head confirming that there was still a lot of residue left in it. She brought her hand to her nose taking a sniff. “What did you use to wash your hair?” she asked. Leo looked behind him a little nervous before pointing out the bottle. Desiree chuckled. “That's conditioner dear, you should have used shampoo.” Leo was about to reply but held back. The only excuse he had was that he had wasn't

able to read the bottles which would only make him look like more of a little kid than he appeared. Desiree took off the shirt and hoisted him up onto the counter. She had him lay down with his head over the sink. She proceeded to use the sink to wash Leo's hair like he was at a salon. Leo felt completely foolish. How could he have been so stupid? He had been all out to prove himself and now felt like the only thing he had shown was that he was incapable of doing even the simplest task of bathing himself. Afterwards Desiree had dried off his hair with a towel before opening up a drawer and pulling out a toothbrush.

“I got you and Tanner some toothbrushes but I think it might be a little big for you,” she said as she put some toothpaste on the bristles. “Alright open up.” she said.

“I can brush my teeth myself,” Leo said not at all enthused to fall back into the nighttime routine he had been subjected to at Hawthorne where he had to let Ms. Klay brush his teeth for him. Desiree looked at him with understanding look yet she wasn't going to budge. She had let him attempt the bath by himself to see how he did and that had shown her what she had assumed, Leo indeed needed some help.

“Well Leo you know this toothpaste is actually meant for adults and I'm just worried about you swallowing it,” Desiree said taking on a compromising tone. “I'll have RJ pick up some kids toothpaste tomorrow and then you can brush your teeth by yourself all you want. But for tonight could you please let me help. I really don't want you getting sick.”

Leo hung his head a little. He opened his mouth letting Desiree begin to brush his teeth for him. Afterwards Desiree got the shirt on him and buttoned it on. Leo slunk back to the room feeling dejected, he had been a complete failure. Upon walking into the room he saw Tanner sat upon his own bed with his legs crossed He had put on a long sleeve shirt with a clothing brand on it. He was hunched over reading the magazine that Leo had been using earlier. Leo didn't say a word as he went to his own bed laying on top of the covers curling up into a ball with his back to Tanner.

“You alright?” Tanner asked noticing Leo was certainly in a worse mood than he had been upon leaving the room. Leo only responded with a monotone no. “You want to talk about it?” Tanner asked.

“Not really,” Leo responded. Tanner got off of his bed walking over to Leo.

“C'mon you'll feel better if you get it off your chest,” Tanner said poking Leo a little. Leo turned around and gave Tanner a stormy look.

“This isn't going to work,” Leo said. “We got out of Hawthorne but what are we really supposed to do now?”

“The plan hasn't changed,” Tanner said. “Me an you are going to be out of here in a couple of days and then we're going to get an apartment together.”

Leo sat up giving Tanner a skeptical look. Leo got off the bed. Tanner's confidence did make him a feel a little better

even if he wasn't really convinced that it would work it out. Still it was a nice dream, one that had given them hope through those long nights of the last four years. Leo caught himself in the mirror as he went over and observed his reflection. The pajamas didn't actually make him look all the more mature but he didn't actually look too shabby in them. In fact if it wasn't his own reflection staring back at him he might be able to admit that the boy in the reflection was pretty cute.

“You really think that will work?” Leo asked offhandedly.

“Of course, as long as we're together we can pull off anything,” Tanner said before taking notice of Leo looking at himself in the mirror. He smirked a little watching Leo spin around a little. “You really like that mirror, huh?” Leo shot a glare back at Tanner before smirking himself.

“I was just thinking we're going to need jobs.” Leo said turning back to the mirror.

“I suppose,” Tanner said. “We'll make it work, I mean once we clear up this whole mess of how old we are we'll find something.”

“Maybe I could be a model,” Leo said. Tanner laughed. “Don't make fun of me,” Leo grumbled.

“Sorry, it was just sort of out of left field,” Tanner then got up from the bed and walked over to Leo.

“Still you might be right,” Tanner said flicking a little bit of

Leo's brown hair at the point where it began to curl out. “You could model all sorts of kid things I guess, you would certainly be easier to work with than an actual kid.” Tanner said nodding. “Might even be good enough to become like a poster child for something.”

Leo smiled a little at the thought. He supposed if that did happen and he found himself in magazines he could send it along to his parents, even get Tanner to write something nasty on it, since he was good with that kind of stuff. He could really stick it to his parents and show them that he didn't need them in his life. Leo then shook his head. Somehow thinking about his parents and what they had done to him put him back into the feeling of hopelessness that had overcome him a moment ago.

“Like that'll ever happen,” Leo said slumping back onto his bed. “I'm probably going to end up a little kid.”

“You're still worried about that,” Tanner said with some frustration at seeing Leo turn back into his gloominess. Tanner sat on the bed with the magazine in his hand. “I've been thinking about what you said earlier you know about all that stuff you said you can't do anymore. I think all we gotta do is work on it a little. I think somewhere in that big head of yours you still know it all, we just gotta remind you,” Tanner said holding the magazine up in front of Leo. “Read this first word.” Leo squinted a little before frowning. It was no use.

“Letter by letter, Leo,” Tanner said. “What sound does the first letter make.” Leo rolled his eyes a little but still decided

to try.

“S-ss,” He sounded out.

“Right, now the second one.” Tanner encouraged.

“P.pp..ohh.errta,” Leo continued sounding out the word.

“Put it all together now,” Tanner said with an excited look on his face.

Suhhpotas,” Leo tried again before a flash of understanding hit him. “Sports!,” Leo exclaimed.

“You did it,” Tanner said giving him a big toothy smile. “Sports Illustrated. See I knew you could do it, simple.” Tanner said as he opened the magazine flipping through it.

“I did it,” Leo said in quiet astonishment. He had really read a word. It was an exhilarating feeling almost as if it had been the first time he had done so.

“We'll keep working on it just like that,” Tanner said flipping another page. “You'll be back to reading in no time.” Leo smiled feeling that things weren't as bad as he had thought. He looked over at the magazine as Tanner turned another page before Leo slapped his hand down stopping Tanner from turning another page.

“Hang on,” Leo said as something caught his eyes. “Whose that?”

Tanner looked down to see that Leo was asking about a picture of some baseball player who was standing on the

pitcher's mound in his uniform looking intimidatingly into the camera.

“Some player, I guess. “Tanner said. “I don't know him though.” Tanner said looking at the article some more.

“He's kind of handsome,” Leo said absentmindedly as he continued to look at the picture feeling a fluttery feeling in his stomach.

“That's why you were interested?” Tanner asked chuckling a little.

“I..I...mean well... you know,” Leo stammered realizing what he had just said. Not that Tanner was unaware, but its not like Leo had ever talked to Tanner about his taste in guys.

“I guess that's a good sign,” Tanner said nudging Leo a little. “Looks like Hawthorne didn't take that away from you.”

Leo smiled a little. Tanner was right. Hawthorne for all their effort hadn't succeeded in changing Leo as much as he thought. He was still himself. Despite the confirmation Leo still found himself questioning his recent surge of emotion. It was a familiar feeling yet he couldn't shake the feeling that something had been different. Something he couldn't quite put his finger on.

Meanwhile Desiree was sat up in her bed. RJ next to her watching some Tv. She was filling out some paperwork on the boys to get ready for moving them to more permanent placement within the foster care system. It was something she wasn't looking forward to telling them about. She knew both

boys would be incredibly upset to find out they were to be separated, but there was not much she could do.

Not much she could do, the thought repeated in her mind. This feeling of knowing her hands were tied was the sole reason she had quit her job with the state, yet here she was again feeling that same demoralizing emotion.

“Hey RJ,” Desiree said softly catching her husbands attention. “What do you think of the boys.”

“They're fine,” RJ replied keeping his eyes on the tv.

“No, I mean come on what do your really think,” Desiree prodded. RJ turned down the volume of the tv and looked at Desiree.

“I mean I don't really know what you want me to say,” RJ said shrugging his shoulders. “I don't really know them that well. They both seem like good kids with some problems which doesn't seem to be too out of the ordinary given what little we know of their past.”

“Problems, yeah,” Desiree said quietly. “That Leo you give him just a little bit of affection and he melts or he gets so distressed as if he doesn't know how to react.”

“Yeah I've noticed,” RJ chuckled. “And Tanner comes off as moody all the time but I did get him to open up a little at the store and I can tell he has been trying to take on everything by himself.”

Desiree nodded. She knew what kind of help those two boys

needed yet neither of them would let it happen. Not so long as they held onto that fanciful story of being shrunken down eighteen year olds, a story that she still couldn't figure out the significance of. Desiree couldn't see a scenario where things worked out. Leo all alone at an orphanage would certainly put him in a tough situation and Tanner probably wouldn't settle into his new foster home either, especially without Leo by his side. Desiree looked at RJ for a moment pondering on something to say before shaking her head.

“Hey can you take Leo into the office with you tomorrow?” she asked instead.

“Sure, I guess,” RJ said.

“Good,” Desiree nodded. “Cindy wants to interview the boys separately and I figured we could start with Tanner. Plus he is going to need to do some testing to get him assessed for school when he goes to foster placement, I don't want Leo having to sit around for all that.”

In her mind this was going to be the first step to getting the boys to come around on being separated. Although she was a little worried to see how they would fare. Desiree switched off her bedside lamp as she laid down falling asleep to the soft hum of the tv. A sleep that would be filled with worry and stress for the coming day.

Chapter 10

To Build a Nest: Chapter 10 - Chapter 10

Slip up

Leo was sat in the back seat of RJ's pick up truck next to Kaylee who was in her car seat. He had found out that he would be going with RJ into his work today while Tanner went with Desiree to fill out some paperwork and talk to a lady about what had happened to them at Hawthorne. Tanner had been confident that he would be able to clear up this whole mess. He had seemed rather eager to go. Leo spent the car ride making faces at Kaylee. He thought it was really funny whenever she laughed and smiled at him. RJ had even commented that Leo was being a big help keeping her entertained.

Usually she cried most of time in the car during the morning. This only spurred Leo on to make sure he kept her happy and smile. RJ pulled into a parking lot before coming over and opening the backdoor. Leo got out of the car while RJ went in to get Kaylee out of her seat. Leo looked at the building they were at. He couldn't read the sign out front of course but upon seeing the other people walking in with babies and small children he could only guess it was a daycare. Upon seeing kids his own age or at least the age everyone thought he was, Leo became a little nervous. He began to worry that perhaps he had been tricked. What if RJ planned to leave him here

too? Leo looked back at the man with some suspicion.

“Ready to go?” RJ asked with a smile.

“Don't want Kaylee to be late,” Leo said looking away, as if to confirm that they were here to drop her off and that was it – RJ merely chuckled. As Leo followed RJ into the building he was just hoping that he had not been wrong about the sort of people RJ and Desiree were, he was hoping they weren't the type of people that would trick him like this. They came into a large front area that had a U-shaped desk. There were some staff in bright yellow shirts behind the counter checking in parents before other staff member would appear to collect the child which one of them did as she collected Kaylee into her arms and disappeared with the baby back into the building. Leo stood next to RJ as he finished filling out the sign in form.

“Cool shirt,” a red haired freckled boy said standing next to Leo.

“Huh,” Leo said with a jolt at the sudden intrusion into his space.

“Your shirt,” the boy said pointing at Leo “I love PJ Mask.” Leo looked down remembering that he was wearing the outfit that had caused some drama at the store the previous day.

“Oh yeah,” Leo said becoming somewhat self conscious of his choice of clothes now that he was being met with an

example of the demographic the show was aimed at. Leo didn't have much chance to form more of a response as another yellow shirted staff member appear placing a hand behind Leo and the other boy.

“All right you two lets get you to your classroom,” she said.

“Wait,” Leo squeaked as he felt himself starting to be lead away. Thankfully RJ had been quick to notice as she shot a hand out from behind onto Leo's chest and pulling him back so that Leo was up against his legs.

“Woah there,” RJ said as the staff person turned around. “Sorry he's not staying.”

“Oh my apologies,” the staff person said with an apologetic smile. “He looked like one of ours.”

“Yeeeah,” RJ said. “This one is coming into the office with me today.”

“Oh lucky you,” the staff person said looking at Leo. “Have fun with Daddy, kay.” she said before walking off with the red haired boy.

As RJ walked with Leo back to the truck he noticed that Leo looked a little frazzled by the whole exchange.

“You almost got snatched up back there,” RJ said trying to lighten the mood. “Though you know I've seen the preschool rooms before, they got a lot of cool stuff in there, lots of toys and things. You could stay for the day if you want, might be fun,” RJ said. Leo came to a stop as he looked at RJ with an

angered look.

“I don't belong there,” Leo said becoming instantly defensive.

“You're right,” RJ said a little taken aback. He had never seen Leo get so pissed before, he honestly didn't know he had it in him. Leo huffed a little as he walked a little faster back to the truck. RJ got into the drivers seat and took a look in the rearview mirror to see Leo staring out the window, his arms crossed and his face scrunched up. RJ wasn't sure what about the comment had been so bad, but it was clear that whatever it was had upset the kid.

“Hey, Leo,” RJ said turning around to face him. “I'm sorry for saying that.” Leo's face softened a little.

“Its alright,” Leo mumbled. “I shouldn't have gotten mad. You were just thinking about what would be best for me...Its what adults are supposed to do.”

“Maybe,” RJ replied. “But it doesn't mean it was right. Adults get it wrong sometimes too.”

Leo looked back at RJ with a stunned face. As if what he had just said was some sort of revelation. As they drove on Leo couldn't get over what RJ had just admitted. It went against everything his parents had told him all his life, against everything that Hawthorne had drilled into his head.

After a little time RJ pulled into a dirt lot. Getting out of the car Leo saw the frame of a building on the dirt lot with lots of workmen walking around. The air was filled with the sounds of power tools as construction vehicles zipped around. Leo

felt something pushed down onto his head mushing his brown curly air over his eyes. As Leo readjusted whatever had just been put on his head he realized it was a hard hat.

“You're on a worksite so you gotta wear a hard hat,” RJ said placing his own hard hat onto his head, before grabbing Leo's hand. “Hold my hand, kay. This place can be kind of dangerous.”

It was kind of hard for Leo to keep up with RJ's stride and he had to hold the hard hat on his head with his free hand to keep it from falling forward or completely off. He felt like he should pull his hand away from RJ, he was after all perfectly capable of walking around without getting into trouble. Yet on the car ride over Leo had concluded that RJ was a pretty good guy all around, the last thing he wanted to do was cause him any sort of problem – and that included making a scene. RJ walked over to a makeshift table made out of large piece of plywood set upon two wooden workhorses, there was a blueprint and some other papers spread out.

“Hey RJ fancy seeing you out here,” a tall man with glasses said in a booming voice. “Getting your hands dirty today?”

“Wish I could,” RJ said with a laugh. “Paulson's got me doing office work today.”

The other man gave him a somewhat sympathetic look.

“Honestly I never would have taken this promotion if I knew I'd just be doing paperwork all the time.” RJ noted with some melancholy.

“Tch heard that,” the man said slapping RJ on the back before noticing Leo. “Whose the kid? Nephew or something?”

“Nah nothing like that.” RJ said “This is Leo, me and Desi are watching after him for a couple of days.” The other man smirked a little before leaning down a little.

“Well what do you think Leo, bet you like all these bulldozers, huh?” The man said loudly as he spoke over the noise of the construction site.

“I-I guess,” Leo said retreating back a little as he felt an overwhelming sense of shyness overtake him.

“What little boy doesn't,” the man laughed before straightening up as he and RJ began to talk about work related things. Leo let out a little groan at the man's last comment making him feel all the smaller. Leo looked out at the worksite waiting patiently as the men talked. After some time RJ gathered up some papers and took Leo's hand again as they walked back to the truck.

“To the office,” RJ said grabbing Leo's hard hat before shutting the door. As they drove RJ tried to strike up a conversation asking if Leo thought the job site was cool and if he liked seeing all the tools and vehicles. Leo only responded with some short one word answers. Leo had watched with some interest, but found that it hadn't particularly excited him in any way, which was perfectly fine for him. He was content that the man's comment had not been true, sure Leo was little but not in the way the man had meant

it.

After another thirty minutes they pulled into the parking lot of a large office building. Going inside they made a stop at the front desk where a woman with frizzy brown hair sat typing away.

“Hey Carol think you can make copies?” RJ asked handing over the papers he had gotten from the worksite.

“Sure thing,” Carol said as she stood up grabbing the papers and noticing Leo standing next to RJ.

“And who are you?” she asked with a warm smile. Leo felt that same rush of shyness take him again as he shirked back a little behind RJ who sensing that Leo was uncomfortable took over introductions.

“Oh I see,” Carol said upon hearing RJ's explanation. “Well Leo no need to be shy I take care of everybody in this office so if you need anything just let me know,” she said. Leo nodded his head as they began to walk away. Leo couldn't understand why he was acting this way. He had never been shy in front of new people before, even as a little kid his parents had always made him introduce himself if to only show off what a polite mature child they had. The only excuse Leo could muster was he was just tired and his emotions were somewhat out of wack. He had kept up his nightly routine of waking up every hour to use the bathroom and it was really starting to take its toll. He had caught sight of himself that morning and he was starting to develop some dark bags under his sunken eyes.

RJ's office was thankfully a private room. Upon walking in Leo could see a desk stacked with papers and a computer. There were some filing cabinets as well. Two chairs sat in front of the desk and then against the wall was a black sofa.

“You can have the couch,” RJ said as Leo went and took a seat. RJ then looked around the office taking in some air through his teeth. “Guess we should have grabbed something from the house to keep you occupied,”

“Its fine,” Leo said. “I don't need anything. RJ frowned a little before shrugging as he took a seat at his desk beginning to work on the computer. Leo sat for some time. Even though he had said he would be fine he was starting to get increasingly bored. Leo looked around the room spotting some magazines sitting on an end table near the couch. He grabbed one and began to flip through it. As far as he could tell it was some magazine about the construction industry. He tried to work on reading some of the words but it seemed harder than last night without Tanner there to lead him on. Leo gave up feeling exhausted with the prospect. He began to just flip through the pages but found that there weren't even any interesting pictures to look at. That was until he came to an ad for some line of tools.

In the picture was a tall man wearing just a high vis jacket and no shirt showing off the mans impressive washboard abs as he wielded a hammer. Leo was hit by the same fluttery feeling in his tummy that he had gotten before when he had looked at the baseball player. He laid back onto the couch as he continued to admire the picture feeling spurred on by the

fact he was feeling an emotion that was not completely kiddie. Leo let his eyes close listening to the rhythmic clacking of RJ's keyboard.

Leo imagined himself back in his old body. Just as grown up he had been the day when he had walked down to Mr. Gareth's office. In his fantasy he was on a date with the model from the ad he had been looking at. They were at some swanky restaurant. The plate in front of him had a slice of meat on it arranged with a sprig of garnish and some deep red sauce that was artfully displayed on the plate and some cherry tomatoes sliced up on the side signifying that this was a meal befit of a fine dining experience. He looked across at his date who was dressed in a rather dapper suit. They held up wine glasses cheering one another with a laugh. Later on they were taking a night stroll along a lit up sidewalk. Suddenly Leo felt himself lifted up into the strong arms of his date. Leo let out a surprised squeak finding himself having been shrunken down again.

“Whats the matter little one,” his date cooed looking down at him with adoring brown eyes.

“I'm small,” Leo yelped. His date laughed.

“Whats the problem with being small?” his date said. “If you weren't small I couldn't do this,” the man said before suddenly lifting Leo high and putting him on his shoulders. Leo was perplexed as he rode along on the man's shoulders. Why had he suddenly gotten small? Still there was something comforting about being in this position.

“You okay up there squirt?” the man asked.

“Yeah,” Leo smiled. “This is fun Daddy.”

Leo shot up finding himself back on the couch in RJ's office. He was breathing heavy as he looked down to see the magazine still open to the picture of the man he had imagined as his date.

“Bad dream?” RJ asked looking out from behind his computer with a hint of concern.

“I was asleep?” Leo asked still out of breath.

“Yeah for a little bit,” RJ replied back. Leo's eyes immediately went wide as he pushed the magazine off of him. To his relief he found his pants dry. Leo stood up beyond relieved that he hadn't had an accident. After confirming he was indeed still dry Leo became a little distressed, the dream had been bizarre to say the least and something about how it had ended only caused Leo to shiver a little. He shook his head as if to dislodge the lingering feeling that had crept up on him.

Just then the office door opened and Carol came walking in with some papers. She came over and dropped the papers on RJ's desk.

“Your copies,” she said before turning around and seeing Leo still reeling from the sudden and strange turn his dream had taken. “You okay there squirt,” she asked. Leo looked up at her with startled look upon being referred to the same way he had in the dream. Carol then looked at her watch. “Hmmm

look at the time, I bet you could use a snack?”

Before Leo could refuse RJ had already interjected saying a snack sounded good before he fished some money out of his wallet and asking if they could bring a soda back for him. Carol nodded and then took Leo by the hand leading him out of the office down a hallway to a break room with some vending machines. Leo looked at all the options before him, even though he had wanted to refuse at first he found was feeling a tad bit hungry.

“Anything look good?” Carol asked after getting RJ's soda. “We got peanut butter crackers, some fruit snack, goldfish.”

“Goldfish,” Leo said looking a little confused.

“You've never had them?” Carol asked looking surprised. “My kids practically live on those things.”

Leo looked on as she pointed out the package to him seeing that it was some sort of cracker. She then asked if he wanted to try them. Leo nodded. Afterwards she gave him a choice between some chocolate milk or apple juice. Leo was about to refuse and ask for a soda, it had been so long since he had one, but knew she would probably refuse him outright.

“Juice is fine,” Leo mumbled.

Leo was back in the office in short order taking his place back on the couch. As he went to open up the crackers he found he couldn't seem to do it more or less scrunching the package up, giving up he moved onto the apple juice but found that he just couldn't twist off the cap. RJ got up from

his desk seeing Leo struggling and opened up the crackers and the apple juice for him.

“Be careful with that, try not to spill,” RJ said handing the juice to Leo.

“I won't,” Leo said feeling talked down to. In fact that seemed to be a running thing that day. Every adult except for RJ that one time had talked to him like he had been a little kid, and it seemed to be hitting him in a strange way. Leo had gotten plenty of that treatment at Hawthorne. He didn't know if it was because of the dream making him hyper aware of it or perhaps because when they had done it at Hawthorne there had always been the knowledge that Leo wasn't actually a small child, Of course these people didn't know that, so perhaps that's why it felt different?

Leo sat eating his snack and being extra careful with the juice. He couldn't let anything happen that would make anyone think he was just a little kid. He and Tanner were trying to convince these people of something unimaginable, and Leo hadn't exactly been a big help, in fact as he saw it he had only been making it harder for Tanner. Leo finished up his snack, feeling better on the whole. The Goldfish had been tasty and the apple juice had tasted sweeter than he remembered. With nothing left to do Leo sat back on the couch looking at the hands on the clock on the wall ticking slowly.

“Bored?” RJ asked looking at Leo from behind his computer. Leo nodded. “Well you know I think Carol has a kid around

your age, we could ask if she has any toys stashed in her car you could play with it. Or if you want I could put some videos on my phone for you," RJ said grabbing his phone and beginning to que something up. "I have some Sesame Street videos I play for Kaylee sometimes, you an Elmo fan?" RJ asked.

"No," Leo yelped. "I mean I'm fine really, I don't need anything," Leo said as his face became filled with worry. RJ put the phone down. He could tell Leo was bored just sitting there, but he could see that Leo wasn't going to budge from insisting he was fine. RJ then looked at a stack of papers on his desk as an idea popped into his head.

"Want to help me with some work?" RJ asked.

"Like what?" Leo asked as he took on a more curious if not hesitant expression. RJ picked up a stack of papers and went over setting them on the ground in front of the couch motioning for Leo to move to the floor. He then separated out three folders one with a red tab, a yellow tab, and a blue tab. He then lifted up one of the papers.

"All you gotta do is match the color of the stamp to the folder," RJ said pointing to a spot on one of the papers where a stamp with red ink was displayed in the corner, he then placed the paper into the red tabbed folder. "You think you can handle that?" RJ asked.

"I don't know," Leo said side eyeing the large stack of papers. "It looks like a lot."

“Oh come on now, Tanner told me you were smart,” RJ said.

“He did,” Leo asked looking taken aback for a moment.

“Yeah, he said you were smarter than him so this should be easy for you,” RJ said. “And its not like I expect you to get through this whole stack, just do what you can.”

“I guess,” Leo said as he started to get to work. RJ walked back to his desk and watched Leo for a few moments, he then returned to his own work satisfied that Leo had understood the direction. Leo worked diligently, with their being no reading involved he found even with his diminished skill set that the task in front of him was doable. As he kept on working sorting the papers into the files it actually made him feel pretty good. He felt for once in a long time he was actually being useful. He didn't need to be a burden that everyone had to look out for all the time. There was plenty he could do to be helpful. Some time later RJ looked over to notice Leo standing off to the side of his desk.

“I'm done,” Leo said. RJ looked over at the spot he had set Leo up in to see the large stack of papers was gone and now their were three plump folders on the ground. RJ looked down at his watch astonished to see that an hour had passed.

“You did all of it?” RJ exclaimed getting up and walking over to the folder picking one of them up and flipping through it a little to see that Leo had done exactly as he was told to.

“I-It was easy,” Leo said although a little unsure of himself.

“Leo this is great,” RJ enthused. “You really saved me a ton of work.”

Leo let a small smile creep across his mouth as he felt his tummy flutter a little. He was happy to hear the praise but didn't know if he should instead be embarrassed for being congratulated on what had been a simple task. Even a monkey could have done it, but RJ still looked incredibly pleased with him.

“You know with this out of the way I would say I'm ahead of schedule, whaddya say we get out of here hit up McDonald's for a long lunch?”

“S-sure,” Leo said giving a little excited hop. He couldn't even remember the last time he had gotten to eat some fast food, he was feeling hungry again anyways and a fast food joint sounded like just the thing to hit the spot.

Upon arriving at the fast food place Leo sidled up to the counter next to RJ and was fully ready to order for himself, that was until RJ went ahead and ordered him a happy meal.

“Burger or chicken nuggets,” the employee asked. RJ looked down at Leo with a questioning look.

“Burger I guess,” Leo said shrugging his shoulders. He didn't want to appear ungrateful. RJ was being nice to him by taking him to lunch not too mention all the other things he had done for Leo, buying him clothes, getting stuff for Timothy, and most of all opening his house up to the two boys. Desiree and RJ had gone above and beyond for Leo in a

way that no one else in his life had ever done so, he could put up with a kids meal.

“And will that be milk or juice?” the employee asked.

“Can't I have a soda?” Leo asked looking up at RJ as if he were his Dad whom Leo needed permission from. Leo was expecting to be shot down, to be told he was too little. In fact he regretted even asking thinking how small he would feel when refused.

“Sure,” RJ said. “Why not.”

Leo let his head rock back a little as if he had just been lightly hit. He had been so sure RJ was going to say no. At the soda fountain RJ asked him which one he wanted.

“Coke,” Leo said. Even if he couldn't read, he could still recognize the red and white logo.

“I don't know,” RJ said apprehensively. “That's got caffeine in it.”

ÿýCaffeine! Leo thought. It was just the thing he needed. Even after his small nap he was still incredibly tired to the point he was actually needing to fight the urge to let his eyes close.

“I need it,” Leo blurted out without thinking.

“And why would you need caffeine?” RJ asked raising an eyebrow. Leo stared back at RJ gormless look, he of course couldn't tell him the truth. He panicked a little thinking of something to say.

“Uhh well it gives you energy right,” Leo said thinking out loud for some reason to give. “I need energy so I can keep helping you at work.”

Leo swallowed hard as he looked back at RJ who was staring at him, his eyes narrowed, before he smirked a little.

“I suppose one little drink won't hurt you,” RJ said filling up the cup. “But its our secret okay, don't tell Desi.” Leo nodded, they were now co-conspirators.

Sitting down in a booth across from one another Leo opened up his box and began to empty out the contents. The first thing he pulled out was a toy. It was a small little figurine of some character from some kids movie that Leo had never head of. The rest of the meal consisted of a small cheeseburger and some apple slices. Leo looked at the apples with some disappointment, he had wanted fries.

“Something wrong?” RJ asked noticing Leo's less than pleased look.

“Oh no,” Leo said shaking his head quickly. “Can you open these?” he asked handing over the package of apples across the table to RJ. The man ripped them open handing them back to Leo.

“I got you some caramel too,” RJ said opening up a sauce container and setting it in front of Leo.

“Caramel?” Leo repeated back. RJ chuckled a little explaining that it was for his apple slices. Leo just nodded his

head. Its not like he had never had a caramel apple before, he just didn't realize that this was an option. Leo took one of the apple slices and dunked it before taking a bite. His eyes went wide as the sweet flavor exploded across his taste buds. It tasted way different than he had remembered.

“Like it?” RJ asked.

“Mhmm,” Leo hummed. He liked it so much that he forgot all about his disappointment in not getting some fries.

“Oh RJ,” a voice sounded out. Leo looked up to see a woman with short blonde hair. Next to her was a little girl with matching blonde hair done up in pigtails and wearing a mermaid themed dress. “Fancy running into you here,” the woman said with a big smile.

“Oh hey Tammy,” RJ smiled back. “Yeah you know just on a lunch break.”

“I see you have some company as well,” the woman named Tammy said looking at Leo. RJ proceeded to introduce Leo giving the same response that he and Desi were looking after him for a little bit. RJ then introduced Leo to Tammy and her daughter Molly as friends.

“Why don't you join us,” RJ offered. Tammy tried to refuse but RJ insisted as he shifted his tray across the table next to Leo as he vacated the bench coming around to the other side of the booth. Tammy and Molly slid into the booth across from the boys. As the two adults began to catch up Leo couldn't help but notice that Molly was staring at him

intently. Leo averted his eyes keeping his head down as he ate his food. Leo finally came to a stop as he finished his soda, sitting back in the booth feeling stuffed, which was surprising to him as he had only managed to eat half of the burger.

“You done?” RJ asked looking at Leo. The boy just nodded back. A smile then crept across Molly's face as she leaned over whispering something into her Mom's ear.

“You can ask yourself,” Tammy said with a nod. Molly then turned locking onto Leo once again.

“How old are you?” she asked no doubt enthused to finally ask the question that had been on her mind the whole time. Leo froze up a little. He looked to RJ with a nervous look not really knowing how to respond. Should he insist upon his real age, or play along not to cause any problems?

“Leo is four,” RJ answered taking Leo's look as him being too shy to answer back. Leo frowned while Molly gasped.

“We the same age,” Molly exclaimed as she bounced up and down in her seat before she turned to her Mom. “Can me and Leo go play in the play place?” she asked excitedly.

“I don't think so,” Tammy said with frown. “RJ has to go back to work, I don't think they have time.”

“Nonsense,” RJ said. “We're on an extended lunch we got time.”

Leo looked at RJ with an alarmed look. There was no way he wanted to play with an actual four year old.

“Are you sure?” Tammy questioned feeling that RJ was just being accommodating to her daughter's request.

“Of course,” RJ reassured her. “I feel bad for Leo, he's been cooped up in my office all morning. Whaddya think buddy?” RJ asked turning to Leo. “Want to go burn off some energy for a bit.”

Leo stammered a little, yet RJ had already gotten up motioning for him to go. As Leo scooted out of the booth he wanted to flatly refuse, but in doing so he might cause a scene. What if RJ got embarrassed by him being obstinate? Molly however wasted no time in grabbing Leo by the arm and pulling him along while the adults walked further behind.

The play structure was a twisting mass of brightly colored tubes and compartments, with a ball pit in the center and a big slide going from the top to the bottom. Molly dragged Leo over to the shoe cubby slipping off her own shoes and placing them in a compartment as she hurried Leo along. He begrudgingly undid the straps on his own shoes. Was he really going to go through with this? He gave a look back to RJ and Tammy who were sat on a bench nearby chatting. He guessed that it wasn't so bad. Its not like they were going to look at him any differently, they already thought he was a little kid. Even if he refused they would just think he was being an overly shy little boy. Regardless of what Leo did the needle wasn't going to move towards dispelling that lie.

Leo followed Molly into the play structure crawling up one of the tubes. He had only played in a play structure like this

once before. Although he had been older around ten years old or so. It had been when he had gone to Roberts birthday, the same party where the photo of he and Robert had been taken that Leo had kept framed on his desk. As Leo remembered he began to think on Robert, he wondered what he was up to? Maybe he should try and contact him. Robert could certainly confirm that Leo was telling the truth about his age, that was if Leo could even convince him it was really him– not too mention he had no way of contacting him.

“You're it,” Molly said slapping Leo on the chest bringing him back to the present.

“Huh,” Leo breathed out not understanding.

“Tag silly,” Molly laughed before crawling off into another tube. Leo smiled as he scampered after her. They made their way to the top he was just about to get her before she went down the slide. Leo didn't hesitate as he dove headfirst sliding down with a squeal of delight. Coming out at the bottom Molly was scooting off the slide. Leo stood up tagging her on top of the head.

“Gotcha,” Leo said before jumping over the side and taking off around the back of the structure and diving back into the twisting tubes of the play structure. He eventually found him self in the ball pit. Leo waded into the center before he was suddenly sent tumbling down when Molly came up from behind pouncing onto him. Both of the kids then swam around in the balls giggling as they began throwing balls around. After bit they both came to a stop catching their

breaths.

“I'm tired,” Molly whined a little. Leo could only agree realizing he was a little sweaty. “Lets play hide and seek,” Molly then suggested. “I'll go first, you hide,” she instructed as she covered her eyes and began counting out loud. Leo made his way out of the ball pit quickly as he crawled through the tubes. He found a square compartment at the bottom that had a circular glass window he could see out of. He spotted RJ and Tammy still talking on a bench. He decided this was a pretty good spot. As he sat he could hear Molly moving around. Judging from the sounds he could hear that she had gone up to another level to search for him. Leo laid back on his back resting his head in his hands. He closed his eyes figuring it was gonna be awhile before Molly made her way to him. The last thought he had was that he probably wouldn't tell Tanner about this.

The next thing Leo knew he was being shaken awake somewhat roughly. He opened his eyes to see Molly over him smiling.

“Found you,” she said before he saw her eyes look down a little. “Uh oh, you had an oopsey daisey,” she said in a sing song voice. Leo shot up looking down at his pants. A horrified look came across his face as he yelped a little seeing the dark spot that was on his pants. Although looking at it, spot was perhaps putting it lightly as the entirety of his crotch was covered. He could feel that he had completely soaked himself. Molly looked completely unbothered as if it was the most normal thing in the world. “I'll go get your Daddy,” she

said as she crawled away. Leo tried to call out to her but found his voice catch in his throat. He started to breath fast. The great lengths he had gone to conceal this problem of his crumbled away in a moment. There was no way he could keep this secret any longer. Everyone would know.

Chapter 11

To Build a Nest: Chapter 11 - Chapter 11

Coming Clean

No, this could not be happening. It was the only thought that Leo could think as he looked at the dark wet spot on his pants it had even spread up to the very bottom of the hem of his shirt. He had done everything he could to keep this under wraps but it seemed his number had finally been called. Leo could hear heavy thudding echoing in the tube leading to the compartment he was holed up in. He immediately turned his back to the entrance pulling his knee's to his chest and tucking his head into a tight ball. This was all a dream, it just had to be. Any moment now he would wake up back in the Hawthorne dorm. It would be the morning of his eighteenth birthday. He would march down to Mr. Gareth's office and be granted his release and then Tanner would meet him at the front gate.

“Leo,” RJ's soft voice said. Leo scrunched his eyes tighter, he just had to wake up. He didn't even care if he woke up back in his own room, back home with his parents, fourteen again returned to the rigors of the life they had set out for him.

“Buddy,” RJ said reaching out a hand and putting it on Leo's back shattering Leo's delusion. This was real, all too real.

“I-I did'nt do anything,” Leo sputtered. “She's lying.”

“Oh Leo,” he heard RJ sigh a little. “You gotta come out.”

Leo knew that was true, there was no excuse he could use. RJ was probably annoyed with him, Desiree would probably pity him and would only confirm her suspicions that he really was helpless and Tanner, when he inevitably heard about this, would be so disappointed in him. Leo turned around to see RJ giving him a sympathetic look.

“Lets go,” RJ said. Watching RJ with his burly frame have to navigate turning around in the tube might have been funny if Leo wasn't so humiliated at that moment but eventually they were out standing in front of the play structure. An employee came walking in with a spray bottle and some paper towel in hand.

“I'll take that,” RJ said grabbing the cleaning supplies.

“You don't have to,” the employee said unbothered. “Isn't the first time this has happened, I'm just glad its not the ball pit again.”

“Even so,” RJ said giving a smile. The employee nodded not passing up the opportunity to pass the buck. RJ climbed back into the play structure with supplies in hand leaving Leo with Tammy and Molly. Leo could not even begin to process how completely humiliated he was.

“It'll be okay,” Tammy said kneeling down next to Leo and placing a hand on his shoulder. “Just a little oopsie daisy,” she said revealing where Molly had gotten the cute moniker.

“I have'em sometimes too,” Molly said almost as if she were

proud of it. However her comment only made Leo feel all the worse as he moaned a little at being compared to an actual four year old. RJ came back out throwing away the paper towel and setting the spray bottle on the steps leading into the entrance tube. He came and knelt down in front of Leo surveying the damage. RJ then stood up with his hands on his hips letting out a deep groan.

“What to do now,” RJ muttered as the corner of his mouth went up and down as he looked like he was mulling something over in his head.

“You don't have a change of clothes for him, do you?” Tammy said with a smirk. RJ gave her a gave her an apologetic look showing that she had caught him holding the bag as it were. Tammy merely gave him a sort of knowing look as if to say she knew exactly what he was going through. “I probably have something on hand,” Tammy said going to her large bag as she began to dig through it. She cam back with a bundle of clothes and handed them to RJ. “Its probably not ideal.”

“Anything will do,” RJ said with a grateful tone before he put a hand on Leo's back. “Lets get you cleaned up,” he said as he lead Leo out.

Walking through the restaurant was mortifying for Leo. The only saving grace being that he was wearing black pants which helped to hide what he had done from any passing glances. They got into a bathroom as RJ lead Leo into a large stall locking the door behind them.

“Alright arms up pal,” RJ said as he set the bundle Tammy had given him on the toilet seat.

“I-I” Leo stammered wanting to insist that he could fix this himself, yet RJ gave him a gentle hush.

“Its alright,” RJ said pulling Leo's shirt off over his head. “I'm going to take care you, don't worry.” Leo looked up at the man for a moment a little taken aback. Something about the dynamic was different than it had been at Hawthorne. Back then it had felt like to Leo that they were using Leo's bedwetting against him, to convince him of something. Yet RJ wasn't doing any of that. Leo couldn't quite decide how the man felt. Was it pity or concern?

“Alright lets see what we're working with here,” RJ said as he pulled Leo's pants down to his ankles. “Oh boy you soaked these undies,” RJ said. Leo grimaced, he really didn't need the commentary. Everyone already knew how bad it was. RJ then hooked his thumbs in the waistband of Leo's train themed undies and pulled them down. Leo let out a miserable little groan feeling the cold air hit his skin, contrasting against the heat radiating of his scarlet cheeks. RJ had Leo step out of the wet clothes before turning around and grabbing some wipes out of a package Tammy had included in the bundle. As RJ wiped Leo down he could do nothing but hide his face in his hands. He then heard a rustle as RJ let out a small low hum, as if something had made him pause. Leo let his fingers separate enough to get a peek and what he saw horrified him. RJ was holding a pair of pull-ups. He looked a little apprehensive and for good reason. The pull-ups were

pink and had some Disney princess on them.

“No,” Leo yelped. “I don't need that.”

“I understand that,” RJ said giving Leo a look that told him that RJ agreed with him. “But I don't think Tammy really has much else. I mean unless you want to take your chances with some unicorn panties,” RJ chuckled not at all serious with the offer. Leo's mouth fell a little open. Honestly both options were soul shattering to him. RJ seeing that his joke was not helping knelt down holding the pull-up open. “Its going to be okay,” RJ said. “Once we get some pants on no one will even know what you are wearing underneath.”

Leo took in a shuddered breath as he put his hands on RJ's shoulders to balance himself as he stepped into the crinkly princess themed undergarment. As RJ pulled them up to his waist Leo let out a whimper of shame. They seemed so poofy and thick. The pink outline of a bow displayed near the bottom seemed to only increase Leo's distress knowing full well what its purpose was. RJ then grabbed the shorts and began to get them on Leo. They were a plain black pair made of spandex. They clung to Leo tightly coming down to right above his knees and doing nothing to hide the bulk beneath, making a perfect outline of what he was now wearing. RJ then pulled a plain yellow t-shirt over his head both of them at least grateful that there was no imagery on the shirt.

“There that will have to do for now,” RJ said. However Leo just looked down at himself with a defeated look. “I'm so sorry,” RJ said giving Leo an apologetic look. “This is my

fault, I should have thought to bring a change of clothes with me.”

Leo looked at RJ's face that seemed so full of regret. Leo took in some deep breaths trying to hold back the tears that were pushing up at the bottom of his eyes. This wasn't RJ's fault, it was his. It was his fault for not being able to keep his parents happy, it was his fault for resisting everything that Hawthrorne had tried to teach him, If he had just listened or rather made it look like he had then he would have never been regressed. Yet even disregarding all that the worst thing had to be that Leo had known what would happen if he let himself fall asleep, and yet he had not once but twice today allowed himself to fall asleep.

“I'm sorry it's all my fault,” Leo choked out. “I messed it up, I knew it would happen cuz...I'm a stupid bed wetter who needs diapers,” Leo said as the tears began to fall and he melted down into a full on cry. RJ pulled him in close wrapping him up in a bear hug. Leo continued to cry as RJ held him letting him get it out of his system. After a couple of minutes Leo's crying subsided yet he didn't feel any better as he continued to sniffle. RJ released him.

“None of that is true,” RJ said brushing some of Leo's hair to the side. “No one thinks you need pull-ups, you just had an accident, I know you didn't mean too, and you certainly are not a bed wetter. Need I remind you that you've slept in my house for the last two nights and the bed has been perfectly dry?” RJ said dismissing every claim Leo had made against himself. Yet that wasn't good enough for Leo.

“That's because of the alarm,” Leo said not thinking about what he was admitting, only bringing it up as proof so that RJ would see that what Leo had said was the truth, so that Leo would win the argument and RJ would know what sort of screw-up he was.

“What alarm?” RJ asked with a perplexed. Leo then came out with the whole truth of what he had been doing at night, using his alarm to wake up on the hour throughout the night. RJ looked at Leo for a moment with his brow furrowed. Leo could only guess he was mad, which was fine, he deserved it after all the trouble he had caused.

“So that's why you look so tired all the time,” RJ said as his face softened and he used his thumb to wipe away a stray tear from under Leo's eye. “I guess I know now where you got those bags under your eyes.”

Leo gave another shuddering breath as much as he felt like he was about to cry again he found that no tears came – it seemed he was all cried out. RJ stood up before putting a hand on Leo's head and moving it a little so that Leo looked up at him.

“Thank you for telling me that,” RJ said. “I know you wanted to keep it a secret so it took a lot of bravery to tell the truth.”

Leo stared back gloomily, he was certainly not feeling very brave at the moment. If anything he felt completely ashamed.

“Don't tell Desi or Tanner,” Leo said with a pleading look. “Please.”

RJ responded with a weak smile.

“I won't say anything unless you want me to, but Leo we can't just ignore this,” RJ said. “I'm going to help you out the best I can, but that might mean they'll find out on their own, so you might want to tell them sooner rather than later.”

Leo knew that RJ was being realistic with him. There was no way he could keep up with this, it was too big of a thing. What had happened that day was inevitable.

“I know you can do it,” RJ said.

“You really think I'm brave?” Leo asked his voice tinged with uncertainty, as if he was calling out for RJ to reassure him.

“Sure,” RJ beamed. “You wouldn't be here if you weren't.” RJ wasn't clear on exactly what Leo and Tanner had gone through but he was certain that the boys had been faced with some danger that they had escaped from on their own. It was extraordinary to think the two kids had been capable enough to have not only made a decision to run away into the woods but to have gone through with it and succeeded in escaping whatever they had been running away from. It was almost as if they weren't merely little kids but...RJ stopped himself for a moment. He laughed a little too himself as he looked at Leo who had just enough of a little curve to the corner of his mouth to show that RJ's words had made him feel just a tad bit better. He had to reassert in his own thoughts just who Leo was, a little boy who was in desperate need of some confidence. RJ then thought of what Desiree had told him of the future that awaited Leo. He had heard enough stories

from his wife to know that it was not going to be the environment Leo needed to flourish, in fact it would probably have the opposite effect. RJ shook himself away from the dour thoughts running across his head. He decided that with what little time he had with Leo that he was going to do his best to put him on the right path and hopefully that would be enough to give Leo a fighting chance in the stormy waters that lay ahead.

“I guess I can try, but give me a little time to think about how to tell them,” Leo said. RJ nodded.

“There is nothing to worry about with telling the truth.” RJ said. “Especially with Desi, she won't think any differently about you.” That was the exact thing Leo was worried about. Then again the person he was really worried about was Tanner.

“But no more secrets like this,” RJ then said. “Its important that you be honest with me and Desi about everything, that's the only way we can help you,” RJ prodded feeling like he was being presented with an opportunity. Perhaps this was a good time to try and get Leo to abandon the boys little story about being shrunken down eighteen years old's. It was after all something that holding on to would only make things more difficult for everybody.

“Okay,” Leo said as his head pointed down. RJ gave a pat on the back before gathering up his wet clothes and putting them in a plastic bag that Tammy had given him. As they walked out of the bathroom RJ was a little disappointed he hadn't

been able to get Leo to tell him the truth about the story although it was probably for the best as RJ felt a little guilty as he felt he had been taking advantage of the situation and trying to push Leo towards something he wasn't ready for when he had been in an already bad situation.

As they met back up with Tammy and Molly RJ gave her another grateful thank you which Tammy insisted wasn't a big deal and she was happy to help.

“Are you wearing one of my pull-ups?” Molly then blurted out as she made a grab for the waistband of Leo's pants in an effort to pull them back to see for herself. Leo jumped back completely startled. Tammy had been quick to intervene grabbing her daughters hand with lightning quick reflexes.

“Young lady what have I told you about keeping your hands to yourself?” Tammy said clearly embarrassed.

“But we match,” Molly said clearly confused at what the big deal was as she lifted up her dress showing off a pair of identical pink pull-ups.

“Molly,” Tammy exclaimed pulling the dress back down. “Young ladies do not lift their dresses up, especially in public.

“Sorry,” Molly said putting on a sweet innocent look. Tammy rolled her eyes.

“I am so sorry about her,” she said giving RJ and exasperated look.

“Thats alright,” RJ chuckled as he put his hand on the side of

Leo's head pulling him close to the side of his thigh which Leo sidled against as he took a small step behind RJ as if to protect his bottom half from any more intrusions.

“Mommy can me an Leo go back to playing?” Molly then asked.

“I don't think so sweetie, RJ has to go back to work now,” Tammy said giving Molly a couple pats on the head. “And its getting to be a certain little girl's naptime.” Molly gave a little whine looking downtrodden at being refused more time to play. “Why don't you say goodbye to your new friend.” Tammy then said. Molly ran up to Leo and gave him a big hug squeezing him so tight that Leo thought his head might pop off.

“Bye, bye Leo,” she said in a sing song voice before thankfully releasing him as she went back to her Mom as they left.

Getting back into RJ's office Leo took his spot back on the couch as he put his head back feeling as though he had just rode a rollercoaster for a solid straight hour. RJ went over to a small closet in his office digging around for a bit before he came back out and threw a blanket over Leo.

“What this?” Leo asked a little surprised pulling the blanket down off his head.

“Its a blanket,” RJ said. “Why don't you try taking a nap on the couch.

“I don't take naps,” Leo said shirking off the blanket.

“Maybe you normally don't,” RJ said as he gently pushed Leo down onto the couch before taking off his shoes for him. “But after what you told me it might be a good idea, you know start catching up on all that sleep you've been missing, you're tired aren't you?”

“I guess,” Leo said as he put his head back. He couldn't lie, he was tired. RJ pulled the blanket off over him before he went over to the blinds and drew them down darkening the room a little. Leo closed his eyes which honestly felt good. For a moment he panicked worrying about what would happen if he wet himself. It only took a second as he shifted a little to hear the rustling in his pants and the feeling of the papery material against his leg to remind him of why he didn't need to worry about that. Leo felt that even though it wasn't an ideal situation at least he didn't need to worry about ruining the couch. With one last sigh Leo turned onto his side curling up under the cover. A minute later he was completely out.

The next thing Leo knew he was being shaken gently awake by RJ. Leo sat up groggily as he rubbed his eyes.

“Have a good rest?” RJ asked.

“Yeah,” Leo said with a yawn. “Was I asleep for long?”

“A couple of hours,” RJ nodded. “Are you still...okay?” RJ said looking a little hesitant. Leo felt a little self conscious knowing full well what RJ was asking. Leo pulled up his shirt a little and pulled back the waistband of the black spandex shorts, His cheeks reddened a little as he was met again by

the sight of the pink princess pull-up he was wearing. Though he was grateful to see the image of the little bow was still present signifying that he had not had an accident.

“I'm good,” Leo said sheepishly as he let the waistband snap back.

“Great,” RJ said enthusiastically. “Why don't you go use the potty and then we can get out of here,”

Leo walked down the hall to the bathroom while RJ packed up for the day. Coming in he spied a urnial that was lower to the ground which Leo sidled up to. It was actually a godsend for him at the moment. All the toilet's at Hawthorne had been mini sized and had made it easy for Leo to use the bathroom on his own, but since then he had found it rather difficult to sit on the toilet comfortably now that everything was back to being normal sized. Leo tried to finish up quickly hoping that no one walked in and caught a glance at the pull-ups. What would they think seeing a little boy wearing pink training pants? Leo met back up with RJ and they were off, they had to stop at the grocery store before returning back to the house to pick up some stuff for dinner. RJ grabbed a cart at the entrance and then lifted Leo up and set him in the child seat. He hadn't really thought much about it until he looked at Leo who looked bothered by the sequence of events.

“C-can I walk,” Leo said as he squirmed in the seat. He wasn't too bothered at the idea of riding in the cart, though he wasn't really okay with it either, yet the thing that seemed to give him the most anxiety was that when he was sat the pull-

up became more noticeable under his shorts as it made a more pronounced bulge.

“Sure,” RJ said seeing that perhaps right now it might be a good idea not to treat Leo like the four year old that RJ saw in front of him. Besides as far as he could tell Leo was perhaps a little more mature than other kids his age – its not like RJ felt he needed to worry about Leo running off on him.

Leo walked along the cart as RJ pushed it along first into the produce section where he began grabbing up various fruits and veggies asking Leo every so often if he had a preference. Leo insisted he was fine with anything as his mind was elsewhere. Walking around he wasn't able to really get comfortable feeling the black spandex shorts pushing tightly against the pull-up underneath. He couldn't stop glancing at the other shoppers feeling completely self conscious as if they all could tell what he was wearing even down to the details of the printed designs. At some point Leo couldn't bear it anymore and had opted just to keep his eyes on the ground only looking up when RJ had gotten his attention.

“So which ones do you want?” RJ asked with a somewhat nervous look on his face. Leo then looked around to see that they were in the diaper aisle, specifically in the section that had various packages of disposable training pants on display.

“Do I really hafta?” Leo mewled not even able to look at the colorful packages.

“Leo its –“ RJ began with a sigh.

“I, I know,” Leo interjected. “There are just a lot of them, I don't really know which ones would be good.”

RJ looked over the packages. Honestly he was in pretty much the same boat. He didn't know which ones would be good as he had not reached this stage yet with his own kid.

“How about these ones,” RJ said picking one of the packages off of the shelf before flipping it around to show Leo a picture display of what they looked like out of the package. “They don't have any designs on them, their just plain white.”

“Not those,” Leo said with a startled rebuke at once recognizing them as the same brand he had been forced to wear at Hawthorne. There was no way he was going to go back to anything that would relate in his mind to Hawthorne.

“Its up to you,” RJ said replacing the package on the shelf. “But you're gonna have to actually look at them to make a choice.”

Leo took a deep breath before turning to face the wall of packages. He looked from one package to another. He saw a package that contained the same ones he currently was wearing. He then spotted the package next to it that was the boy version. Instead of princesses though this one had Mickey Mouse on it. Maybe they wouldn't be so bad. The ones he was wearing were more comfortable than the ones he had been used to wearing. Leo then looked at some more seeing what all his options were. He came to a stop looking at one package before turning his body away again looking down. If he had to choose any they were the ones he would at

least be able to bear with the best yet the prospect of actually picking any of them out was still something that seemed too humiliating to actually do.

“Which ones?” RJ asked seeing that Leo had come to a conclusion yet still couldn't muster the resolve to face it. Leo kept his head down as he pointed up to the package. RJ followed his finger to see that Leo had pointed out a package with Paw Patrol branding. “You're going with the dogs?” RJ asked confirming that he had correctly seen what Leo was pointing out. Leo just nodded his head. RJ grabbed the boys's version and tossed them into the cart. “Okay we're done,”' RJ said. “That wasn't too bad, now was it?”

Leo didn't respond as he just turned on his heels walking quickly out of the aisle as RJ followed behind.

The next spot was the next aisle over. RJ had Leo pick out a toothbrush set. Leo could see that each set had a theme from superheroes to monster trucks. Each set came with a cup and a toothbrush and a tube of flavored toothpaste. Leo had looked with some interest at the paw patrol one but ultimately decided on spider man which came with a small cup fashioned to look like the webslinger's head. RJ then tried to decide on which one to get Tanner. He picked up a Nascar themed one seeing that it seemed to be the most mature option.

“Do you think Tanner would like this?” RJ asked showing it to Leo.

“Tanner hates that,” Leo said knowing from the rare times at Hawthorne that they would let the students watch tv. One of the staff members liked Nascar so that's what they would have to watch. Tanner would always grouse about it as he would make snide comments in a over the top southern drawl about how stupid he thought it was.

“Maybe if you're going with Spiderman, Tanner could do Batman,” RJ said picking up another set.

“I don't think Tanner will be happy with any of them,” Leo giggled. RJ gave him a knowing nod.

“He'll just have to deal with the bat then,” RJ chuckled tossing it into the cart.

Leo had finally felt his heartbeat start to slow down a little on the car ride back to the house, yet upon entering the kitchen to see Desiree standing at the counter he could feel it start to pick back up.

“Hey how was your day at work?” she asked with a big smile before realizing a second later that Leo who was standing in the archway to the kitchen looking beyond nervous was wearing completely different clothes than he had on that morning. RJ came walking through the kitchen setting the grocery bags on the island counter Desiree was stood at.

“Well me and Leo had a very interesting day,” RJ said raising his eyebrows. “Leo do you think now is a good time?” RJ asked looking behind him. Leo took some nervous steps as he came to stand at RJ's side. As Desiree watched him walk she

immediately picked up on the outline on his shorts and the distinct crinkling that punctuated his every step as her face morphed to be painted with concern.

“I don't know if now is good,” Leo said in a near whisper. RJ bent down at Leo's side putting a hand on his back.

“I think the sooner you get in front of this thing the better,” RJ said. Desiree came around the side to stand in front of Leo.

“You can tell me whatever you need to,” Desiree said with some reassurance. Leo looked up at her with worried eyes.

“Well...its...ummm...I sorta been keeping a secret from everybody,” Leo said as he fidgeted with the bottom of his shirt. “Even Tanner doesn't know that I uhh wet the bed.”

Leo came to a stop as it was apparent he couldn't go on becoming a little choked up. RJ took over explaining what had happened sparing the more embarrassing details of course and also divulging what Leo had been doing the last two night.

“Oh Leo,” Desiree said as she cupped his cheeks in both her her hands using her thumbs to wipe away some stray tears. “I'm so sorry you've had to go through that all on your own. No wonder you have those bags under your eyes,” she said miming her husbands reaction.

Leo pulled his head back as he took over wiping the tears from his eyes with his arm.

“Its going to be okay now,” RJ said as he rubbed Leo's back.

“We stopped at the store and took care of it.”

“Leo,” Desiree said. “I need you to know that you don't need to feel like you need to keep problems like this to yourself, me and RJ are here to help you, okay? Leo gave a couple final sniffles before nodding his head.

“Do you feel better now that its out of the way,” RJ asked.

“I guess,” Leo said nodding his head again. “I just don't know how I'm going to tell Tanner.”

“Speaking of Tanner how did that go today?” RJ asked getting to his feet.

“Well,” Desiree began giving off a weary glance. “I guess it went okay. He talked to Cindy for awhile,” Desiree recounted keeping out the part where Tanner had given Cindy the same story he had given her and RJ about being eighteen years old and all the other wild accusations at Hawthorne. “Then he did some assessment testing and he seemed to be pleasant enough throughout, yet on the drive back and getting Kaylee from daycare he seemed to be rather gruff about the whole thing. But ever since we got back he's been up in the room. I can't really tell if he's mad or not.”

“I guess we best not poke the bear,” RJ said with a nervous chuckle. Desiree agreed before looking down at Leo.

“I bet you want to change out of those clothes,” she said.

“I can't” Leo said being a little disheartened to hear that perhaps Tanner was not exactly in the best of moods at the

moment, especially given what Leo was going to have to tell him. “I don't want him to see me like this, not yet.”

“I'll go and get you a change of clothes and you can change in the bathroom,” RJ offered. Leo nodded and after getting changed out of the pull-up and replacement clothes he did feel a good deal better. At dinner Leo was quiet as was Tanner. RJ tried to talk to him about what he had done that day. For his part Tanner seemed to answer normally if not a little non-nonchalant about everything. RJ perhaps thought that Desiree had been reading too much into Tanner's reaction and perhaps he had just been a little tired due to all the work, yet Leo could tell that wasn't the case. He had seen it enough to know that Tanner was actually mad about something and he was just masking it.

After dinner Leo found himself wandering aimlessly. He was curious to hear how Tanner's day had went but found himself avoiding him. Starting a conversation would inevitably lead to questions about Leo's own day and Leo found that he would rather put that off as much as possible. As Leo continued to wander he came outside of the door to Kaylee's room that was slightly ajar, he peered in to see Desiree changing Kaylee on her changing table. Desiree was tickling the baby's feet as Kaylee let out some giggles. Leo smiled a little as he walked away. He wondered if his own mother had ever been like that with him when he had been a baby. He couldn't even really bring such an image to his mind, it just seemed so unlike her. Leo then came to another room he looked inside to see it looked like some sort of home office.

In one corner was a desk and a computer. Set against the wall was a large sound system with speakers and a shelf stock full of cd's. The walls were adorned with band posters from different musical acts. Leo then looked over and saw a guitar on the stand. It was a Gibson SG, the red shine of its body seemed to glow bright underneath the lights. Leo approached running his hands along one of the strings down the neck of the guitar.

“Hey Leo,” RJ voice sounded from behind causing Leo to jump and twist around to see RJ in the doorway. “Looks like you found my man cave,” RJ said as he walked into the room.

“You like that guitar?” RJ asked as he picked up the guitar off the stand.

“Oh yeah, it pretty cool,” Leo said.

“Want to try it out?” RJ asked giving Leo a questioning look.

“Oh I couldn't,” Leo said backing away a little. “Its looks expensive.”

“Just sit down,” RJ said as he motioned for Leo to take a seat on the ground. Leo complied and sat on the ground with his legs crossed. RJ set the guitar in his lap before bring over a small amp and plugged it in. “We got to keep it down, since Desi is trying to put Kaylee to bed,” RJ said as he fiddled with some of the knobss. “Okay take a strum,” RJ said as he handed Leo a pick. Leo gave the guitar a strum hearing the smooth tone play out from the amp. RJ then helped him position his fingers on the neck before telling him to try it

again. Leo gave the guitar a few more strums, the sound of the note making his stomach flutter a little with excitement.

“You like music?” RJ asked as Leo continued to strum.

“I guess,” Leo said absentmindedly as he continued to strum the note.

“What are you into?” RJ asked. “I mean what kind do you like?” he reiterated upon seeing Leo give him an oblivious expression.

“I don't know,” Leo said. “I haven't really listened to all that much.”

“I like rock,” RJ offered. “Especially punk, but I guess you could figure that out,” RJ said motioning around the room.

“I guess I've never listened to anything like that.” Leo said.

“You gotta,” RJ said with an excited look as he took the guitar back replacing it onto the stand. He then went and pulled a pair of headphones off of the top of the sound system handing them to Leo. “I usually just listen to stuff on my computer but sometimes I like to pull out a cd from my highschool days and just zone out,” RJ said grabbing a CD case from the shelf and inserting the disc. Leo put on the headphones that were rather large on his head. The ear muffs seemed to drown out any noise from the outside as well. RJ hit the play button and a second later Leo heard the first twangs of a guitar. As the song played on Leo was suddenly hit by a feeling of pure joy. He reckoned this is what people

meant when they said they had a transcendent moment. He wasn't quite sure why, he had certainly listened to rock music before, maybe it was the headphones or just the moment he was in but something about the music was deeply alluring to him. The fast distorted sounds of the guitar mixed with the driving beat of the drums and the aggressive rebellious voice of the singer all melded together in a sonic tapestry. It was almost as if Leo's emotions about his life were being played out in his ears, needless to say he was left in a feeling of awe.

“You like it,” RJ said pulling back one of the ears of the headphones.

“I love it,” Leo said with an enthusiastic cheer.

“Alright I'm going to go over and do some stuff on my computer but feel free to keep jamming out.” RJ said. Leo nodded as he replaced the headphone over his ear, secluding himself back in the world of sound. As he sat listening he had his eyes closed as he let his head rock up and down, but before long he could feel a restless energy overtake him. Pretty soon he was on his feet jumping up and down holding the headphones to his ears his eyes closed and a big smile on his face. As one song came to an end he opened his eyes catching his breath only to see RJ behind his desk looking at him with a smirk. Leo felt a little embarrassed that RJ had seen him like that yet RJ gave him the devil horns with his fingers before turning his attention back to his computer screen. Leo smiled a little as it seemed RJ was happy enough to see Leo enjoying himself. Still Leo flopped back on the ground laying on his back as he was a little winded. After

some more time Leo felt someone shaking him. He opened his eyes to see Desiree standing over him. Leo sat up letting the headphones rest around his neck, the music still blaring.

“What are you listening to?” Desiree asked with a smile as she removed the headphones and held them up to her ear before she grimaced a little. “RJ really?” she said with a chiding tone.

“He loves it,” RJ said as if that was the only defense he needed. “You can't deny a true punk their passions.”

“Anyways,” Desiree said setting the headphones aside. “I think you should think about getting ready for bed.”

Leo gave her a muddled look knowing what that meant he had to deal with.

“I know you probably think its early but knowing that you've not been sleeping I don't think it will hurt to get a little extra sleep,” Desiree said rubbing the side of Leo's arm.

“I guess,” Leo said. He was pretty tired after all and he had almost fallen asleep while he had been lying on the floor. Leo got up as Desiree lead him out of the room.

“Why don't you brush your teeth and then meet me in your room,” Desiree said.

“I-I can dress myself,” Leo said as his little voice quivered.

“I know,” Desiree said. “But just for the first night I want to help to make sure everything fits. Does that sound okay?”

“I suppose,” Leo said. He went into the bathroom stepping onto the step stool RJ had placed in there as he grabbed his toothbrush out of his Spider man cup. He grabbed the toothpaste and squeezed some out. Much to Leo's dismay he squeezed too much. Leo used a hand towel to wipe out the paste that had gotten on the counter before picking up the toothbrush and beginning to work. He was taking his time more out of wanting to delay what was about to happen then anything else. But it finally came time where even he had to face the music, besides if he brushed anymore he might actually start to brush his teeth down to little nubs. Leo walked into his room to find Desiree. Thankfully Tanner was no where to be seen. She was pulling out a space themed set of pajamas that Leo had picked out before she grabbed the bag from the grocery store and removed the package of training pants before she tore it open and pulled a crinkly pair of training pants out. She set it on the ground next to the pajamas before taking the package and stowing it away in the bottom drawer of the dresser that belonged to Leo.

“Okaey dokey, arms up,” Desiree said.

“I got it,” Leo sputtered before he quickly pulled off his shirt and pants by himself. He took a breath before he pulled down his underwear going red in the face as he stepped out of them. Desiree made no reaction to his naked state as she held the pull-up out for him to step into. She pulled it up to his waist and made an adjustment to the waist band before sitting back on her knees.

“Not so bad, right?” she asked. Leo turned to see himself in

the mirror. The pull-up had blue sides and on the front was the smiling face of Chase from the Paw Patrol. He then turned around to see a tail printed on the back.

“I guess not,” Leo said, though still wearing a dour expression.

“They're not too tight are they?” Desiree said as she pulled at the side a little. “It looks like you and RJ got the right size.”

Leo was about to agree before he saw the door swing open and Tanner came sauntering in coming to a stop and having to do a double take when he saw what Leo was dressed in. Leo went to say something but could only sputter. Tanner's face twisted up as he dashed towards Leo who thought he was going to pounce on him for some reason. Yet Tanner came in between Leo and Desiree as he stood in front of Leo to protect him.

“What are you doing to him?” Tanner shouted.

“I'm not doing anything,” Desiree said in a calm and controlled manner her face showing a sort of resolve that seemed to suggest that she was expecting this reaction.

“Why in the world would you make him wear that,” Tanner yelled not backing down for a minute. “I knew it, I just knew it, you aren't any different. You're just as bad as them.”

“Tanner stop,” Leo yelped. Tanner whirled around to face Leo.

“C'mon Leo we gotta,” Tanner began to say as he grabbed Leo by the forearm to start leading him away.

“STOP,”” Leo yelled pulling his arm away and causing Tanner to pause with a confused look upon his face. “She didn't do anything to me,” Leo said lowering his voice. “I-I have to wear this,” Leo stuttered.

“Leo I don't care what they told you, but its a lie,” Tanner said.

“It's not,” Leo said. “I wet the bed, and Desi had nothing to do with it. It started back at Hawthorne. But I just couldn't tell you cause I was embarrassed.”

Leo then began to explain in more detail the series of events that had lead him to this point. Tanner listened on with a baffled look on his face. When Leo had finished he looked up at Tanner with a meek look of shame having gotten everything out in the open. Tanner's face then softened and to the surprise of everyone he hugged Leo.

“I can't believe those bastards did that too you,” Tanner said before releasing him. “But we'll get you some help.”

“Tanner you don't need to worry about that,” Desiree said.

“I can't let him stay like this,” Tanner protested. “I'm sure the doctors could give him some medication or whatever.” Desiree smirked.

“No doctor will give Leo medication for something like this, he doesn't need it.” Desiree said gathering up the pajama shirt and putting it on Leo. “We're just going to deal with this the old fashioned way,” Desiree said as she then held the pants out for Leo to step into, which he did grateful to at least cover up. “He will grow out of it naturally,” Desiree said. “Now

Leo is going to turn in early since he needs the sleep. You had a pretty long day too, so it might not be a bad idea for you to join him."

Tanner's mouth twisted up a little before he smiled.

"You might be right," Tanner said stretching out his arms and giving a big yawn. "I think I'll hit the hay."

"Sounds good," Desiree said as she lead Leo over to his bed. Leo crawled under the covers as Desiree tucked him in a little. She then went to the door before turning back around.

"Don't forget to brush your teeth, RJ and Leo picked up new toothbrushes at the store." Desiree said before leaving the room. Tanner waited until he knew she had walked far enough down the hall before going to the door and shutting it.

"Get out of that bed," Tanner said looking at Leo before he grabbed the backpack he had gotten at Hawthorne as he went to the dresser and began to throw clothes into it."

"Why?" Leo asked sitting up sensing some urgency within Tanner.

"We're leaving so hurry up and get packed." Tanner said throwing Leo's backpack on his bed.

"Is this about the umm..." Leo said stopping himself finding that he couldn't even say the word out loud.

"That's not it," Tanner said. "Though it does complicate things for sure."

“Tanner, I don't think,” Leo began before Tanner held up his hand cutting him off.

“Leo, just trust me,” Tanner said as he looked at Leo with a grave look. “We have got to get out of here...tonight.”

Chapter 12

To Build a Nest: Chapter 12 - Chapter 12

Hasty Decision

Leo was on his feet the backpack that Tanner had packed for him slung across his shoulder. Tanner was serious about this, he intended for them to run away and Leo still couldn't figure out why.

“Tanner stop for a second,” Leo said grabbing onto Tanner's arm to stop him. “Do you really think this is okay, I mean where are we going to go?” Leo asked.

“I don't know we just gotta go somewhere, anywhere.” Tanner said pulling his arm back.

“At least tell me why,” Leo said. His previous attempts to get Tanner to explain himself had only been met with the excuse that he didn't have time to explain at the moment. “I'm not leaving until you tell me,” Leo said crossing his arms ready to stand his ground. Tanner gave him an incredulous look which Leo countered by raising his eyebrows at him.

“Okay fine,” Tanner said. “Today they made take a bunch of test mostly stuff that was like school.”

“So you're mad that they made you take test,” Leo said cocking his head a little with an annoyed look. It was just like Tanner to overreact like this over something like that.

“Let me finish,” Tanner said. “I expected stuff like that, I've been through it before. Anyways I got done and I went to go find the Cindy lady to give it to her so I could get out of there and that's when I overheard her and Desi talking in the hall. They were kind of whispering but I heard them clear as day. Apparently the state is doing an investigation and while that's happening they are going to keep us in the system, at the end of the week I'm going to live with a foster family and you are going to an orphanage.”

Leo felt the breath go out of his chest. That couldn't be true. If that happened he and Tanner would be separated.

“Worst comes to worse and the investigation finishes up and they find no wrongdoing by Hawthorne and they return us. Me to that other family and you go right back with your parents.” Tanner said pointing a finger into Leo's chest.

“B-but Desi and RJ wouldn't do that,” Leo said as if Tanner was lying to him.

“They. Are. Not. Going. To. Help. Us.” Tanner said punctuating each word. “Even if I'm being fair to Desi it didn't sound like she liked the idea but even she said there wasn't much they could do.”

“Ok I understand,” Leo said. It was a disappointment to leave, especially since RJ and Desiree had seemed so nice, but given the stakes Leo knew he had to agree with Tanner. “I'll get Timothy.” Leo said as he went towards the rabbit's cage.

“You can't,” Tanner said with some sadness.

“But he's my friend, I can't just leave him,” Leo exclaimed. Tanner was regretful of the choice but there wasn't anything he could do.

“Leo you've never been on the streets like I have, there is no way we can take Timothy,” Tanner said. “We are going to have enough problems keeping ourselves fed and we are going to have to be able to move at a moment's notice. We can't take care of him. He has to stay here.” Leo looked grief stricken as he opened the cage door gathering Timothy up into his arms.

“I know you're right,” Leo said nuzzling the rabbit. “I just hate to leave him, we escaped all together.”

“We did,” Tanner said placing a hand on Leo's shoulder. “But we gotta think about whats best for him. Desi and RJ are good people even if they can't help us, they'll take care of him.”

“I'm so sorry,” Leo whispered as he touched noses with Timothy as the rabbit stretched up to meet his face. Leo then put him back in the cage wiping away a few stray tears. “Lets go before I change my mind,” Leo said.

“We'll get some supplies first and then sneak out,” Tanner said.

Meanwhile Desiree was coming out of the master bathroom into the bedroom where RJ sat at the end of the bed watching Tv. She was in a bathrobe after taking a shower. The whole day she had been walking around with a heavy heart knowing

what the boy's fate was ultimately going to be. She had decided that tomorrow they were going to have to tell them. It didn't sit right with her. She felt as is she were failing them after they had reached out for her help. Desiree sat on the edge of the bed before reaching over and grabbing the remote muting the volume.

“Something you want to talk about?” RJ said looking over at her.

“Yeah,” Desiree said quietly. RJ moved back resting himself up against the headboard of the bed all ears for whatever Desiree had to say. She was silent for a moment before she turned to him.

“What do you think of the boys?” she asked.

“I mean I think they're both pretty great but they have some problems, why what do you think about them?” RJ asked.

“I think Tanner is a little rough around the edges but I can tell he has a big heart and Leo is a really sweet kid.” Desiree said.

“Desi what's this really about,” RJ said sensing that she was hesitant to say something.

“I guess I've just been thinking a lot about whats going to happen to them in the future. It seems Cindy doesn't really have much she can do, they're going to be separated.” Desiree said looking down at the ground.

“Yeah,” RJ responded quietly. “I really wish there was something we could do.”

“Maybe there is,” Desiree said with some interest, although she was a little hesitant to even float the idea out there.

“What are you scheming?” RJ asked as his eyes narrowed a little.

“I mean you know we are already approved for foster placements since we did the classes,” Desiree said as she ran her finger across the blanket not even looking up at RJ.

“I'm aware,” RJ said raising an eyebrow. “But I thought we agreed we wouldn't take any foster kids on until Kaylee was a little older.

“Even so,” Desiree said getting to her feet as turned to face RJ. “I just can't stand the idea of those two being separated, especially knowing that there was something I could have done.”

RJ proceeded to get up from the bed and walked over to his wife before hugging her.

“You don't have to convince me,” RJ said. “I'm on your side.”

“You really mean it,” Desiree said looking up at RJ.

“Of course,” RJ laughed. “I mean they've only been here a couple of days but I already feel like I would do anything for those two.”

“Great,” Desiree said as she went and grabbed her phone as she began to type out a text to Cindy.

“I still have a couple of favors that I can call in that will make

it easy for Cindy to pull some strings for us." She sent the message before placing the phone on the bed as she and RJ then stared at it.

"Ya think she'll get back to us right away?" RJ asked as they stood.

"I mean its not like she can flip a switch right now, but if she is confident enough that it will work she'll say so. A long minute then passed in silence. As the two stood they were starting to feel that they would have to wait for tomorrow for an answer.

The phone dinged.

Desiree swooped it up. As she read the message a small smile spread across her lips.

"She says that there is nothing that would stop us," Desiree said looking up at RJ.

"Now we just have to tell the boys," RJ said. "Although I guess we'll have to wait till tomorrow."

"I can't wait," Desiree said throwing her hands up.

"Lead on," RJ said with a smirk.

As they opened the door to the boys room they discovered that the beds were empty. They then heard some rustling coming from the kitchen. The two looked at each other with questioning looks as they walked down the hall towards the kitchen. Desiree flipped on the lights where they caught sight of Leo who spun around to face them with a shocked look as

he held a loaf of bread in his hands. His eyes bulged out their their sockets as they stood in silence looking at each other. Tanner came out of the pantry with a jar of peanut butter in his hands.

“What are you –“ Desiree began to say before she stopped having to catch a jar of peanut butter that came flying in her direction, Tanner had already dashed across the kitchen barreling into RJ as if he was holding him back.

“LEO RUN,” Tanner screamed as Leo took of into a sprint towards Desiree. He ducked under her at the last moment taking off down the hall towards the front door.

Leo got to the front door, he knew he just had to get out. He got the front door open but before he could flee he felt two arms wrap around his torso from behind and pluck him off the ground as Desiree now held him held close to her body. Leo jerked about wildly screaming at the top of his lungs. As they turned around Leo saw RJ coming out of the kitchen as he held Tanner in much the same way. Tanner was yelling out every expletive he knew as he tried to thrash about and get free but RJ was far too strong for him.

“Get them to the room,” RJ said as he carried Tanner off followed by Desiree and Leo. Once in the room they plopped both boys on Tanner's bed before RJ went and closed the door before he proceeded to stand guard in front of it. Leo was in tears so overcome with fear and adrenaline. Tanner was already on his feet standing in front of Leo, his tiny hands already balled up into fist looking ready to throw hands.

“Were you guys trying to run away?” Desiree asked noticing the plump bags still on their back.

“We aren't staying here any longer,” Tanner yelled. Desiree and RJ looked at one another wondering if the boys had possibly overheard them somehow, both of them a little downtrodden to hear that the boys were apparently upset that they were going to be taken in as foster kids.

“Tanner just listen,” Desiree said calmly hoping to try and get them calmed down.

“No,” Tanner shouted back. “I heard everything about your plan. You won't help us, you just want to get rid of us and be done with it. I won't go to some foster home and I won't let you put Leo in an orphanage. We're staying together whether you like it or not.”

Desiree sighed a little as she took a chair from the side and brought it to the middle of the room before sitting down. It was clear to her now what had happened. Tanner had overheard a conversation that she didn't want him to hear under any circumstances. Still she was a little relieved to hear that is what he was mad about. What she was about to say would certainly be met more positively at least in her mind.

“No one is getting separated, in fact you two aren't going anywhere,” Desiree said.

“What do you mean?” Tanner asked as his fist lowered and Leo's crying subsided into little sniffles.

“Me and RJ have talked it over. If you guys are okay with it

we are prepared to take you on as fosters."

"We don't need to be taken care of," Tanner growled going back on the defensive. "We'll take our chances on the streets."

"Do you really think you can make it out there on your own?" RJ asked still standing at the door.

"I've done it before," Tanner replied.

"And how did that work out for you?" Desiree countered. Tanner went to say something before sitting back on the bed crossing his arms muttering something under his breath. "I'm not trying to be mean," Desiree said apologetically. "But you need to think about this rationally. You on your own is one thing but it wouldn't just be you. Besides since you were listening in you would know the state has its eyes on you. If you left now they would come looking. Do you think you'll be able to hide from the police?"

Tanner pursed his lips looking deep in thought before giving a shrug as if he did really think he could evade the cops. Yet Tanner was aware that if they were caught they would not be returned to Desiree and RJ they would be taken to where the state had wanted them originally, and that meant they would be separated.

"So Tanner do you agree to staying here?" Desiree asked.

"Its up to Leo," Tanner said. Leo's head snapped as he looked at Tanner with some surprise.

"W-Why me?" Leo sputtered. It was clear to Tanner that he

wasn't going to be able to say yes. He was far too resistant to the idea. He had too much baggage. But if Leo did it he would go along with it.

“Because you're better with this kind of stuff, I'm too much of a hothead to make a good choice here.” Tanner said. “Whatever you decide though I'll accept it.”

Leo looked at all the faces that were now staring at him. He couldn't figure out if Tanner was messing with him. Why would he leave this up to him? But he could see no trace that Tanner wasn't serious. Leo thought for a moment. What was there to decide? They really only had one good option in front of them. Yet Leo did hesitate a moment. It would be kind of weird to think of Desiree and RJ as parents. Would they expect to be called mom and dad? Leo felt an awkward feeling in his chest. Just a couple of weeks ago he was relishing in the thought that he would never have to listen to his parents ever again. There was also the fact to consider that he and Tanner were eighteen. If Leo agreed would that somehow be admitting that he really was a little kid who needed someone to take care of him?

“We'll stay,” Leo said after some time. “But If its alright with you I don't want to call anyone mom or dad,” Leo said bringing up part of the blanket to cover his face.

“Yeah, I'm not doing that either,” Tanner agreed.

“We aren't expecting that,” Desiree smirked. “But now that we are fostering you the state will be expecting some things from us if they are going to allow you two to stay, so their

will be some changes."

"Here it comes," Tanner grumbled as Leo took the blanket down, bracing himself to hear what Desiree meant.

Chapter 13

To Build a Nest Chapter 13 - Chapter 13

I love this so much. My two favorite boys are learning to adapt to their situation. I hope Desiree will eventually piece together that they are/were 18. She seems to get little pieces to the puzzle here and there.

Leo is such a a worrywart, he needs to relax but I am also glad to see he stuck up for himself against tanner.

Tanner has to realize that while he might be on his own journey at Kindergarten, Leo is still by his side facing his own set of challenges.

They are still together and survived Hawthorne against all odds.

I kind of want Leo to have a melt down and tell his truth, he has a lot of hidden anxiety and big unresolved feelings from when he was 18. Between Tanner and Leo, Leo had the worst original childhood, so I think he might need to explode a bit and hopefully tanner will understand that Leo is caught between two worlds.

One of being his old brainwashed self and the other of this new life where he has freedom to explore his own wants and needs.

Chapter 14

To Build a Nest: Part 14 - Chapter 14

Nice Guy Tanner

Tanner was walking down the hallway of the school a hall pass in his hand. He was on his way to the bathroom even though he did not have to go. Right now, back in the classroom the kids were having carpet time. Tanner was absolutely disgusted by the fact that he was being subjected to something so juvenile. What was he even supposed to learn sitting on a carpet while Ms. Hollis the teacher read them a book? He needed a break from the little kid treatment. Tanner walked into the bathroom to find a scene. There were three boys who looked to be third graders and they were surrounding another kid who had his back up against the wall of one of the stalls near the urinals. Tanner knew the boy they had surrounded, he was a kid from his class. Gordy or something Tanner thought. He hadn't really taken notice of his new classmates all that much. Honestly Tanner had pegged the kid as sort of dorky, which wasn't helped by the thick rimmed glasses he wore and the collared button down shirts his Mother no doubt picked out for him to wear. Tanner sidled up to the urinal not really caring what was going on.

“What grade are you in kid?” one of the boys asked.

“Um kindergarten,” Gordy stumbled in his nasally falsetto.

“Don't you know anything,” one of the other boys said.

“Kindergartners use the bathroom down the hall. This one is only for big kids. We don't want you getting baby germs all over it.”

“I-I didn't know,” Gordy mewled. “Its the closest one.”

Tanner had finished his business and he was leading up against the wall watching things play out, and it wasn't sitting well with him.

“Guess we'll just need to teach you,” said another boy. As Tanner watched Gordy's face go a little pale he could no longer stay on the side.

“Why don't you just back off,” Tanner said approaching the boys.

“When did you get here?” one of the boys said surprised. “What grade are you in?”

Tanner pursed his lips. He hated answering that question.

“He's in my class,” Gordy piped up. Tanner looked at the kid with a weary look – didn't he have enough sense to know when to keep his mouth shut?

“Oh I see,” one of the third graders said placing a hand on Tanner's shoulder. “Guess we'll have to teach you too.”

Tanner's eyes looked over at the hand on his shoulder. A wicked little smile came to his face. This was certainly what he needed to blow off some steam. It was perfect too, nobody would blame a little kindergartner for defending himself against a gang of older boys. Tanner grabbed the other kids

hand twisting back his fingers causing the boy to let out a little whelp.

“Hey kid,” another goon said pushing Tanner back hard. Tanner didn't hesitate as he barreled back into the boy's stomach causing him to stumble back into the wall. Tanner then put up his fist jumping a little on his feet as if he were a prizefighter. The other boys looked at him a little surprised as they gave nervous glances at one another. A second later they lost their nerve.

“We'll remember this kid,” one of the boys shouted as they scurried out of the bathroom. Tanner watched them leave throwing his arms up. He was kind of disappointed. As far as scraps went that wouldn't even rank among the mediocre ones, it had been over before it even started. With his little diversion over he walked over to the sinks and began to wash his hands. Afterwards he turned around to see Gordy still standing in his spot looking a little anxious.

“You coming back to class?” Tanner asked as he began to make for the door.

“Oh uh yeah,” Gordy said as he scurried catching up to Tanner in the hallway. “Thanks for helping me,” the boy said.

“Don't mention it,” Tanner said. Gordy felt a little nervous to be walking next to Tanner. It had been a couple of days since he had shown up in the class and it seemed he mostly kept to himself. In fact Gordy would have to admit he had been a little scared of Tanner. The new kid never talked to any of the other kids, at lunch he always sat in the corner as far away

from the others as he could and even at recess he never played with anyone either. Some kids had tried to play tag with him on the first day and Tanner had barked at them scaring them off. Gordy was a little surprised that Tanner had actually saved him, if anything Tanner seemed more like the type to join in with the older bullies.

“Why did you help me?” Gordy finally blurted out before covering his mouth. He winced. His Mom always told him he asked too many questions, something about an overabundance of curiosity – whatever that meant. Tanner stopped and looked at Gordy as his brow furrowed. Now he had done it, Tanner was probably going to yell at him or beat him up for being annoying or something.

“I felt like it,” Tanner said with a shrug. “Plus those guys rubbed me the wrong way, they thought they could just make you do whatever they wanted because they were older,” Tanner paused for a moment. “Lets just say I have a real problem with that.”

Getting back to the classroom the boys went their separate ways as the class was now at tables working on their letters. Today was vowels. Gordy kept on sneaking glances over at Tanner having become beyond curious about him. He could see Tanner tracing out the letters on his worksheet his face twisted up a little as if he were concentrating. Ms. Hollis the teacher, leaned over for a moment before saying something Gordy couldn't hear before she took Tanner's hand into her own and they traced out some letters together. Tanner then looked up at her with a smile as she gave him a couple pats

on his shoulders. As soon as she turned her back though Gordy saw Tanner give a scowl before going back to his paper. The day went on and it was time for afternoon recess. Gordy spotted Tanner walking the perimeter of the playground by himself. Gordy stood a little ways off. He finally worked up enough courage to approach. In some ways he felt kind of sad seeing Tanner being all alone. Not that Gordy's own situation was much different, not like he had any friends either, in fact Tanner was the first kid that had actually been nice to him. Most of the other kids had just ignored him. He always had trouble talking to the others.

“Umm D-do you want to play...maybe?” Gordy asked as he let the tips of his fingers touch against one another.

“I don't play,” Tanner said somewhat gruffly.

“So what are you doing?” Gordy asked.

“Walking,” Tanner said as he continued walking along the black plastic perimeter that surrounded the playground, one foot in front of the other.

“Oh do you think I could walk with you?” Gordy said with a pleading look.

“Look kid –“ Tanner began.

“Gordy,” the boy interjected. “My name is Gordy.”

Tanner was silent for a moment as he gave Gordy a once over before shrugging his shoulders as he resumed walking along the path. The two of them walked around the playground in

silence. As they neared a corner for the umpteenth time Gordy gasped as he scurried over to a mud patch kneeling down in front of it. Tanner came up from behind taking some interest in whatever had elicited the reaction.

“Frogs,” Gordy smiled turning to Tanner showing that the boy had a little frog in his hand. Tanner crouched down next to him to see lots of little frogs hopping around in the mud. “It rained this morning so their coming out of the ground,” Gordy said. Tanner picked up one of the frogs letting it hop around his hand. The boys sat for several minutes picking up the frogs and letting them hop from one hand to the other. Gordy was surprised to find Tanner laugh a few times.

“You like animals?” Gordy finally asked. “I think they're really cool.”

“I don't really care all that much,” Tanner said. “But Leo would probably think this was really cool.”

“Whose that?” Gordy asked.

“Just some kid I live with,” Tanner said.

“Is he your brother?” Gordy then asked concluding that is what Tanner had meant.

“Something like that,” Tanner said looking a little unsure. “I guess we are both foster kids now.”

“So he is your foster brother?” Gordy asked, his inquisitive nature taking over becoming overcome

with a desire to find out everything about Tanner he could.

“Is he older?”

“We're the same age,” Tanner replied.

“Oh so is he like in a different class?” Gordy asked looking around the playground waiting for Tanner to point him out.

“No, he doesn't come to school,” Tanner said realizing what he had said. “I mean he's like younger but also not,” Gordy cocked his head in confusion. “He is younger but he's big in other ways,” Tanner reiterated. “He's pretty smart, kind of like you actually.”

Gordy felt his face flush a little red at the compliment.

“I'm not smart,” Gordy said shaking his head.

“What are you talking about,” Tanner laughed. “You're always raising your hand and the teacher is always putting gold stars on your worksheets.”

“That's just because its easy,” Gordy said not seeing the big deal. “I mean I can already read and I know how to add big numbers together too. I just can't write all that well yet.”

“Doing better than me,” Tanner muttered under his breath. Gordy looked up at him for a moment.

“What's going on over there,” Tanner said moving on quickly as he pointed off to a baseball diamond where a lot of kids had gathered surrounding a tall man with a shaved head.

“Oh Mr. Dutton does baseball during recess on Thursdays.” Gordy answered.

“Baseball eh,” Tanner said looking off in the distance. “Lets go check it out,” Tanner then said as he began to walk off.

“That's okay, I'll stay here,” Gordy said with some apprehension.

“What you don't like baseball,” Tanner asked looking at Gordy quizzically.

“I do,” Gordy yelped back. “I watch it with my Daddy all the time, its just that I'm not really good at sports and the big kids play too.”

“C'mon,” Tanner said grabbing Gordy by the wrist. “You'll never get better if you don't practice.”

Gordy followed along with Tanner keeping a little distance. As they came onto the baseball diamond Tanner marched right up to the P.E teacher Mr. Dutton.

“Can we play?” Tanner asked motioning to Gordy behind him. The man looked a little surprised as no other kindergartners had ever wanted to join before he gave a big smile.

“Of course,” the man boomed. “You two can be on the batting team.”

Once the teams were made Mr. Dutton then announced that Gordy and Tanner being the youngest would be the first up to bat.

“Aww c'mon Mr. D,” a boy whined. “They're little kids they're both going to strike out right away.”

“Christopher this is about good sportsmanship and respecting our teammates,” the man tutted, before turning to Gordy and Tanner. “So which one of you is going first, want to do rock paper scissors to decide?”

“Gordy can go first,” Tanner said pushing Gordy forward a little.

“W-wh-what,” Gordy stammered as Mr. Dutton placed a helmet on his head. Gordy went up to the plate holding the bat up shakily. Mr. Dutton pitched the ball to him underhand. Gordy swung spinning around a little before falling onto the ground. He got to his feet as he pushed the helmet back up on his head. Mr. Dutton told him to keep his eye on the ball. As the next pitch came Gordy swung wildly missing completely yet staying on his feet this time. He could see the kids in the field laughing a little while there were noticeable groans from his own team. Gordy could feel tears coming to his eyes. What was he doing here? Why did he follow Tanner? Just then he felt a hand on his shoulder, he turned to see Tanner standing next to him. Tanner made a line in the sand near where Gordy stood in the batter's box.

“When you swing lift your front foot over that line,” Tanner instructed. “And you don't have to swing super fast.”

“But how do I know when to swing?” Gordy asked. Tanner smirked.

“I'll tell you when,” Tanner said before giving Gordy a pat on top of the helmet. Gordy took up his stance as his heart began to beat.

It all seemed to happen in slow motion as Mr. Dutton pitched the ball. Gordy watched it coming towards him. He heard Tanner yell swing and he did just that. His eyes were closed as he felt the ball make contact with the bat letting out a sharp ping. Gordy opened his eyes to see the ball skittering down the third base line. Gordy looked back at Tanner.

“Run,” Tanner said pointing. Gordy nodded and took off making it to first base. He stood his hands on his knees breathing heavily. He couldn't believe it, he had hit the ball. Not just that he had made it on base.

It was then Tanner's turn as he stepped up to the plate. Mr. Dutton pitched the ball to him underhand. Tanner didn't make a move as he let the ball go past him.

“Strike one,” the boy playing catcher called out. Tanner stood up straight.

“Could you pitch it overhand?” Tanner called out to Mr. Dutton. The man gave a questioning look before nodding. The next pitch came in and Tanner swung hard creating loud clang of metal as the ball sailed over Mr. Dutton looking completely caught off guard. The kid playing shortstop jumped to try and catch it but missed as the ball plopped down rolling into the outfield. Gordy was still watching the outfielders scrambling for the ball when he turned to see Tanner barreling towards him.

“Gordy run,” Tanner yelled waving his arms wildly. Gordy took off running towards the bases with Tanner behind him. Gordy made it to home base, he came to a stop completely

unaware of what to do next. He heard a whoosh of air go past his head before he felt his legs go out from under him as Tanner slid into home colliding into Gordy in the process. Gordy sat up looking over to see Tanner still on the ground his leg outstretched onto home base as the catcher had his glove resting on Tanner's chest.

“Safe, safe,” Mr. Dutton came running up to home plate waving his hands through the air. As everyone got to their feet Gordy found himself surrounded by teammates as they all gave hoots and hollers and slaps to his helmet. Gordy was flabbergasted. He had actually scored, everybody was happy with him. He had never felt such a rush of excitement in his short life. The rest of the game proceeded on. At one point the ball had rolled to Gordy in the outfield. He picked it up but when he went to throw it he found it only dribbled out of his hand pathetically before another kid came from behind and threw it into the infield.

Recess soon came to an end yet back in the classroom Gordy was still shaking. He couldn't get over the feeling he had felt. He kept looking over at Tanner who seemed so calm and collected. Gordy could not fathom how Tanner could seem to not care that they had done something so amazing. Even Mr. Dutton had been impressed. All Gordy wanted to do was stand up on the table and shout. He could only conclude that this was all normal for Tanner who seemed like he could do anything in Gordy's eyes. Tanner probably did amazing things like this everyday. Near the end of the day the class was released for a little free-time in the classroom before the

bell rang. Gordy found Tanner at his table stuffing some blank worksheets into his folder.

“What are you doing?” Gordy asked. Tanner spun around with a look of surprise. He gave out a sigh of relief seeing that it was just Gordy.

“They're for Leo,” Tanner said closing up the folder. “I'm teaching him how to read.”

“Oh,” Gordy said nodding.

“Or well I guess I should say I'm trying to,” Tanner said with some frustration.

“He might be too little,” Gordy offered understanding how tough it was to get little kids to listen. He

had a little cousin who never seemed interested in all the cool facts Gordy tried to tell him.

“He's not,” Tanner said a little defensively causing Gordy to take a step back a little worrying that he had upset Tanner. “He can do it, but I'm not the greatest teacher.”

“I could help,” Gordy piped up. “I'm pretty good at it, so I could come over maybe.”

Tanner nodded a little looking as if he were thinking on it.

“That might work,” Tanner said rubbing his chin. “You two would probably get along great.”

Gordy was happy to hear that Tanner was open to the idea. He had never actually been invited over to another kids house

after all. Before he could try and cement some sort of plan Ms. Hollis interrupted.

“Tanner dear, I need you to put this in your take home folder,” she said handing him a paper. Tanner took it and looked at it for a moment although Gordy could tell he didn't really know what it was. “Its a reminder for parent teacher conferences,” Ms. Hollis explained. “They're happening next week and I haven't gotten an appointment from either your Mommy or Daddy yet.”

“They're not my parents,” Tanner said with some offense. Ms. Hollis looked surprised for a moment before she gave Tanner an understanding smile.

“I know that, but they are the ones taking care of you right now, and they'll want to know how you are doing in school, so make sure you give this to them after school.” Ms. Hollis then left. Tanner furrowed his brow before crumpling up the paper and throwing it into the trashcan. Gordy's eyes widened at Tanner's rebellious display.

“You're not going to give it to them?” Gordy asked dumbfounded that Tanner would disobey the teacher like that.

“Its not important,” Tanner said.

The bell to go home then rang as the kids made their way to the cubbies to grab their backpacks. Walking out into the front of the school Gordy saw a woman holding a baby with a younger boy next to her. She waved to Tanner.

“Yeah, yeah I see you,” Tanner muttered.

“Is that Leo?” Gordy asked looking at the younger boy who seemed to be staring off into space at the moment.

“Yeah that's him,” Tanner replied.

“So that's your Mom then...” Gordy said before quickly catching himself. “I mean the lady you live

with.”

“Her name is Desi,” Tanner said nodding his head as if to tell Gordy he had not taken offense.

“Um well if you want I could get my Mom to come talk to her and we can have a play date.”

“Woah hang on there,” Tanner said hurriedly. “I don't think that's a good idea.”

Gordy looked at Tanner. He gave a sad look. Of course that was a stupid suggestion. Gordy kicked himself a little, he had been so eager that he hadn't even thought about the possibility that Tanner had just been being nice. It was perfectly reasonable in the boys mind to think that Tanner didn't actually want to play with him.

“Look its just we're busy this week, okay,” Tanner said.

“I get it,” Gordy said quietly.

“But soon,” Tanner added. Gordy looked up. It didn't look like Tanner was lying to him at the moment, not that he would know even if he was.

“I guess.” Gordy said before he started to fiddle with his

fingers. “Um we can still play together tomorrow...I mean hang out or whatever.” Gordy said careful to use the terms Tanner seemed to prefer.

“Of course,” Tanner shrugged. “I'll bring a baseball tomorrow.”

“What for?” Gordy asked raising an eyebrow.

“I just noticed out on the field you couldn't really throw so tomorrow at recess I'll teach you so the

next time we play baseball you'll know how.”

“O-only if you really want to,” Gordy said a little nervous at the prospect.

“We don't have to,” Tanner said sounding a little unsure.

“No,” Gordy yelped. “I would like that...its just I don't want to bother you or nothing.”

“You won't be,” Tanner laughed. The boys were silent for a moment. Gordy stood with something on his mind yet part of him was telling him to not ask, it would only make him look stupid and he couldn't bear to find out if he had been wrong about all this.

“Can I ask you a question?” Gordy finally said. Tanner looked at him with some interest as he nodded his head. “Are we friends?” Gordy asked before he closed his eyes wincing as he knew he had really messed things up now. There was a pause before he heard Tanner chuckle a little.

“Yeah Gordy we're friends.” Tanner then waved to him as he walked off to join up with Desi and Leo. Gordy stood frozen as he watched Tanner walk off. Gordy then made his way over to the pick up line. When his Mom pulled up in the car he climbed into the back seat getting himself buckled into his booster seat. Gordy knew he had been acting different that day. Usually he was a meek quiet kid, yet being around Tanner had brought out a different side to him. Tanner was unlike any kid Gordy had ever met. He just seemed so easy to talk too.

“Have a good day at school sweetie?” Gordy's mom asked from the drivers seat bringing Gordy back to the present.

“Oh um yeah it was good.” Gordy said.

“Anything fun happen?” his mom then asked.

“Well I umm...I made a friend today,” Gordy said smiling from ear to ear. His Mom was surprised yet pleased all the same to hear the news. Gordy then gave her all the highlights of his day. How he had hit his first baseball and scored his first run, all with the help of his first friend.

Chapter 15

To Build a Nest: Chapter 15 - Chapter 15

Disturbing the Peace.

Desiree pulled the car into the garage. She got out walking into the living room of the house. She sat on the couch taking her heels off before rubbing the soles of her feet a little before getting up and walking into the kitchen. She saw Kaylee sitting in her highchair her face still a mess from dinner as she chewed on her spoon. Desiree knelt down and gave her a kiss to the top of her head as she used the bib to wipe the babie's face. She then removed the dirty dishes from the tray. She looked over to see Tanner and Leo sat at the table half eaten plates of food nearby. Leo was hunched over a paper with a pencil in his hand.

“Just circle all the ones that have e's in them,” Tanner instructed.

“What are you two doing?” Desiree asked.

“We're –“ Leo began.

“Playing,” Tanner interjected, cutting Leo off. “You know because we're kids, that what we do.” he said sarcastically.

Desiree walked over peering over Leo's shoulder. The paper looked like a worksheet, very similar to the ones that could be found in Tanner's take home folder.

“You aren't making Leo do your homework are you?” Desiree asked.

“I don't have homework,” Tanner said gruffly.

“Lets see that take home folder then,” Desiree said making a grab for the red folder on the table.

“We can go through it now and I can sign off on it.”

Tanner snatched the folder away using his body to cover it.

“RJ already did it,” Tanner said. Desiree gave him a raised eyebrow. Tanner rolled his eyes opening it up. “See,” he said showing RJ's signature on that days box on the calendar sheet. Desiree nodded as she then grabbed up the dirty dishes putting them in the sink.

“Speaking of which,” Desiree said. “Where is RJ?”

“He's in the pantry,” Leo said not even looking up from the paper as he pressed the eraser of the pencil into his cheek looking stumped at whatever he was working on. Desiree walked over to the pantry finding RJ putting away some boxes. She came in closing the door behind her.

“So how did it go?” RJ asked. Desiree gave a RJ a perplexed look. “That bad huh?”

He wasn't surprised to hear the news. Especially after Desiree had called him at the office that morning to inform him that she had just gotten off the phone with Tanner's teacher making a last ditch effort to set up a time for parent teacher conferences. Upon hearing the teacher mention she had sent

home multiple reminders it was clear to both Desi and RJ that Tanner had been hiding this from them. It was decided that Desiree would go under the auspice of a work related thing while RJ would stay home with the kids. They would confront Tanner after the fact.

“I guess I can't say I'm surprised,” RJ said. “Especially since he was upset that he had to go to school in the first place.”

“Actually,” Desiree said. “The teacher had nothing but nice things to say about him. She said he is polite, does his work and apparently he's nice to all the other kids, she even says he's become really close with another kid. A friend apparently.” RJ's mouth dropped a little in surprise.

“She was talking about Tanner, right?” RJ asked. “Our Tanner?”

“I guess he is a different person at school,” Desiree said shaking her head a little. RJ stood thinking for a moment before he smiled.

“This is great news, I mean it sounds like when Tanner is at school he doesn't need to stick to that lie about him and Leo being older so he lets his guard down. I think with a little time he'll come around when he is back home as well.” RJ then looked at Desiree who had a pondering look on her face.

“You don't seem happy,” RJ noticed.

“I am,” Desiree said. “But there was something that sort of bothered me too.” she said as she fished a paper out of her

purse. “Look at this.” RJ took the paper seeing it was a worksheet. There were lines with the letters written out that Tanner had traced over and some other lines where he had written the letters himself albeit a little more sloppy. Further down the sheet were other activities that had to do with letter sounds and the like.

“Looks like he is doing fine to me,” RJ said noting the gold star sticker at the top. Desiree shook her head.

“Its gotten worse,” Desiree said. “That first morning when I had the boys take that test, Tanner did a lot better, not too mention that test was more advanced than whatever was asked of him here.”

“So you think he's making it look like he isn't as smart as he is?” RJ asked with a raised eyebrow.

“That's certainly what it looks like,” Desiree said throwing her arms up.

“Why would he do that?” RJ asked looking at the worksheet as if the answer was somehow contained within it.

“I don't know,” Desiree said shaking her head. “Especially if he is trying to convince the world that he is older than he is.”

Just then the pantry door swung open. Desiree and RJ looked to see Tanner standing in the doorway. He had a concerned look on his face. Both of them were sure that he had heard them talking.

“Um the cops are at the door,” Tanner said pointing. Desiree

and RJ gave each other a look before rushing off to the front door.

Leo was standing in the front hallway looking at the two police officers. His stomach had twisted up into a knot. He knew there could only be one reason the cops were here. Desiree and RJ walked past going to the door as Tanner came and stood next to Leo.

“Should we run?” Leo whispered.

“Not yet,” Tanner said. “Lets just wait for a minute.” The boys watched from afar as Desiree and RJ were now on the front stoop talking to the cops. At one moment Desiree came back inside grabbing her phone from the kitchen. Leo stood as tears started to come to his eyes. This was it. The jig was up. They were going to take him away and send him back to his parents.

Leo then felt two hands come from behind him and wrap him in a hug.

“Don't worry everything is going to be okay,” Desiree said softly.

“They're here to take us away aren't they,” Tanner said, even his tough guy act was faltering.

“No one is going anywhere,” Desiree said.

“But they're the cops,” Tanner hissed.

“And I'm Desi,” she said standing up as she brought the phone up to her ear. “Hey Cindy how fast can you get here?”

she said as she walked up the stairs. A couple of minutes later RJ opened the screen door.

“Tanner, Leo, come out here for a moment,” RJ said motioning for the two of them to come outside. The boys came out onto the front step standing in front of the two police officers. They were both dressed in uniforms and as Leo looked up at them he found himself feeling incredibly small. One of the cops knelt down to the boys level.

“Hey buddy I'm officer Kyle and that's my partner officer Jim,” the cop said looking at Leo. “Do you think you could tell me your name?”

“L-leo,” the boy responded.

“You gotta last name Leo,” Officer Kyle asked.

“Rushton,” Leo said putting his hands behind his back. He felt like he was being interrogated.

The cop then turned his gaze onto Tanner.

“Tanner Beck,” the boy said with a confidence that showed he was no stranger to talking to the police. Officer Kyle then stood up.

“These them?” he asked taking a step aside. Leo let out a squeak while Tanner took in a sharp breath. Standing there was none other than Mr. Gareth.

“That's them all right,” Mr. Gareth said walking closer dabbing his sweaty forehead with a cloth.

“Lets go boys,” Mr. Gareth said as he extended a hand towards Leo.

“N-no,” Leo shuddered as he went to move back before he felt himself lifted up by RJ who put him on his hip.

“Now wait just minute,” RJ said. “These two have been placed here by the state as foster kids, you can't just take them.” Leo grabbed onto RJ's shirt tightly, fully believing he was about to be torn away. Even Tanner had taken a step behind RJ.

“I am the administrator of the school they were placed at, I have every legal right to take them into my custody right now.”Mr. Gareth said. “These boys have parents waiting for them. They're legal parents”

Desiree had come back out and was standing behind Tanner with both hands on his shoulders. The most surprising thing to her was when she felt Tanner's shaking hand come up and grab onto hers.

“Bullshit,” RJ growled. “As if I would ever let you take these kids. We found these two wandering around in the woods at night, just what kind of school are you running anyways?”

“You don't have a choice,” Mr. Gareth said shaking his head. RJ and Mr. Gareth went back and forth a few more time before Officer Kyle threw up his hands.

“All rights, lets everyone settle down a minute,” he said. “Officer Jim will stay with the boys while we take this conversation elsewhere,” the officer said motioning with his

hands for the adults to follow him to the driveway.

Leo and Tanner sat on either side of the other officer on the stoop. For his part he seemed to be trying to distract the boys. He was asking Tanner all sorts of questions about school. Tanner was responding as little as possible as he tried to come up with a plan. He knew they needed to run, to get out of there as fast as possible, but he also knew that was impossible. The cop would catch them no problem. Leo was watching the adults talking intently. There was a lot of finger pointing and hand waving. Mr. Gareth was the same as ever. His demeanor showing that he wasn't giving an inch to anyone, throwing around his inflated sense of authority. He was going to get his way, like always.

Another car came parking on the street. Leo recognized the woman getting out. It was Cindy their case worker. Another man got out of the passenger seat. He was wearing a suit yet he didn't have the jacket on. As he looked over at the arguing adults he gave a sort of smirk before he looked over saying something to Cindy that Leo could not hear. The two of them then approached the group. Leo watched as the man seemed to take complete control of the situation. Leo was astonished as the man talked to Mr. Gareth, the portly man's face becoming redder by the moment. His bravodo from a few moments earlier turning to frustration.

“This is ridiculous,” Mr. Gareth exclaimed at on point before the officer got in front of him with a stern look on his face as he talked to him. There were some more words exchanged before Mr. Gareth went into the back of the cop car and

grabbed something before he came walking over to the front stoop where the boys sat.

“Jim a word please,” Officer Kyle called out waving his partner over to him. As the officer left Mr. Gareth knelt down in front of the boys with a pleasant smile on his face. Leo wanted nothing more than to punch him in the face.

“Good, now we have some privacy,” Mr. Gareth said. “These are for you,” Mr. Gareth said handing Tanner and Leo each a disc inside of a jewel case.

“What is it?” Tanner asked sneering at the man.

“They are the welcome videos your families made for you, figured you might want to watch them.”

“Yeah right,” Tanner said shoving the disc back towards Mr. Gareth. “That's not my family.”

“You should watch it,” Mr. Gareth said pushing the disc back towards Tanner. “It will give you a glimpse of the future.”

“Like hell we're going to do that you pig's ass,” Tanner growled. Mr. Gareth shook his head clicking his tongue a little.

“Looks like you've still got that potty mouth Tanner,” Mr. Gareth tutted, “Well no matter we'll have plenty of time to take care of that.”

“What do you mean?” Leo asked feeling a pit growing in his stomach.

“Once this whole mess is cleared up both of you will be returning to Hawthorne,” Mr. Gareth smiled.

“Both of your parents have agreed that you need a little more time before you're ready to be the proper children we all know you can be.”

“N-n-no,” Leo stammered.

“Yes,” Mr. Gareth said a sad smile on his face. “We will have to rethink your treatment. For instance Tanner, I think you've been a bad influence on little Leo here. However, I don't believe in tearing friends apart so maybe it would be better if you were both on more equal footing.”

“You can't,” Tanner choked out realizing at once what Mr. Gareth was saying.

“Whaddya think about that Leo?” Mr. Gareth said giving Leo a gentle slap to his arm. “You and Tanner could be back to being the same age.” Mr. Gareth then got to his feet dusting off his knees.

“Anyways boys, have your fun while you can, I'll be seeing you soon,” he said as he turned around to leave. Leo and Tanner were left on the stoop both of their mouths hanging open a little as a cold feeling hit both of them.

The cops and Mr. Gareth then left as Desiree and the other adults came back to the stoop.

“We can contest this, right?” Desiree said in mid-conversation.

“As long as the investigation is ongoing the boys will not be moved,” Cindy said.

“And after?” Desiree questioned.

“Maybe a discussion for another time,” the man in the suit said as he walked up to Leo and Tanner. He looked down at them with smile.

“Steve Takahashi,” he said extending his hand out. “Family law.”

Leo looked up at the man. He was suddenly struck by the confidence of the man. Leo felt his heart skip a beat. It was easy to see now why the man had seemed to effortlessly take control of the squabbling adults.

“Great a lawyer,” Tanner said standing up and shaking the man's hand. “I want to sue that fat guy,” he said enthusiastically.

“We'll see about that,” Steve laughed.

A little while later Cindy and Steve left as Desiree, RJ, and the boys went back inside. RJ went upstairs to put Kaylee down for bed. Desiree followed the boys into the kitchen.

“You're not really going to let them take us?” Leo asked turning to Desiree with worry filled eyes.

“Of course not,” Desiree said. Yet Leo had heard enough, even she might not be able to stop that from happening. “What did that man give you?” she asked taking the cd case out of Leo's hands.

“Video's from our parents,” Tanner said, his voice dripping with disgust. Desiree looked at the cd in his hand with some intrigue.

“You gonna watch it?” Desiree asked just a little bit curious to see what was on the disc.

“Hell no,” Tanner said tossing his case into the garbage can.

“Oh Tanner,” Desiree said as she went to hug him. Tanner put his hands up stopping her.

“Don't do that,” Tanner said furrowing his brows before jamming his hands in his pockets and walking out of the kitchen. Desiree sighed. She guessed that the moment when he had reached out to her for comfort was a one time thing. Desiree then turned to Leo who was looking down at the case in his hand.

“You want to throw yours away too?” she asked. Leo shook his head.

“I want to watch it,” Leo said. Desiree nodded as she lead him into the living room putting the disc into the player as they sat on the couch. Leo knew he shouldn't want to see it. Yet he needed to see something. He wanted to see what sort of life his parents had envisioned for him. He wanted an answer. What could have been so important to do this to him?

The video started as Leo saw his parents on the screen. They were smiling.

“Hi Leo,” his Mom waved. “The school asked us to make a

video for you.”

“You may already know this, but we moved,” his Dad said.

“Surprise,” his Mom said making jazz hands.

“We thought it would be great to give you a tour of the new house before you got here,” Dad said. His Mom then lead a house tour pointing out all the new rooms. Leo thought the new house was pretty nice although he did find it a little unnerving seeing all the familiar bits of furniture now in a new place.

“And now we've saved the best for last, your new room,” Mom said as she pointed at a little whiteboard hung on a door. There were magnetic letters spelling out “Little Leo's Room” Leo cringed at the sight. His parents had never called him that. It was no doubt Hawthorne's influence. They had always gone out of their way to make Leo feel as small as possible, all to convince him of the little kid he was supposed to become. As the door opened Leo was met by the sight of a room decked out for a little kid. There was a bed with safety railings and a patchwork comforter of red and blue blocks. The walls were painted in a pastel blue with fluffs of white to mimic clouds, inspired by the beachfront property. Leo's name was painted on the wall above the bed. He watched as his Mom went around the room pointing out on the little touches that would certainly make Leo feel like a little kid.

“And here is your desk where you can work on your studies and all those fun arts and crafts,” his Mom said. Leo felt his stomach drop. The desk was arranged neatly with

construction paper and pipe cleaners as well as some crayons and pencils. But what was causing Leo's distress was the two things he saw that he recognized. The cork board from his old room was there, yet all the pictures were gone instead being replaced by a calendar. On his desk was the picture frame that had contained the picture of him and Robert from the birthday party. It was his cherished souvenir of one of the happiest days of his life, but the picture was gone, instead being replaced with an old photo of Leo and his parents that had been taken when he had actually been four. It was now clear to Leo. They had meant to erase him. The person he had been had been thrown away. They were starting over.

Desiree watched the video with some interest. Nothing had really stuck out to her as strange. In fact these people seemed nice and they had prepared a lovely home for their son. Yet something did not make sense to her. She had spent enough time around Leo to see that he was a sweet kid. So why on earth had these people sent him away? She looked over to see that Leo was on his feet. She watched him walk over to the player and eject the disk. He held it in his hands for a moment staring at it with a blank expression.

“YOU MOTHERFUCKERS,” Leo screamed as he slammed the disc on the ground as he began to stomp on it. Leo saw that his stomping was doing no good. He grabbed the disc bending and twisting it before it finally broke in half. Leo let his arms slump to his sides as he dropped the two half's of the disc onto the ground. He took in a couple of deep breaths before the strength went from his legs and he crumpled to the

ground. Tears were falling down his eyes as he cried with uncontrolled breaths that weren't so much a wail but involuntary sounds that Leo couldn't control. He was lost in a whirlpool being pulled deeper down and there was nothing to grab onto, his life could never be normal again. Leo then felt arms wrap around him as Desiree pulled him onto her lap having taken a seat on the ground next to him.

“Just breath,” she said gently as she used a hand to guide his head onto her chest. Leo felt her steady breathing and heard the rhythmic beat of her heart. As he wept, he could feel the swirl subside as he was anchored. It took some time but eventually Leo stopped crying.

“You want to talk about it?” Desiree asked. Leo looked up at her and shook his head with a sniffle – he wasn't ready yet. Desiree gave an understanding look. She looked over at a digital display of the time that read eight o'clock. “Maybe you should take a nice warm bath to clear your head and then head off to bed, hmm?” She suggested. It was clear to her that Leo was tired, in fact he looked like he was running on fumes. Desiree released him as she got to her feet. Leo nodded his head agreeing with her yet he didn't move, he simply didn't have the will to move.

“C'mon you,” Desiree said picking him up off the ground. She took him to the bathroom and gave him a bath. Leo didn't say anything as he just stared straight ahead with a sad look on his face. Afterwards she wrapped him up in a towel and brought him to the his room. Tanner was sitting on his bed. He was chewing on his fingernail and gave no notice that

someone had even entered the room. Desiree got out some pajamas for Leo and set them down on the bed next to him. She waited a moment to see if Leo would go to dress himself. She gave a little sigh as it became apparent that Leo was not going to take any action. The only thing she could get him to do was stand as she got him dressed. She then pulled back the blankets as she lead Leo into the bed before tucking him in.

“Leo, you're going to be fine,” Desiree whispered. Leo just nodded before curling up and pulling the blankets over his head. Desiree then looked over at Tanner.

“Leo is going to sleep, so I'm going to turn off the lights,”' she said. Tanner looked up a little startled as if he had just noticed there were other people in the room.

“Oh yeah, sleep,” Tanner said with a far off look as he got up and stripped down to his underwear before crawling under the blankets of his own bed. Desiree was a little surprised. Getting Tanner to go to bed at a reasonable hour had always been a fight. She walked over to him and knelt down. Earlier when she had seen Mr. Gareth talking to the boys she had wanted to go over and get between them, yet before she could get over there the man had already finished talking to them.

“Tanner, what did that man say to you?” she asked.

“Nothing,” Tanner said. “He just gave us those videos.” Tanner then turned his back as he pulled the covers up tighter. Desiree wasn't buying it for a moment. Mr. Gareth had said something to them, something that had shaken both of the boys. She decided not to push it. Now wasn't the time.

The next morning had found the boys still acting off. Tanner seemed a little better yet he still seemed distracted. Shockingly, he seemed eager for RJ to hurry up and take him to school. It had become apparent to Desiree that Tanner was a different person at school than at the house. Maybe that's why he had seemed so anxious to get there – school was the one place that offered him some respite from everything that was going on here. A place where he could be that different person that didn't have to deal with the events of last night.

Leo was not so lucky. As the morning proceeded Leo had remained quite wandering around the house. The few times Desiree had tried to talk to him he had just responded with little chirps of acknowledgment or grunts before wandering off again. She had been in the kitchen wiping the counter when she turned around to find Leo standing there. She went to say something, but Leo had just started weeping again. Desiree picked him up and held him for awhile as he cried. After a bit she heard him ask to be set down, as she did Leo gave a quick “sorry” before running off. Desiree wasn't exactly surprised by the behavior. She had seen it before. The crying, the anger, the sadness. Yet she hadn't actually ever had a client seek her out to be held while they cried only to run off apparently embarrassed that they had done so.

Later on Desiree made some lunch and went to go and find Leo. She found him in the living room staring out the window into the backyard watching the rain fall outside.

“Leo want some lunch?” she asked. Leo turned his head giving a small nod as he walked into the kitchen. As they sat

at the table he was picking off little pieces of the sandwich she had made for him. Leo picked up a small piece of bread before letting it drop back down on the plate. He then bursted into tears again.

“Oh Leo,” Desiree said sympathetically as she lifted him off his chair and brought him onto her lap cradling him a little. They sat for a couple of minutes while Leo cried it out. He calmed down a little with some residual sniffles.

“I'm sorry,” Leo said wiping his eyes.

“There is no need to be sorry,” Desiree stated. “All part of the process.”

“I just don't know what to do,” Leo mumbled.

“It helps to talk about it,” Desiree said as she brushed some hair away from his eyes. “Maybe you can tell me about that video we watched.”

Leo looked up at her with an anxious look.

“Did it upset you that your parents moved?”

Leo shook his head.

“I don't care about that,” he said. “It was...my room.”

“You liked your old room better, huh,” Desiree said. Leo shook his head again.

“I just don't know why...” Leo said before pausing bracing himself for the terrible truth he was about to verbalize. “What was so wrong with me?” Leo whispered. Desiree didn't know

about Leo's home life and she certainly had some questions for his parents, particularly why they had seen fit to send their four year old away, but to hear Leo say what had internalized in him so strongly made her almost question what else could have happened between Leo and his parents. The idea of a rearranged room causing a little kid to think their parents didn't want them seemed like a hasty conclusion to jump too.

“It seemed like a nice room,” Desiree said.

“Its not the room,” Leo said with some force surprising Desiree. “Its not the stuff that was in their, its the stuff that wasn't...” Leo trailed off. “They got rid of my picture.”

“What picture?”

“The one of me and Rober...” Leo's eyes went wide. He jumped up out of Desiree's lap putting his hands on the sides of his head. “Oh god, I'm such an idiot!” He exclaimed before bolting out of the kitchen. Desiree was left a little befuddled. She got up to go after him as she could hear him now in his room rooting around. As she walked down the hall she was met by Leo who came running out of his room with a cellphone in his hand.

“I need this charged,” Leo said.

Chapter 16

To Build a Nest Part 16 - Chapter 16

Vindication

Leo was squirming in the booth at the coffee shop. Part of him was excited and part of him was beyond anxious. He wondered if this was really a good idea. He looked over at Desiree whom he had asked to stay with him, while RJ, Tanner, and Kaylee were across the street at the mini golf course. Leo hadn't even really told Tanner what they were doing here. He didn't know why, but he felt a little weird about the whole thing. For some reason Leo felt that if Tanner knew he was here to meet up with his old friend he might get jealous. Leo knew it was silly to think that, but he couldn't shake the feeling. Every person that walked in sent Leo's heart into overdrive. He didn't know what he was going to say yet.

Leo recalled how he had even got here. He had brought the phone out to Desiree asking her to charge it. Desiree had placed it on the charging pad next to her own. Leo had waited on pin's and needles as he watched. It had been so long since the phone had been used, he wondered if it would even work. Desiree had just said that if the pad didn't work she would have to try and find a cord. A couple of seconds later a little lightning bolt had appeared on the screen. Leo went to grab it before Desiree stopped him as she explained it would need to charge more before he could use it.

“Why don't you go take your nap,” Desiree then suggested. “Afterwards it will be plenty charged.”

“But I can't,” Leo had whined a little. How could she expect him to fall asleep now?

“Leo,” Desiree had said with the smallest hint of sternness. “You have been all over the place this morning, I think it would do you a world of good to take a little rest.”

Leo had given a little groan, but seeing as the phone couldn't even be used yet, he figured it was better to comply. In the back of his head he was fearful that Desiree would just take the phone away if he misbehaved.

“Just a short one,” Leo mumbled with a pouty face.

“Of course,” Desiree had said patting him on the back as she walked him down to his room. Leo hadn't slept a wink. His mind had been occupied with all sorts of ideas. What was he going to say after all this time? Did Robert even still have the same number? What if he didn't believe it was Leo? After thirty minutes Desiree had popped her head back into the room expecting to find Leo asleep, yet Leo had already shot up from the bed and was on his feet.

“Its been thirty minutes?” he had asked eagerly. Desiree had frowned a little but nodded her head. Leo had raced to the kitchen grabbing the phone. He switched it on and watched with anticipation as the phone booted up. He looked on with a strange sense of deja vu as he was met with an old part of his life. Leo opened up the text message app where he found

the old messages. He hadn't really texted anyone other than his parents or Robert so there were only three message chains. Even though Leo couldn't read, he remembered enough to be able to discern which one belonged to Robert. He clicked on it. Leo was shocked to see hundreds of unread messages as he scrolled through. Leo's hands dropped to his sides with a frustrated huff of air through his nose.

“Whats up?” Desiree had asked.

“I can't read the messages,” Leo had said.

“Want me to read them for you?” Desiree had asked. Leo felt a little awkward at the proposal. He had no idea what the messages even said.

“Umm well its kind of private,” Leo had said looking a little nervous.

“Here lets do this,” Desiree had then said, kneeling down next to Leo and showing him how to get the text messages to be read out to him.

“I'll be back,” Leo then said as he retreated back to his room. He sat on his bed listening to all the messages. The first dozen or so had been Robert apologizing for running away. Then there were a bunch of messages asking Leo where he was and if he was okay. There was then another message which told Leo that Robert had gone over to his house.

“I went to your house and your Dad told me that you had been sent to boarding school,” the text to speech voice read out. “I can't believe that! I told my parents and even they

thought it was harsh, but they said there isn't much they can do. I am so sorry, I feel like this is all my fault. Leo...really I'm sorry. I don't regret kissing you though. That was real and I only hope you feel the same way."

Leo was in tears as he listened on. He wanted so much to reply back to Robert right then and there and tell him he felt the same way. He did regret the booze and all the other things he had done to push his parents to go nuclear on him, yet despite everything, being sent away, being regressed, the one thing he had never regretted was kissing Robert, not even for a second. The rest of the messages played out. Robert had started texting him about all the things that were happening to him, sort of like a journal – so that on the day they saw each other again Leo would be up to speed. Robert told him about the going on at school, the years passed and Leo heard about Robert going to dances with dates and all the gossip of names Leo recognized. It was kind of like a reality show in a way as Leo listened to all the developing story lines. Leo then heard about Robert looking into colleges and trying to decide as well as the impending graduation from high school.

The messages then ended. Leo looked at the phone to see there were none left. He laid on his bed thinking about what to do. Robert certainly seemed happy, maybe he shouldn't bother him. Leo then thought that might be a little unfair. Robert had continuously texted him throughout the years, it would only be fair to let him know he was at least still alive. Leo sat up taking the phone into his hand clicking on the button to write a message. Leo twisted up his mouth as he

looked at the keyboard looking like a bunch of hieroglyphics – he was going to need help. Leo found Desiree in the living room. He approached cautiously, still not sure what he was going to tell her.

“You find what you were looking for,” Desiree had said muting the tv.

“Yeah,” Leo said in a small voice. “I need to send a message, could you type it out for me?” he asked handing the phone to her.

“Sure,” Desiree agreed taking the phone. “Who are you talking too?”

“My friend, Robert,” Leo had replied.

“Oh is this his Mom's phone number or something?” Desiree had asked. Leo shook his head understanding the Desiree probably thought Robert was a little kid like him.

“Robert is an adult, he's eighteen,” Leo replied plainly. Desiree raised an eyebrow. She had to guess that whoever this Robert was must be some sort of family friend, maybe even an older relative of some sort – that is if Leo was telling the truth.

“What do you want to say?” Desiree then asked. She was keen to talk to this Robert person herself, and maybe get some answers.

“Just type, hey this is Leo.”

Desiree typed the message and sent it off. Leo waited

wondering if he would even respond. A couple moments later the phone started dinging rapidly as a flurry of messages were received. Just then the phone began ringing.

“Oh he's calling,” Desiree had exclaimed. Leo saw her finger go to answer it before he leapt forward grabbing her hand.

“Don't answer it,” Leo had yelped.

“Why not?” Desiree probed.

“I just can't talk to him right now, its too much,” Leo said as his face turned into a scared little pucker. “Just tell him I can't talk right this minute.”

Desiree nodded as she sent another text. There was another ding on the phone.

“Okay I understand,” Desiree said reading out the message. “But at least tell me where you are?”

“Where am I?” Leo said cocking his head to the side.

“You mean you don't know?” Desiree then asked surprised. It seemed weird to Leo. He hadn't thought about it in a long time. He remembered getting on a plane. He knew that he had known at some point where he was, yet for some reason he couldn't remember.

“You're in New York,” Desiree then answered. Leo looked back with a surprised look. He still couldn't wrap his head around that.

“You mean like New York City!” Leo had exclaimed.

“Not quite dear,” Desiree chuckled. “New York state, we're actually more than a few hours away from the city.”

“Oh,” Leo said. He really couldn't even imagine where that was on a map, although he still sort of knew what the United States looked like still. “Um I guess you can tell him that.”

Desiree typed out of message telling Robert there location within the state. Leo was left feeling a little put off. He was trying to remember where he had lived before yet, he couldn't actually recall. But he did know it wasn't nearby. Another messaged ding.

“Oh it looks like he's here too,” Desiree said. “Looks like he is here on a college visit to NYU. He says he wants to meet up.”

Leo groaned. It was just his luck to be in this situation. He did want to see Robert more than anything, but not like this. Leo crossed his arms looking down as he shifted his weight from one foot to another deep in thought about what he should do.

“Leo,” Desiree said softly putting a hand on his shoulder. “If he is your friend it might be a good idea to go see him.”

Leo frowned a little as he felt pains of anxiety in his sides. He looked up at Desiree who was looking at him with a reassuring look. In an instant Leo felt the pain dissipate. In that moment Leo was overcome with a feeling that he couldn't quite describe. It just felt like that as long as Desiree was with him he would be okay.

“Alright,” Leo whipsered. “Lets meet up.”

Back in the present Leo squirmed a little in his seat again. He looked up at Desiree and once again felt some calmness return to him. He was glad he had asked her to sit with him, it was doing a world of good for him to have her nearby. Leo took a deep breath looking up at the door again as he saw a man walk through taking the breath out of Leo's chest.

“That's him,” Leo squeaked. It was undeniable. Even though he hadn't seen Robert in years he knew it was him. Leo was flabbergasted. He looked even more handsome now than he had remembered him. Robert came sauntering into the cafe taking some aviators off as he flipped his black shaggy bangs to the side. He looked around looking for Leo whom he thought would be looking older as well. Desiree raised her hand waving at him. Robert caught her sight and looked a little confused as he approached. Leo's heart felt like it would explode out of his chest at any moment.

“Robert, right?” Desiree asked.

“Uh yeah,” he said a little confused. “I'm here to meet someone,” he said looking from Desiree to Leo.

“Why don't you take a seat,” Desiree said motioning to the other side of the booth.

“Sure,” Robert said still a little unsure of what was going on.

“I'm Desiree, by the way,” she said as she and Robert shook hands.

“Do you know Leo?” he asked looking around. “He is here, right?”

“Of course he is,” Desiree said looking down at Leo next to her who had shrunken down in his seat. Robert's gaze then set on Leo, as he looked at him without a hint of recognition.

“Um hi,” Leo squeaked. “Long time no see.”

Robert's lips pursed as his face twisted up in confusion before a second later his mouth dropped.

“L-l-leo!” he sputtered as he slammed his hands onto the table. “W-what...why...how.”

“Its kind of a long story,” Leo said as he looked on anxiously. Then without warning he hid his face into a surprised Desiree's side. “I didn't want you to see,” he mewled with a muffled voice. Desiree put an arm around Leo rubbing his back a little. She could feel him shaking. She looked completely befuddled from Leo to Robert who now was covering his mouth with his hand. There was definitely something weird going on here.

“You seem surprised,” Desiree said apprehensively as he looked between the two of them.

“I mean of course,” Robert said. “The last time I saw him he was fourteen. I was expecting to see my eighteen year old friend.”

Desiree puckered her lips. There was no way. This had to be some kind of trick or something. But why and how had Leo

set this up. There was silence in the booth as Leo finally got the courage to show his face again. He kept looking at Robert for a few seconds before averting his gaze away. Robert's eyebrows were furrowed as he regarded Leo. Robert then slid out of the booth walking over to the other side.

“I missed you man,” Robert said holding his arms out with a smile. Leo face gave way to a smile as he scurried over Desiree before leaping into Roberts arms wrapping his own arms and legs around Robert.

“I missed you too,” Leo said nuzzling into Robert a little. After a long embrace, Robert returned to his seat with Leo sitting next to him.

“Alright so tell me what happened?” Robert said. Leo began to recount the long story of his time at Hawthorn from his first day in the lunchroom all the way up to the night of the graduation where he recounted seeing his parent. Leo however did leave out a great deal of the story, specifically the bed wetting incidents and the time Tanner got spanked.

“So you talked to your parents,” Robert sighed.

“Yeah,”Leo said quietly. “They seemed ready just to pick back up right where they left off, as if nothing had happened.”

“So I think the first thing to do is get you to a doctor, see if they can reverse this,” Robert suggested. Leo shook his head.

“I don't think that's possible.” Leo said. “I mean the people at Hawthorne were pretty clear that there was no way to reverse this, and why would they have something like that in the first

place? When they do something its because they believe their right, no mistakes."

"We gotta try something," Robert said shaking his head.

"Don't be stupid," Leo said curtly. "The doctors would never believe me and Hawthorne would never admit to something like that." Leo said looking graven. He then told Robert about the night Mr. Gareth had tried to take him and Tanner back.

"I know Mr. Gareth," Leo said. "If he suddenly showed up that means he probably has everything figured out, he's going to take me back," Leo said with a shudder.

"That's not happening," Desiree interjected. Leo looked back at her a little surprised but gave a nod back all the same. Robert's phone then dinged as he looked at it groaning a little.

"You gotta go?" Leo asked looking disappointed.

"Soon," Robert said. "I'm with my parents, their back in the city at a Broadway show while I came to see you, I told them I was meeting up with an old friend. We gotta fly out tonight."

"Sorry," Leo said.

"For what?"

"I know you always wanted to see a show on Broadway, but I guess you missed your chance because of me."

"Don't worry about it," Robert laughed. "I would much rather be here, besides there will be plenty of time to see a show. I think I'm applying to NYU."

“Really.” Leo said with a smile. Desiree excused herself saying she was going to send a text to RJ telling him to wrap it up at the mini-golf place. Upon returning he found Robert and Leo laughing and talking like old friends, the age gap between them completely having disappeared as they engaged in reminisces and inside jokes. Desiree sat watching quietly. She had never seen Leo like this. He had seemed like such a little kid in so many ways if not for some little quirks. Yet right in that moment its like she could see it, she could see the real him.

“Okay,” Robert said sitting back. “I really am going to miss my flight if I don't get going.”

“I get it,” Leo said. Robert slid out of the booth and stood facing Leo.

“Now give me another hug,” Robert said. Leo stood up on the booth and walked over to Robert giving him another hug. As they released Leo looked at Robert for a moment before he quickly leaned forward giving Robert a peck to his lips. Robert looked a little surprised before he smiled.

“Been waiting to do that for a long time haven't you?” Robert chuckled giving Leo a small shove to his shoulder.

“Maybe,” Leo said with a smile as his face blushed.

“Look Leo, as much as I would like to pick up where we left off, I don't think that's really possible,” Robert said sympathetically as he rubbed Leo's arm.

“I know,” Leo said looking sad.

“But that doesn't mean I still cant be your friend,” Robert said. “That doesn't change no matter what. You have my number call me anytime day or night. I'm going to be there for you. I love you”

“I love you too,” Leo said nodding. Desiree was smiling as she looked on. Even if she was still trying to wrap her head around all of this, she could see the deep friendship that these two shared. She looked back at the entrance and saw RJ and Tanner standing with Kaylee outside.

“Leo could you go and tell RJ we'll be leaving now,” Desiree said. “I'm gonna quick exchange phone numbers with Robert, just in case your phone service dies.” Leo nodded hopping off the booth seat as he ran off towards the door giving one last stop to wave at Robert before exiting.

Desiree and Robert were silent for a moment.

“Do you believe him?” Robert finally asked.

“I want too,” Desiree said. “But I mean something like this is...” Desiree said as she trailed off. Robert took out his phone and a few moments later he showed Desiree the screen.

“That's Leo right there,” Robert said. Desiree looked a the photo. It was of two boys about nine or ten years old sitting up in a tree. She couldn't deny that the boys looked similar to Leo and Robert.

“So whats the plan?” Robert asked. Desiree twisted up her mouth a little before shaking her head a little.

“I'm going to help them however I can. I just need to figure out what it is they exactly want and how to get it for them.”

“I'll help any way I can,” Robert said. Desiree nodded. It felt good to know they had another person in their corner. They exchanged numbers before Robert took off. Desiree went walking towards the exit. She was in dis-belief in the fact that the truth had come out and it had been what the boys had been saying all along. She wondered what she was even going to say to them now. Just then she caught sight of the boys. They were outside with RJ who had his arms held up in the air as if he were flexing his biceps like a sideshow strongman. Tanner and Leo were hanging on each arm, their legs dangling in the air as they looked to be trying to force RJ's arms to the ground, both of them were laughing. Desiree came to a stop. Even if these boys were eighteen at one point the evidence was too strong. They both had acted like little kids on more than one occasion, especially Leo. Desiree wondered for a moment if it had all been an act. She was torn. On one hand it would be great to think it was, things would be simpler that way. Yet as she looked at the smiling boys who had now returned back to the ground smiling and laughing animatedly, she knew it wasn't an act. She just wondered how much the boys even realized. With everything she had witnessed it was clear, they were acting more like little kids by the day.

Desiree walked up to the group.

“Everything go okay?” RJ asked looking at her.

“Yep,” Desiree said with a smile. “We met Leo's friend and had a nice chat,” Tanner gave a Leo a look at upon hearing that's what they had been doing here. “How did mini-golf go?” Desiree asked.

“Tanner kicked my butt, actually,” RJ said with an embarrassed sort of smile, it seemed he had been genuinely bested by someone he took as a six year old. They all walked back to the car. Tanner kept giving glances back towards Leo as if he wanted to ask something. When they got to the car Tanner crawled into the backseat getting into his booster seat and buckling the seat belt without question. As Leo got into his car seat RJ leaned over and started strapping him in. Desiree watched with some hesitancy. Leo caught her watching and looked a little embarrassed.

“I-I- can do it,” Leo stammered grabbing at the straps as he tried to put them together but his little fingers didn't seem to want to cooperate.

“You were close,” RJ laughed as he took back over and clicked the straps together before mussing up Leo's hair a little. Desiree turned, grimacing a little. Everything had just changed so radically in the span of thirty minutes. What were they going to do? The car ride home was quiet as Desiree thought about everything. She thought about what Leo had said to Robert about trying to reverse what had been done to them, she couldn't help but agree. If Mr. Gareth had chosen now to come forward it could only mean he was confident in getting the boys back and keeping what he was doing a secret. Even if by some miracle they could convince the

authorities that something like this was possible Hawthorne would no doubt get rid of all the evidence. To admit to something like that would be tantamount to confessing to murder. All Desiree had was the words of two people who everyone thought were little kids and some files – files that hadn't even been enough to convince her. Desiree finally came to the conclusion that the most important thing at that moment was to ensure that the boys didn't get taken by Hawthorne. Finally Tanner broke the silence.

“What happened with Leo's friend?” he asked from the back.

Desiree turned around with a pained expression.

“She knows,” Leo said. Tanner looked at Desiree with a shocked expression as she slowly nodded her head.

“Well its about damn time,” Tanner said loudly as he crossed his arms with a look of smug satisfaction.

“Whats happening?” RJ asked, looking somewhat clueless.

“They were telling the truth,” Desiree said with a cringing smile. “They really were eighteen.”

RJ stared ahead at the road with a confused look.

“But that,” he began to say before Desiree placed a hand on his shoulder.

“I know,” she said knowing full well of all the thoughts racing through his head.

“There are a couple of changes I'm going to want to be

making around here," Tanner said acting like some king issuing edicts from his throne. "First off I don't have to go to school anymore."

Desiree took a some air in through her nose, she knew that would be the first thing he said.

"I don't think that's possible," Desiree said as she shook her head.

"But you just said you believe us!" Tanner roared.

"I know," Desiree said as she used her hand to motion for Tanner to lower his voice as she pointed to Kaylee who was asleep. "You have to look at this from an outside perspective," Desiree said.

"What perspective," Tanner said still angry yet keeping his volume down.

"Think about it," Leo said quietly. "Even if they believe us its not like anyone else does." Tanner's brow was furrowed as he looked from Desiree to Leo. "If Desiree tries to tell them we are eighteen without any proof, they'll just think she is crazy and take us away."

Desiree was surprised to hear Leo say this. He seemed to understand the reality of the situation and she was starting to understand the dynamics of their relationship. Tanner was the headstrong leader while Leo was the voice of reason.

"I am going to help you boys get what you want," Desiree said as she looked from Leo to Tanner with a deep sincerity.

“But right now the best thing is to keep you guys close by and out of Hawthorne.”

Tanner face became concerned upon being reminded of the possibility of returning to Hawthorne.

“I guess,” he muttered sitting back in his seat.

“Unfortunately that means we need to keep up appearances,” Desiree said. “And that means you still have to go to school.”

Tanner muttered something under his breath as the conversation ended. Upon getting home, Desiree took Kaylee up to her room to put her down for a nap. She then walked down the hall to find RJ pacing around their room.

“You mind telling me whats going on?” RJ asked looking up at her. Desiree walked over to the files the boys had taken from Hawthorn lifting both of them up and setting them on the bed.

“I guess we start here,” Desiree said. “Its time to make all this make sense.”

Chapter 17

To Build a Nest Chapter 17 - Chapter 17

Big Catch

Tanner sat in the backseat of RJ's truck as the two of them drove along. He was a little miffed that they had moved his booster seat into RJ's truck for the ride, he was also a little miffed that they even made him still sit in the thing. They had just reasoned that even if he was eighteen he was still too short to go without it. Though Tanner did'nt let himself get too mad about it. He knew why they still had to keep up this charade, why he still had to go to kindergarten and why to the outside world he had to keep up the act that he was only six years old. Still even with everything going on Tanner was finding it a little awkward around the house now, Desi and RJ were certainly acting weird. It just seemed to him that they didn't know what to do. Just one example had been Tanner's take home folder. Whereas they had always insisted on going through it with him each and every night asking him about all the things that were in it. Now they just signed it without even looking. Tanner was alright with the situation, after all he hadn't exactly been enthused to have to go through the routine every night either.

It was Leo who had brought it up to Tanner one night. Tanner had been sitting on his bed. He had taken some of the action figures Desiree had bought for him when she had thought he

had been a kid, and he had them set up on dresser in a line. He was shooting them down with a nerf gun. It was something to pass the time. Leo was sitting on his bed watching, his face showing he was deep in thought. They had both had a long talk with Desiree at the kitchen table before. She had asked them to think about what it is they wanted to do, that was after the investigation finished up. She had just told them that they really needed to think about what their future entailed. Tanner wondered what she wanted them to say? She seemed to have focused on a lot of things, mainly the difficulties they were going to have moving forward. Talking about how Leo couldn't read any more and Tanner wasn't doing much better. Tanner had argued that they would get it back. They just needed a little time, but even he knew that was becoming optimistic thinking. Leo hadn't really improved all that much, and as much as Tanner wanted to deny it, he actually felt like he was moving backwards more than forwards. It had struck him one day in class when he had been listening to the teacher explain the names of certain words. She had asked a simple question. Did anyone know what a noun was? No one had raised their hand. For some reason Tanner felt compelled to raise his hand. When the teacher then called on him Tanner suddenly realized he didn't know the answer. He sputtered for a few moments before giving the excuse that he forgot, an excuse that he had heard more than a few times from his overeager classmates.

Tanner had slumped back into his chair. He should have known that...or rather he had known that. It was becoming clear to Tanner that he had been more affected by whatever

Hawthorne had done to him, despite his best efforts. When Leo had finally broached the subject with him, Tanner felt the only thing he could do was stick to his guns.

“What should we do?” Leo had asked simply.

“The plan hasn't changed,” Tanner had said shooting off another foam dart knocking down the Iron Man toy. “We are going to get our own place.” Leo had been quiet for a moment mulling over Tanner's insistence.

“You think that's still possible,” Leo had said more of a statement than a question.

“Of course,” Tanner had said. “We're eighteen aren't we, it will be fine. I'll get a job doing...something and you should talk to Desiree about finding some GED classes.”

“G..E...D” Leo said confused.

“Yeah you know so you can graduate high school and then you can go to college or whatever,” Tanner had replied.

“What about you?”

“Nah,” Tanner said waving his hand. “I'm not cut out for that kind of stuff, but you're smart so you should.”

“I can't even read,” Leo said twisting his face up. Tanner let out a sigh.

“I told you, its going to come back to you, and then once that happens I'm sure all that other stuff will too. You'll see, I bet

by this time next year you'll be studying astrophysics or something."

Leo gave Tanner an unconvinced look.

"I guess if you don't want to live together anymore then we can go our separate ways," Tanner then said giving a side eyed look at Leo.

"No I do," Leo yelped. "You're right, we should stick to the plan." Tanner had just nodded, a little relieved to hear that Leo was still on board. He could only take it as a sign that Leo hadn't completely lost himself yet.

"Hey Tanner," RJ said from the front seat bringing the boy back to the present. "Did you hear me?"

"Huh," Tanner said shaking his head out of the haze he had found himself in.

"I was just asking if you've ever been to a game before, you know like at a stadium?"

"Oh no not really," Tanner said. RJ smiled a little.

"This should be exciting then," RJ said. "Although its too bad Leo couldn't come, poor guy."

"Yeah," Tanner said. He did feel bad for Leo. He had been looking forward to it.

"I did manage to find someone to take the extra tickets," RJ said. "A guy from I work with and his kid will be there too."

“Greeeat,” Tanner said sarcastically. It was just his luck. Now he would have to spend the whole night getting along with some kid. “How old is the kid anyway?” Tanner asked.

“Not sure,” RJ said. Tanner let out a silent sigh. He was hoping that the kid would be significantly older. At least then he might just ignore Tanner altogether. Not long after RJ pulled into the parking lot of the stadium. As he and Tanner got out of the truck RJ stopped him.

“Hang on I got a surprise,” RJ said holding a plastic bag in his hand. He pulled out a clump of clothing and tossed it at Tanner who let it unfurl to see that it was a Dragon's baseball jersey.

“Its a little big for you, but I thought you should wear your colors,” RJ said. Tanner was a little taken aback. The jersey was black with blue stripes with the emblem of the Dragons stitched onto the breast pocket, a replica of the away uniform the Dragons would be wearing that night. Tanner turned the jersey around to see that RJ had even gotten his favorite player, Hector Jimenez.

“You got this for me?” Tanner asked looking at the crisp new jersey with the price tag still hanging from the sleeve.

“Of course,” RJ said. “Although I don't know if he is playing tonight,” RJ mentioned. Tanner pulled the jersey on taking a moment to button it up. “You'll also need this,” RJ said taking out a mitt and handing it to Tanner. “We're sitting in prime home run territory.” Tanner looked at the mitt, he frowned a little awkwardly. He didn't know why, but he felt a

little undeserving of it all. “You like it?” RJ asked noticing Tanner's expression.

“Yeah,” Tanner said quickly. “Its really nice.”

“Good,” RJ said. “Its your night after all.”

Tanner looked up at RJ with a questioning look.

“I just mean, me and Desi know you've been putting up with a lot with having to go to school and all that. I know it can't be easy. So I just felt like I wanted to do something to show you I appreciate your understanding.”

Tanner took some air in through his nose, now he really did feel guilty. No one had ever done anything this nice for him, and he wasn't really sure how to react. Not too mention its not as if going to school was the worst thing in his life at the moment – even though he acted like it was.

Tanner and RJ made their way to the front of the stadium. As Tanner looked up at the large stadium he started to feel excited. It all seemed so big and and new. Walking in Tanner was looking all around seeing all the sights and sounds.

“Stick close,” RJ said putting a hand on Tanner's shoulder as they walked through the sea of people. Tanner understood why RJ was worried. And though he would never admit it he was glad that RJ had a hand on him. It was crowded and with Tanner's small stature he felt like he was seconds away from being washed away in the crowd. They rode up several flights of escalators before reaching their destination. RJ came to a wide open area near some concessions as he began to look

around. Tanner stuck close by, for some reason he was feeling a little overwhelmed. Everything seemed so big and noisy. Tanner felt himself backing up as his back hit a trash can. He looked around realizing RJ wasn't near him anymore. His head swiveled around a little but he still didn't see the man. Tanner's started to feel his chest rising a little more quickly. He let out a tiny whimper.

“Hey RJ,” he called out, his voice shaking a little.

“Whats up?” RJ asked, as Tanner spun around to see him standing near him. “You okay?” RJ asked noticing the nervous look on Tanner's face.

“Yeah, fine,” Tanner said looking away. Why had he reacted like that? Just what had come over him?

“Yo RJ,” a voice called out. Another man with a cougars hat approached.

“Phil you made it,” RJ said giving the man a high five.

“Tanner,” another excited voice called out. Tanner looked shocked to see Gordy run up to him.

“Gordy wha...” Tanner sputtered.

“This so cool,” Gordy said hopping up and down excitedly. “I didn't know you were going to be here.” Gordy then turned to his Dad. “This is my friend Tanner,” he said with a toothy smile.

“So this is the famous Tanner,” Phil said smiling down at Tanner who was still flabbergasted. “I guess the boys are in

the same class and are friends." Phil said to RJ. "Although I didn't know you had a son."

"Oh um well, me and Desi are fostering at the moment," RJ laughed. "But hey this is great, lets go see what our seats are like." The group made their way to their seats. They were above left field. As they all sat down. Phil and RJ sat near the aisle while the boys sat next to one another. RJ turned to ask Tanner what he thought but came to a pause. As he looked he could see an awestruck expression on his face as he looked all around. RJ could see the same look on Gordy's face as well. As he continued to watch he saw Tanner and Gordy looking all around pointing out all the sights to each other excitedly. RJ was then reminded of the conversations he had been having with Desiree. She had been of the opinion that the boys were acting more like little kids by the day. RJ could not say for certain if he agreed. Maybe it was more believable in Leo's case, yet RJ had only ever seen Leo behave like a little kid outside of some rare moments. Desiree and RJ had gone through the files on both boys. Most of it didn't really make much sense. The one thing that was clear was that Leo had been put on something Hawthorne had deemed an accelerated program. RJ didn't know what that entailed but it could be an explanation for his behavior. Tanner had been different though. If it was hard to see Leo as an eighteen year old it was as equally hard to see Tanner as a six year old. However seeing Tanner next to an actual six year old was starting to erode any distinction between them.

"So Tanner you ever been to a game before?" Phil asked.

“Oh um no,” Tanner said seemingly breaking out of his whirl of excitement.

“Its Gordy's first game too,” Phil said. “Lets hope its a good one.” Phil then pulled out his phone.

“Lets get a picture of you two to mark the occasion.”

Tanner gave an apprehensive look. Gordy seemed to agree however as he leaned back into Tanner putting his arms out with a smile. Tanner smirked as Phil snapped a pic. Tanner then pushed the brim of Gordy's hat down.

“You weirdo,” Tanner chuckled, as Gordy laughed sitting up pushing his hat up. Just then the national anthem started as the people in the stadium stood up removing their hats. Upon sitting back down Gordy turned his cap backwards.

“You gotta wear it the cool way,” Gordy said flipping Tanner's cap around.

“I guess you're right,” Tanner enthused. RJ pursed his lips a little. He had remembered what Desiree had heard from the teacher at the school. How it sounded like Tanner was a different person at school than he was at home. RJ could only surmise he was seeing it first hand. RJ for a moment worried about the implications of such a thing, for a moment he wondered if this was all an act that Tanner was putting on with his classmate. RJ shook those thoughts away. Whatever was going on Tanner seemed to be having fun which is all that really mattered at the moment.

As the game went on RJ could see Tanner was caught up in

everything. He and Gordy were excitedly talking about everything, laughing and giggling with one another. At one point a man with hot dogs came by and RJ bought one for everyone. Phil spotted a guy with drinks and bough a round for everybody getting an orange soda and some cups for Gordy and Tanner to share between the both of them.

“Gordy your face is a mess,” Phil said grabbing napkin and wiping his kid's face off, after he had devoured his hot dog. “Tanner you too,” Phil chuckled, although thankfully he merely passed a napkin down to Tanner who wiped his own face, blushing a little as he did so.

“Daddy I gotta go potty,” Gordy said pulling on his Dad's sleeve.

“Okay, okay,” Phil said standing up. “What about you Tanner, need a potty break?”

“Oh um no,” Tanner said awkwardly.

“You sure?” Phil asked. “Might not hurt to try.”

“I'm okay, really,” Tanner said sitting back in his seat Phil and Gordy left to go find a bathroom. Once they were gone Tanner scowled bringing his knees to his chest.

“Tanner, its not that big of a deal,” RJ sighed giving him a sympathetic look. “He was only being polite.”

“I hate it,” Tanner spat back. “Everyone treating me like a little kid, its annoying.”

“Yeah I know,” RJ said getting up and moving down a couple

of seats to sit next to Tanner.

“Its so stupid,” Tanner vented. “I just can't wait for this to be all over. Once me and Leo move out, things will get better.” RJ pursed his lips. He could see that Tanner was holding out hope, and he didn't want to be the one to rain on his parade.

“You know Tanner, its just this kind of thing is going to happen a lot in the future.” RJ said. “At least until you grow up a little.”

“I know,” Tanner grumbled. “I put up with enough of it at school. But once I don't have to live like this anymore people will have to see the truth.” RJ nodded.

“For the time being try not to hold it against people, okay?” RJ said. “Its better if you just learn to take it in stride.”

“I get it,” Tanner grumbled. “But you're not my Dad and I don't need the fatherly advice.”

“That wasn't fatherly advice,” RJ laughed. “It was friendly advice.”

Tanner looked over at RJ, his face softening a little as he let his legs fall away back to the ground.

“Speaking of Dads, did yours make you a dragons fan?” RJ asked. Tanner's mouth frowned a little before he nodded.

“Yeah it was kind of our thing,” Tanner said. “We would always watch the games together,” Tanner said with some melancholy.

“If you don't want to talk about it, that's cool,” RJ said seeing that perhaps he was digging in some sensitive ground.

“Its fine,” Tanner said. “You already know since you and Desi read through the files.”

“Actually there wasn't much about your past in the file, other than a court order sending you to that school.” RJ mentioned. “If you don't mind, I would like to know more about your past.”

Tanner stared ahead for a moment.

“Whats to tell,” Tanner shrugged. “My Dad was a drug addict. But we always watched the games together, it was the one time I knew he would be sober. It was the night that Jimenez hit the game winning home run and won the world series, that was the last time. He then carried me to my room and tucked me in. I guess he was feeling hopeful at that moment. He said he was going to turn things around. He promised he was going to get us a nicer house, I think we were squatting in that one we went too that first night we met you. Anyways he went out that night and he never came back. Three days later the cops showed up with my Uncle. My Dad was found dead. So I went and lived with my Uncle. He and my Dad did not get along with one another, and it was no secret he didn't like me very much. He was always yelling at me and telling me I was going to end up like my Dad. A month later he gave me up, it was his plan all along I guess. From there I bounced around. I ran away or pushed people to the point where they couldn't handle me. Which was fine with

me, I didn't need anyone taking care of me. Anyways I had some run ins with the cops which caught up with me eventually. I busted into a store to get some money. Got busted a day later. In court the judge gave me a choice. He said I could either go to juvie and then when I was eighteen I would transfer over to prison to serve out two years on a sentence or I could go to Hawthorne and once I turned eighteen I could leave and start with a fresh slate...” Tanner paused for a moment. “At the time it seemed like a no brainer...but I guess that was the biggest mistake of my life,”

RJ didn't know what to say. He was surprised Tanner had even shared all that with him. Tanner looked at RJ with a nervous look.

“What?” Tanner asked “Surprised at what a delinquent I am.”

“No that's not it,” RJ sputtered a little. “I just don't know what to say.”

“You asked,” Tanner said with a shrug. “You don't gotta say anything.” In truth Tanner didn't really want to hear anything. He hadn't meant to dump everything out to RJ. He just couldn't seem to stop himself when he got going. Though it did feel kind of good to get it off his chest.

RJ was a mixture of sad and angry to hear what Tanner had been through. It had seemed like the world had turned on him. There was no wonder why Tanner was the way he was. It was also understandable why being brought back to this age would be doubly upsetting for him. It no doubt brought up memories that Tanner seemed like he would rather forget.

RJ went to say something but was stopped as Phil and Gordy returned.

“Here,” Gordy said shoving a sundae cup of ice cream towards Tanner. “We got you one,” Gordy said plopping down on his seat next to Tanner as he began to dig into his own dessert.

“T-Thanks,” Tanner said as he looked at the ice cream in front of him a little suspiciously. He took a bite and RJ saw his eyes light up a little. Gordy was eating fast, not caring about the ring of ice cream forming around his mouth, while Tanner ate slower, no doubt being careful not to make a mess on his own face.

The game proceeded on. RJ could see that Tanner was a little more subdued and wasn't being as carefree anymore.

Around the top of the eighth inning Phil looked at his watch.

“I think we gotta get going,” he said.

“Awww do we have too,” Gordy whined.

“Yes,” Phil said mussing up the boys hair. “Its a school night, and it will be past your bedtime by the time we get back. I'm sure RJ and Tanner are leaving soon too.”

“We're going to watch the Dragons bat one more time and then we'll be leaving too,” RJ confirmed talking to Gordy.

“Okay,” Gordy said with a sigh before turning to Tanner. “Don't forget we're playing Mega Rangers with Colton and James tomorrow. Their bringing their wrist transformers with

them too. You don't have one, right?”

“No I don't,” Tanner said.

“I got two so you can borrow one of mine. I got the red one and the green one so it will be perfect since you always play the green one.”

“If you don't mind,” Tanner mumbled a little.

“Lets do the power pose,” Gordy then said raising his arms up.

“Gordy I don't...” Tanner began to say.

“You gotta do it,” Gordy said insisting. “C'mon c'mon.”

Tanner rolled his eyes before nodding. Gordy made a circular gesture with his arms as Tanner followed along lazily, remaining seated.

“Mega Power activate,” Gordy shouted out enthusiastically while Tanner said it under his breath.

“We'll have to work on it a little more tomorrow,” Gordy said putting his hands on his hips.

“All right lets go,”' Phil said with a chuckle. “You guys can play more tomorrow.” After Gordy and Phil had left Tanner looked at RJ.

“Not a word,” he said, his cheeks flushed red. RJ smiled and nodded his head letting Tanner know his secret was safe. Despite RJ's understanding a weird awkwardness descended between them.

Tanner was kicking himself a little. He realized how stupid he had been acting all night, just like the little kid everyone took him for. He hadn't been able to help himself. With Gordy being there he had just acted as he always had at school where he needed to play his part, in Tanner's mind that's all it had been. He wondered if he should try to explain that to RJ lest the man got the wrong idea. However that would mean revealing to RJ that while he was at school he regularly played those games with the others. Would RJ even believe it was an act? Was it an act? Tanner bit his lower lip as the question seemed to pop into his head. He had really slipped into that sort of behavior too easily. Tanner gripped his hand into a fist. No, he was eighteen he wasn't turning into some little boy – that just couldn't be true.

The game moved into the top of the ninth and the Cougars went into their last at bat. Tanner got up from his seat resignedly.

“You need something?” RJ asked.

“I thought we were leaving?” Tanner said remembering what RJ had told Phil and Gordy. “You know since its a school night,” Tanner said with some bitterness.

“Nah,” RJ laughed. “We'll stay until the end.”

“Oh,” Tanner said as he took his seat again.

“Besides if you're too tired to go to school tomorrow I don't see any harm in you taking the day off.”

“It'll be fine,” Tanner said. He didn't want RJ thinking that he

was incapable of getting up the next day just because he had been up late. That would just make him look all the more like a kid needing an appropriate bed time.

The Cougars last at bat didn't score them any runs and the game was now locked with the Dragons being one run behind. Tanner was on his feet with his arms crossed as he looked up at the jumbotron displaying the batting order. The first batter hit a line drive down at third and managed to get on first base.

“Great,” Tanner grunted. “Duvall is up next, that guy sucks. He's going to cause a double play I just know it.”

“He might advance the runner at least,” RJ said agreeing with some of Tanner's assessment of how the game would play out.

“Oh please,” Tanner exclaimed. “Look at his batting average.”

Just then an announcement came on.

“Pinch hitting for the Dragons,” the announcer called. “Hector Jimenez.”

Tanner's eyes went wide as he looked towards the Dragon's dug out. Walking out to the plate was the player whose name was currently displayed across Tanner's back.

“He's here, I can't believe it,” Tanner said breathlessly.

“Guess he got off the injured list,” RJ said smiling a little at Tanner's awestruck expression.

Tanner was standing at the railing watching intently. He never

in his wildest dreams thought he would be here, at the stadium, his favorite player at the batter's box.

The first pitch came in as Jimenez swung wildly for a strike. Tanner made no reaction. The next pitch was called a ball. RJ frowned he hoped that Jimenez would at least get on base. It would be anti-climatic for the player to strike out. The pitcher exchanged some head shakes with the catcher before finally nodding. He wound up and sent a fast ball screaming towards the batter. Jimenez swung hard as the crack of the bat rang out in the stadium. The ball flew high coming directly towards where RJ and Tanner were. Tanner watched the ball. He put his glove up in the air. He moved back instinctively getting on top of his seat. As the ball came down it would be just out of his reach. Tanner without thinking leapt backwards his arm outstretched. RJ shot out a hand seeing Tanner flying backwards grabbing the front of his jersey as Tanner ended up suspended above the seats in back of them. RJ hoisted him back up to stand on his own seat as Tanner brought his glove down towards his chest. He opened it slowly revealing the ball in his mitt.

“I got it,” Tanner said as if he didn't believe it himself. There were some cheers from the Dragons fans in attendance as Jimenez rounded the bases. With two runs the Dragons had now taken the lead and effectively had won the game.

“You caught it,” RJ exclaimed with a big smile on his face.

“I got it,” Tanner shouted hopping off his seat as he jumped around a little holding the ball in his hand. He came to a stop

still looking down at the ball with a smile on his face. “Um thanks for grabbing me,” Tanner said giving a bashful look towards the row behind them.

“Of course,” RJ said. “Didn't want you cracking your head open.”

“Check it out,” Tanner said handing the ball to RJ. The man squeezed the ball a little.

“I've never held a game ball before,” RJ mused before placing it back into Tanner's mitt. RJ then looked up at the big screen before laughing. “Hey you're on the jumbo-tron.”

Tanner looked up at the large screen to see a slow motion replay of himself leaping backwards to catch the ball as RJ grabbed him in mid air.

“Totally not graceful,” Tanner said although he still wore a smirk on his face.

“Who cares you caught it,” RJ laughed. They sat down each of them taking a moment to get their breath back. Tanner was still looking at the ball in his mitt, a small smile had taken up residence on his face. A staff member had made their way to the aisle where they sat. He leaned over saying something to RJ. Tanner hadn't paid any attention still completely entranced by the ball he was holding.

“Tanner, c'mon, we're leaving” RJ said standing up. Tanner looked up confused.

“You said we could stay till the end,” Tanner whined a little.

“You'll like this,” RJ smiled as he took Tanner's hand and pulled him along. The staff person brought them to an elevator. They put a key into the panel before pressing a button. As the elevator descended Tanner wondered where they were going. He feared that they weren't going to let him keep the ball, yet RJ had said he was going to like whatever was happening, so that couldn't be what was going on. The door opened and they were lead into a hallway. The employee told them to wait a moment as they turned a corner and walked off. RJ took out his phone and began texting.

“What are you doing?” Tanner asked wanting to get a clue as to what they were doing here.

“Texting Desi. I want to see if she was watching the game, you might end up on TV.” RJ said.

“You think so?” Tanner said scrunching his face up.

“It was a good catch,” RJ said. Tanner began to say something before he felt his voice drop. He had just been thrust into a surreal moment as he could see the staff person had returned and walking behind them was none other than Hector Jimenez himself.

Hector walked up to RJ and the stunned Tanner.

“Glad I cough you,” Hector said with a big smile as he and RJ shook hands. He then turned to Tanner.

“Saw that great catch you made, and when I noticed you were wearing my jersey I just had to say hi.” Hector said extending out his hand. Tanner stared back. He stuttered a little,

blinking in dis-belief.

“Tanner,” RJ said giving him slap to his back, which seemed to knock Tanner out of his daze.

“You're him,” Tanner said shaking the man's hand. “You're Hector Jimenez.”

“Sure am,” Hector laughed. “Whats your name?”

“T-tanner,” the boy stammered. Hector smiled as he knelt down to Tanner's level.

“Well Tanner, want me to sign that ball of yours?” Hector said as the employee handed him a marker.

“Sure,” Tanner said enthusiastically as he handed the ball over. Hector took the ball and signed it.

“Okay,” Hector said placing the ball back into Tanner's mitt. “How about we get a picture with you and your Dad?” Hector said standing up.

“Oh he's not,” Tanner began to say. Hector looked at Tanner with an attentive look. “Nothing,” Tanner then muttered as he shook his head. It wasn't important. RJ handed his phone over to the employee as the three of them stood for a photo.

“So Tanner you play on a team?” Hector then asked.

“I'm not on a team,” Tanner answered. Hector gave a look of surprise.

“Hey Dad I think you need to get this kid signed up for little league,” Hector said giving a smile towards RJ.

“Maybe so,” RJ nodded. Tanner felt his face go a little red. He could never do anything like that. The image of him playing on a field with a bunch of little kids unnerved him. Tanner didn't have respect for much authority, except in the spirit of competition of course. Him playing little league somehow felt like cheating.

“I play at school sometimes though,” Tanner piped up.

“You got a position you like?” Hector asked.

“I kinda of always wanted to try catcher,” Tanner mentioned.

“Mhmm,” Hector nodded. “Its a big position. Requires you to have a lot of awareness of whats going on at all times. Although with the way you caught that ball I think you just might have what it takes.”

“Thanks,” Tanner said a little flustered at having just been praised by his hero.

“I gotta go now,” Hector said as he mussed up Tanner's hair. “It was great to meet you guys though,” the man said as he began to walk away. “I'll see you around Tanner,” he said with a final wave. Tanner stood looking at his signed ball. He could never have imagined ending up here.

After some time RJ and Tanner were back in the car driving home. Tanner had been practically buzzing with excitement. It was only after they had started driving that he seemed to calm down. RJ looked into the rear view mirror to see Tanner looking out the window with his brow furrowed.

“You okay back there?” RJ asked. Tanner met his gaze in the mirror.

“I acted like an idiot,” Tanner said. RJ cocked his head. “I was like some fanboy back there,” Tanner said apparently feeling self conscious coming down from his high.

“I think you were fine,” RJ chuckled.

“He thought I was just some little kid, he never would have met me if he knew,” Tanner said. “I mean he even said I should join little league.”

“You know that might not be a bad idea,” RJ said. “Did you ever do something like that?”

“No,” Tanner said with a grunt. “Not like I could then, or now.”

“If you wanted to you could,” RJ said. “We do have a little league in town.”

“Please,” Tanner said clicking his tongue. “That's for little kids.”

RJ was silent. Part of him wanted to tell Tanner that it was okay. He was more of kid than an adult anyways, at least physically. RJ however held back. That comment would certainly be met with anger and vitriol. At the same time RJ did want to broach the subject. Tanner had some pie in the sky ideas about his future and perhaps it was time for someone to get him to start thinking more realistically about his options. With Tanner's body as it was now it would be

hard for him for him to make his way out in the world on his own. Not too mention his mental state wasn't exactly all that much better. As much as RJ tried to deny that Tanner didn't act like a kid, that night at the game had been a little eye opening. RJ knew that Tanner had realized what had been happening at certain points but the man still wondered if Tanner was cognizant of all that RJ had seen. RJ thought for a long time on the best way to proceed with the conversation, He thought he had arrived at the best approach. He wasn't going to deny the possibility of Tanner proceeding as an adult, its not like that wasn't the best course of action, only that Tanner was going to have to put in some extra work to get himself back up to speed, yet he didn't get to say any of it. When he looked up to start he saw Tanner fast asleep in the back seat. RJ gave a small smile and sigh, it was going to have to be conversation for another day.

Upon pulling into the driveway RJ got out of the car and made his way to the backdoor of the car. He opened it still seeing Tanner asleep.

“Tanner we're back,” RJ said shaking him a little, yet Tanner didn't stir. “Tanner wake up,” RJ said. Tanner scrunched up his body before cuddling into his seat remaining asleep. “Hey if you don't wake up I'm gonna have to carry you inside,” RJ said thinking his threat of treating Tanner like a kid would surely rouse him. Tanner however remained asleep. RJ groaned as he undid the seat belt before lifting Tanner up into his arms. “Just don't bite my head off,” RJ said. Tanner made a little chirp as he began to wiggle a little. RJ feared that he

was about to wake up, yet he didn't. Instead RJ felt Tanner's arm move up and wrap around RJ's neck loosely.

“Dad,” Tanner said softly as he nuzzled into RJ a little. “You're back.”

RJ felt his heart drop a little as he put a hand onto Tanner's back. He walked slowly towards the door into the house. He really didn't want to wake Tanner up now, lest he pull the boy out of whatever pleasant dream he was having.

Chapter 18

To Build a Nest: Chapter 18 - Chapter 18

Under the Weather

Leo let out a groan. He hadn't even opened his eyes up yet and he already knew something was off. He felt an aching in all his joints. His head felt like it was spinning. Leo willed himself to open his eyes, he turned to see Tanner standing in the middle of the room in only his underwear looking at Leo with his brows furrowed. It was sort of a funny sight since Tanner was currently wearing the one pair that he seemed to avoid at all cost. The ones with the the footballs and baseballs all over it. The ones that were absolutely childish. Leo would have said something, yet when he went to speak he only let out a haggard croak.

“Are you like...okay?” Tanner asked as he walked over and stood over Leo. Just then the door opened.

“You guys up?” Desiree asked poking her head in. Tanner yelped covering himself with his hands.

“Changing,” Tanner said annoyed.

“Whoopsies,” Desiree said as she went to retreat.

“Hang on,” Tanner called out. “I think somethings wrong with Leo.”

Desiree walked into the room with a curious look. She knelt

down by Leo's side.

“Leo are you feeling alright?” she said putting a hand to his forehead. “ I think you've got a fever,” she said, after a moment.

Leo let out a groan. He couldn't be sick, not today. RJ had gotten tickets for everyone to go to a baseball game. While Leo was not super into sports, he had still been looking forward to it. He had never done anything like that. Who knew? Maybe he did like sports – but he wouldn't know if he couldn't go. Leo willed himself to sit up as if to prove that he wasn't sick. It had been a mistake of course as the room began to spin. A moment later he puked directly onto the bedspread.

“Oh geez,” Tanner said scrunching up his face. Leo let out a pitiful moan as he fell back onto his pillow.

“Leo don't lay back down,” Desiree said as she pulled back the comforter before picking him up into her arms, before walking out into the hallway. RJ was walking down the hallway coming to see what the commotion had been.

“What was all that noise?” RJ asked seeing Leo in Desiree's arms. He was so sore and tired that he couldn't even lift his head from Desiree's shoulder.

“Leo's sick, he just puked on the bed,” Desiree said. “I'm gonna run a bath for him real quick.”

“Oof,” RJ said as he put a hand up to Leo's forehead. “You definitely look like you're in bad shape. I don't think your

gonna make it out to the ballpark tonight," RJ said with a saddened tone.

"Noo," Leo whined a little lifting his head up slightly. "I'll feel better by tonight," he said putting his head back down not able to hold it up anymore. "I promise." Desiree and RJ exchanged knowing looks with one another.

"We'll see," Desiree had said as she gently rubbed his back before turning towards RJ. "Anyways I haven't had a chance to pack Tanner a lunch yet."

"You don't need to pack a lunch for me everyday," Tanner said gruffly as he walked out of his room fully dressed and headed towards the kitchen.

"Well excuse me for making sure you have something to eat," Desiree chided.

"I can just eat a bag of chips," Tanner called back not even turning around before disappearing into the kitchen. Desiree gave an exasperated look.

"I'll give him some lunch money," RJ chuckled a little. "You work on feeling better, alright Leo," RJ then said ruffling the hair on Leo's head a little before walking away.

In the bathroom Desiree set Leo on his feet before turning on the faucet in the bathtub.

"Think you can get your clothes off. Leo grabbed the bottom of his shirt and went to take it off yet he had only gotten it over his tummy before his arms fell slack at his side. He

seemed to just be too weak at the moment. Desiree gave a little sigh out of sympathy at seeing that he was really in a bad way. She sat down on the toilet before lifting him up onto her lap. She got his shirt off and his pants. Leo let out another whimper. Being undressed in Desiree's lap, not too mention just being in a wet pull-up made him feel so small and babyish. Not too mention he felt gross at the moment.

“You don't gotta,” Leo said hazily.

“Its alright,” Desiree said gently as she pulled the sides of the pull-up apart. She tossed the wet garment into the trash can before she set Leo into the tub, positioning him so his head was laid up against the back wall.

“I don't want to bother...” Leo began.

“Its perfectly alright,” Desiree said as she put a folded up towel behind his head so he he had a comfy spot to rest his head. “You're sick, everyone needs to be taken care of when they're sick,” she said placing a cool wash cloth on his forehead.

“I can handle it,” Leo said. “I've always managed before.”

Back with his parents, whenever Leo had gotten sick they had never really gone out of their way to nurse him back to health. Not that they had ignored it, its just the way things had always been. They would give him some water and medicine and then leave him alone to sleep it off. If he needed anything else he would have to get it himself. The same had been true for them if they were sick as well. His

Dad had always said it had something to do with mindsets. If you let yourself wallow and act helpless it would just make you be sick longer. At the time it had made some sense to Leo, although he had been over at Robert's house one afternoon when his Mom had been sick. Watching Robert's Dad take food up to her and basically be on call to get her whatever she needed made Leo realize that perhaps his parents do it yourself attitude perhaps wasn't the norm. Nonetheless he still was uncomfortable with the idea of someone being there at his side while sick.

“Now you just stay here,” Desiree said making sure the towel behind his head was properly situated. “I'll clean up your bed and then I'll be back.”

Leo was left alone in the bathroom. It wasn't like there was any place for him to go. Even the smallest amount of effort seemed to be too much for him at the moment. He did have to admit that the warm water felt good on his body and the cool wash cloth on his forehead felt refreshing. Leo closed his eyes. His thoughts floated through a fog. He could hear Desiree walking down the hall no doubt with the bed sheets gathered in her arms. He hated that she had to clean up after him, once again he was relying on her and RJ to take care of him. No matter how much they told him it was okay he still couldn't feel good about accepting their help, especially now they knew everything. They knew he was eighteen, so why did it seem that everyday that passed it felt like they had to do more and more for him. They probably thought he was the most helpless person in the world. Leo feared that if this kept

up they might start to see that his parents had good reason to send him to Hawthorne. Perhaps that was it? Maybe his parents had been justified. They had seen just how incapable he was and had decided to do something about it. They had made the exterior match the interior. Leo almost felt himself become sick again. He let out another groan. He really must be delirious to start thinking his parents had been in the right.

After some time Leo felt more relaxed and the room had stopped spinning so fast. He felt himself slip down a little. He moved his feet instinctively to push himself up forgetting for a moment that he was too short, another moment later he slipped down into the water. Leo thrashed about before feeling someone pull him by the wrist up into a sitting position.

“Did you slip?” Desiree asked with a concerned tone.

“Yeah...I guess,” Leo replied between coughs.

“I shouldn't have left you alone,” Desiree said as if she were admonishing herself.

“I'm fine,” Leo said once again feeling helpless.

“Okay,” Desiree said as she gathered up a towel and held it out for Leo. The boy stood up and got out of the tub. He went to grab the towel to wrap himself up in it, but Desiree was fast as she wrapped it around him before picking him back up into her arms.

“Do you at least feel a little better?” Desiree asked as she carried him back to his room. Leo could only mumble out a

small sound of agreement. Desiree set him on his bed. Leo flopped down onto his side pulling the towel tightly around himself. Desiree went to the dresser pulling out a fresh pair of pajamas and another pull-up. She knelt down pulling Leo's legs towards her. She threaded his legs into the pull up and began to pull them up.

“I can do it myself,” Leo said, although he didn't even sound convinced himself.

“Why don't you stand up then,” Desiree said. Leo got onto his feet. He began to sway as the room starting spinning again. Desiree got the pull up around his waist as Leo had reached his limit and sat back down on the bed.

“I'll do the rest,” Leo said his head hanging down low.

“Honey you can barely stand,” Desiree said taking the towel off from around him. “Pushing yourself is not going to help you get better any faster.” Desiree returned pulling a Spider man themed pajama top over Leo's head. She then had Leo lay back and she got a matching set of pants on him.

Desiree then got Leo into a sitting position, before she took a bottle of medicine pouring it into a spoon.

“Open up,” Desiree said. Leo looked at the thick purple liquid. He didn't think much of it, more so bothered by the fact that Desiree was going to give it to him like a little kid, nonetheless he let her put it into his mouth. As soon as it hit his tongue Leo's entire faced puckered in disgust. He hadn't expected it to taste good, he had of course had it before. Yet

for some reason it tasted so much worse than he remembered. After swallowing it down hard, Leo could'nt help but let out a little gag as he stuck his tongue out still coated in the bitter taste.

“Take a drink,” Desiree said with a chuckle handing him a cup with a straw. Leo gulped down the water which was ice cold and felt great in his dried out mouth. “That should help with your fever,” Desiree said pulling the covers on the bed back. “Alright back under the covers.”

Leo gave a grimace. All of this was starting to get to him. He looked down at the childish pajamas he was wearing, a slight bulge was noticeable denoting his pull-up which was Paw Patrol themed something he himself had picked out-- not too mention he had also picked out the pajamas. It had become so normal for him to wear clothes and sometimes act in ways that painted him as a little kid that he didn't even give much notice to it anymore. With the current situation though and how much Desiree had been doing for him, not the least having to change him, it wasn't helping in make Leo feel like he was in any way a competent individual.

“Thanks for the help,” Leo said in a half whisper. “But I got it from here.” he said crawling under the covers. Desiree gave a smile.

“I know you don't exactly like having people fuss over you,” Desiree said. “But there is no shame in it, especially when you're sick.” Desiree pulled the blankets up and tucked Leo in. “Now I have everything set up for you,” Desiree said

motioning over to tray table that had been set up near Leo's bed where the cup of water now sat next to Leo's cellphone. “There is a trashcan right here,” Desiree said pointing down at the ground. “And some water for you to drink. If you need anything call me on your phone,” Desiree said. She then leaned down. Leo's eyes went wide...was she going to kiss him? Leo turned his face away. The questions racing across his mind. That would be too weird, why would she do that? Why was she acting like she was his Mom? However Leo found that Desiree had only leaned over to fluff up his pillow a little before she stood up from the bed. She drew the curtains on the window shut darkening the room a little.

“I hope you feel better soon,” she said, before finally leaving the room. Leo laid in the bed looking up at the ceiling. A awkward sort of feeling had overtaken him and it was causing his stomach to knot up. He may have just chalked it up to being sick but it had only started after he had thought Desiree was about to kiss him. She had been right when she had said Leo didn't like people fussing over him, it always made him feel like a bother. His morning had been filled with it. In some ways it was starting to feel like a bad thing that Desiree knew the truth about him. At least when they had thought he had been a little kid they hadn't really given much thought about him wearing childish clothing or needing help with simple task, but now everything was different. Leo wondered what they really thought of him? As much as he tried to assert himself as an adult, sometime he just couldn't seem to help those other childish impulses from taking over. Sometimes Leo would find himself watching Desiree as she

played with Kaylee. He would watch her tickle the babies feet sending the little girl into a fit of giggles. Then Leo would see the loving look appear across Desiree's face as she called Kaylee mommy's little girl. Leo would find himself almost wishing she was doing that to him. The mere thought though made Leo let out an embarrassed squeak as he pulled the covers up over his face as if to hide his reddened face from any onlookers despite him being alone. After a few moments Leo pulled the cover down curling up into a ball as he closed his weary eyes. Its not like he wanted Desiree to be his mom. He just wanted someone in this world to feel that way about him. To love him in that special way that only a parent could love there own child. Leo knew there were only two people in the world that could do that for him – and they simply wouldn't.

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Leo awoke some time later. He wasn't sure how long he had been asleep for. He stretched out in the bed before sitting up. He seemed to be feeling somewhat better as sitting up did not send the room spinning, yet the aching of his body was still ever present as was the general feeling of nausea. Leo then noticed the cold clammy feeling of a wet pull-up under his pants. He swung his legs out from under the covers getting to his feet. He was determined to take care of this before Desiree came to check on him, having her change him once was more than enough. He stalked over to his dresser, wincing a little from his sore aching body. He got onto his knees opening the bottom drawer where all his underwear

and socks were kept. As he looked at the contents of the drawer that was filled with many pairs of colorful undies on one side and some neatly stacked pull-ups on the other Leo shook his head. What on earth had he been thinking in buying all of this? And why on earth did it even now seem to appeal to him? Leo grabbed a new pull-up and went about getting himself changed. It took him a little longer than usual as he felt like he had no energy to even move. Sitting on the ground he gave one last pull to his pants bringing them up around his waist before falling back on the ground, his arms and legs splayed out leaving him completely out of breath. The door creaked open slowly as Desiree entered. She came over and knelt down by his head.

“Did you need a change?” she asked seeing the wet pull-up on the ground not too far away. “Looks like you're feeling a little better,” she said as she stroked the top of his head a little. Leo found himself leaning into her touch, it felt good.

“Maybe I'll feel better by the time we go to the game,” Leo said hopefully.

“They already left hun,” Desiree said with a sympathetic look. “You've been asleep all day.”

“What!” Leo exclaimed. “But that's...” Leo whined before closing his eyes holding back the tears that were starting to spring up. He couldn't let himself cry. Even if he was upset.

“I know you were looking forward to it,” Desiree said. “But you know if you had forced yourself to go, you would have just felt miserable the whole time.”

Leo let out a little whine as he turned his back to Desiree. Part of him agreed with her of course, she wasn't wrong, yet another part of him felt so upset that he didn't get to go. He had really wanted to go.

“Do you think you're feeling up to try eating something?” Desiree asked changing the subject. Leo turned around realizing he was incredibly hungry.

“Yeah,” Leo said turning back to Desiree.

“Think you can walk?” Desiree asked. Leo nodded getting to his feet. As he took his first step he felt the strength in his legs go out. Desiree caught him thankfully.

“I think I'll just carry you to be safe, “ she chuckled lifting Leo up into her arms. Leo felt a little silly, but didn't protest. It was nice to have someone to help him. Leo put his arms around Desiree as he laid into her. He was after all feeling a tad bit dizzy. She brought him down to the kitchen setting him in a chair. Afterwards she gave him some toast. Leo didn't even lift his head from the table as he munched on the toast. He had only nibbled of a corner before pushing it away.

“Ready to go lay down again?” Desiree asked rubbing Leo's back.

“I slept all day already,” Leo grumbled.

“Why don't you come watch some TV on the couch then,” Desiree suggested. Leo nodded getting up from the table. He was able to walk to the living room on his own.

“Time for more medicine,” Desiree said presenting another spoonful of the awful tasting purple liquid to Leo. He grimaced but let her pop it into his mouth without a fuss. “Here wash it down,” Desiree instructed handing Leo the cup. Leo sucked on the straw but looked puzzled at the cup when he found that it was not water.

“What is this?” Leo asked.

“Its ginger ale, “Desiree explained. “It will help settle your stomach.”

“You're giving me soda?” Leo asked cocking his head in confusion.

“My mother used to give me that when I was feeling sick,” Desiree said. “I don't know if it actually helps though, do you not like it?”

“No, its good,” Leo said before he resumed drinking.

“So what should we watch?” Desiree said picking up the remote. “PJ Mask, some Paw Patrol, or I could put on a movie?”

Leo gave a frown.

“Do you think we could watch something not meant for little kids?” Leo asked with a pleading look. Desiree nodded as she flipped through the channels before landing on an old family sitcom. Leo watched on as he sipped on his drink which was refreshing and the carbonation felt good on his sore throat. Leo watched the show with some interest. It was in black and

white and currently the little boy character was having a talk with his father while he sat on his lap. As far as Leo could tell it had something to do with bullies. Leo found it a little alien. The father listened intently to everything his son was saying and then seemed to have the perfect piece of advice to help. Leo had never experienced something like that. His own Dad's advice was less advice and more commands – do as I say and you won't need to worry. Although Leo did remember that Robert would sometimes say he would talk to his Dad or Mom about some problem he was having, which had always struck Leo as weird. Growing up he had gotten the idea in his head that Robert's parents were different than others. He couldn't imagine opening up to his own parents. To Leo parents told kids what to do and when. He still sort of believed it although now that he was older he was starting to question how true it really was.

“Is this real?” Leo said thinking out loud.

“No,” Desiree said with a smirk. “They're actors.”

“I know that,” Leo said giving her a dissatisfied look. “I just mean is this what most people's parents are like? Do families really talk to each other like this?”

Desiree gave a ponderous look at Leo. His question seemed naive, perfectly acceptable for a four year old, yet at the same time there was a deeper context behind it. She could tell he was asking a more complex question than what he had verbalized.

Desiree had been watching the boys closely the last couple of

days. It was apparent to her that they were starting to exhibit more childish impulses with everyday that went by. Leo more so than Tanner although Desiree couldn't be sure if Tanner wasn't as effected by it as Leo was or if he was just better at masking it. There were some difficulties in talking to them. It was hard to tell how to appeal to their shifting mindsets. Most of the time it was better to talk to Tanner as an eighteen year old, yet with Leo it was difficult to even know where his head was at. He got frustrated a lot more easily with simple task, just like one would expect from a little boy, yet he always seemed to be able to hold back from crying about it, even though Desiree could tell how overwhelming it was becoming for him. This time was just another example. Should she talk to him as an adult or as a kid?

“I guess its somewhere in-between,” Desiree said getting to the question back at hand. “Its tv so everyone always says the exact right thing, especially with these old shows. Did you never have talks with your parents like this?”

Leo shook his head vehemently.

“They just told me what to do all the time,” Leo said. “Or maybe I just didn't listen hard enough.” Leo's face scrunched up in thought. “Maybe if I had just done what they said things would have turned out better. Maybe we would have gotten along.”

Desiree felt her heart drop a little. She put a hand on Leo's shoulder and met his eyes.

“You need to stop blaming yourself,” Desiree said firmly. She

didn't know all that had transpired between Leo and his parents, both boys kept tight lipped about their past, but after a phone call with Robert, she had heard some examples that Robert had witnessed or that had been told to him by Leo. It had been illuminating. So many of the insecurities that Leo possessed had been laid bare and she could finally start to get an idea where the seeds had first taken root. She knew she needed to get Leo to see that he was not the one at fault, it was the only way he could begin to get past all of this. Leo sat back cocooning himself in the blanket around himself so that only his face was visible.

“I don't know if I should really talk about this,” Leo said. Desiree put her arm around him pulling the lump towards her.

“This is all part of it,” Desiree said. “We're going to have to talk about it at some point. So just tell me what you're thinking. There are no wrong answers.” Leo looked up at Desiree, the small smile on her face giving him some reassurance.

“Sometimes,” Leo began. “I just think I should have just kept going along with all of it...like maybe if I had just grinned and beared it that it would have been okay. I could have just went and lived that life they had envisioned for me. I mean would being a lawyer or whatever be so bad,” Leo mused remembering how in control Steve the family lawyer had been. There was certainly something in the way the man had taken control of the situation with Mr. Gareth that had made an impression on Leo.

“Would you have been happy with that?” Desiree asked. Leo thought for a moment before shaking his head. “You know Leo, being successful is all well and good but personally I think a life that makes you happy is more important.”

“That's what I want,” Leo yelped letting his blanket cocoon loosen. “I just don't know how to get that.”

Desiree nodded along, she at least felt like she was getting somewhere with him.

“I mean I don't even know what I want to do in life,” Leo said. “What if I choose wrong and I end up with some career I don't even like?”

“I don't think you need to worry about things like that at the moment. Try thinking about the present. Even with everything the way it is, what would make you happy?”

Leo went quiet for a long time. Desiree could see his face painted with extreme concentration. Finally he spoke up, in a small voice laced with uncertainty.

“I've been thinking a lot about what you asked us...you know about what we want.” Leo began.

“Tanner says we should still concentrate on moving out to our own place. We always talked about that, especially back at Hawthorne. I want to do that, I really do, but I don't think its going to be possible.”

Desiree pursed her lips. She had felt guilty even asking them the question. She didn't even really have a clue about how the

boys should answer themselves, how could anyone?

“If that's what you want I'll try,” Desiree said wanting to instill some hope that the boys wishes could still come true. Leo shook his head.

“I can't,” he said plainly. “I don't want to admit it, but I don't think I can run away from it anymore. I'm turning into a little kid and I don't think I can stop it. I don't even think I can even say I'm eighteen anymore, I just feel it more everyday.”

“That must be kind of scary,” Desiree said. She was honestly shocked. Even if she had her own suspicions it was surprising to hear Leo admit to it.

“It kind of is,” Leo said. “But it also kind of isn't. Sometimes when I start to envision myself that way I feel sort of happy. Its like I could just leave all this bad stuff behind and start fresh.”

“That sounds nice,” Desiree said.

“I mean its not like my old life was all that great, but still, I would also lose out on the good things too,” Leo said.

“And what are the good things?” Desiree asked.

“Well Robert and Tanner,” Leo said. Desiree let out a low hum. “Robert will always be my friend, I know that,” Leo said. “But we could never be like we were. And well you know Tanner he would never...” Leo trailed off. Desiree didn't need Leo to finish to understand where he was going. If Leo did decide just to become a kid fully again, Tanner could

never follow him down that path. It was at complete odds with what Tanner wanted.

“Okay, so you're saying that you going to be a kid,” Desiree said switching gears. “What do you think you need to be happy with that?” Leo's lips twisted a little as he thought.

“I guess someone to take care of me,” Leo said as if he was answering a question on a test that he wasn't entirely sure about.

“You would certainly need parents,” Desiree chuckled.

“Yeah, I guess I would need to be adopted or something. Is that possible, because I definitely don't want the ones I had.” Leo said nervous.

“Don't worry about that right now,” Desiree sad. “We're just brainstorming. I just want to hear what you want, if you could have anything in the world. What would these parents need to be like?”

“They would have to be nice,” Leo said.

“Mhhmm,” Desiree hummed. “I think that goes without saying.”

“And they would have to be okay with rabbits,” Leo then said almost sounding enthused. Desiree gave him a questioning look. “Wherever I go, Timothy goes,” Leo explained.

“I see,” Desiree chuckled.

“And well,” Leo began falling quiet. “They would have to

like me," he said in a whisper.

"Is that it?" Desiree asked.

"Pretty much," Leo replied.

"Leo if this is what you truly want, what you truly think is the right answer for you, I can help," Desiree said. "I will do everything I can to find you the perfect family. Would you like that?"

Leo didn't really know what to say, it all seemed so impossible yet he could sense the sincerity in Desiree's voice, He could tell she really meant it.

"You don't have to answer right this minute of course," Desiree added worrying that Leo was getting a little overwhelmed. It was a major decision after all.

"No," Leo yelped. "Its what I want, really. I think if I had a family like that, I could be happy."

"Alright," Desiree said with a smile. "Starting tomorrow I'm going to start working on this. I'm going to find you the most perfect family in the world. How do you feel about that?"

Leo smiled.

"I feel..." Leo began before his face went a little pale and his hand shot up to cover his mouth. "Sick,"

Desiree's eyes widened before she grabbed the wastebasket sitting by the couch and brought up in front of Leo seconds before he puked again. Afterwards Desiree handed him his

cup to help him wash the taste from his mouth.

“Alright, I think you should rest a little more,” she said leading him gently into lying down so that his head was in her lap. She began to gently rub his back. Leo had been feeling great just a moment ago yet now that sick feeling was back in full force. As awkward as he felt laying in Desiree's lap he couldn't resist. The affection she was doting on him was too much to deny, and the gently motions along his back felt amazing. Leo fell asleep soon after. Desiree looked down at him curled up on the couch. He looked peaceful as the corner of his mouth twitched a little. It was hard to see him as eighteen ,especially given the fact that the waistband of his pants had slunk down and the back of his pull-up was sticking out prominently. Even ignoring his physical appearance, Leo had even admitted his mental state wasn't much different. It made Desiree aware that she had to work fast. Leo was going to be a kid again and she needed to find the place where he could be that without worry. However even if she was committed she wondered how easy would it really be? Could she really find people that were perfect? Would anyone be perfect? Desiree thought for a long while, until suddenly her thoughts turned to Robert and an idea began to form. Leo had made mention that he had always thought Robert's parents were nice and he had even revealed that sometimes when he had been younger he had even thought about what his life would have been like if he had parents like that. Roberts parents were well off enough and if Robert was any indication Desiree could only assume they were good people. Maybe that was the answer she was

looking for. It all seemed rather perfect. Leo knew Roberts parents already so he wouldn't have to worry about what kind of people they were. They would also be aware of Leo's past and perhaps understanding of his present situation, which would make things easier, not too mention it meant that Robert would easily still be able to be part of Leo's life. The only question now was would they agree to taking him in?

Leo awoke a little later to find that Desiree was gone. He could hear some noise in the kitchen. He got up off the couch feeling some energy had returned to him. He wandered into the kitchen to find her at the stove.

“Hey how you feeling?” Desiree asked noticing him walking in.

“Better kind of,” Leo answered.

“That's good,” Desiree said before she gave him a questioning look. “Do you need a change?”

Leo felt his cheeks flush a little red. He was used to it by now, but it still embarrassed him a great deal.

“N-no,” he sputtered. Desiree nodded accepting his answer.

“Would you feel up to eating some soup?” she asked bringing a bowl to the table. Leo nodded thankful to move on quickly from the previous question.

Leo ate as Desiree sat at the table with him with her own bowl. The soup was pretty good and it also felt good to eat something warm. Leo paused for a moment when he realized

something was a little off.

“Where's Kaylee?” he asked realizing he hadn't seen her all day.

“RJ took her over to his Mom's house for the night,” Desiree replied. “You know since he and Tanner are at the game and I'm helping you out.”

Leo felt pangs of guilt in his stomach. Once again he had become a burden.

“Sorry about all this,” Leo said meekly. “You really don't have to go out of your way for me like that.

Desiree gave him a confused look.

“Its no problem,” Desiree said. “RJ's Mom is more than happy for some grandma time. Me and RJ drop her off whenever we need a break. Besides I don't mind helping out people, especially when they're sick. It honestly makes me happy when I feel useful.”

Leo nodded. He could understand where Desiree was coming from. He would probably feel happy to if he could be useful for once.

Leo finished up his soup and despite having felt somewhat more energetic he now found that he was back to feeling woozy and tired. Desiree ushered him back to the couch, wrapping him back up in the blanket.

“I know,” Desiree said picking up the remote. “The game is being televised maybe we should see if we can spot RJ and

Tanner," she said clicking on the tv. Leo nodded. They watched the game in silence. Desiree looked over at one point to see Leo's eye's drooping a little. "Still tired?" Desiree asked.

"Maybe a little," Leo said wiping his eyes with his sleeve.

"You should get comfortable," Desiree said. "I think we're just gonna have you sleep here for the night anyways. Since the bathroom is closer."

"Makes sense," Leo nodded. He then looked at Desiree for a moment before quickly looking away.

"I know that look," Desiree said with a chuckle. "C'mon say whats on your mind."

"Umm well its just..." Leo sputtered before looking back at Desiree with a bashful expression. "Do you think you could rub my back again?"

Desiree's expression remained neutral, on the inside though she was shocked. Its not as if Leo had never seeked out comfort before, but those times had been different. That had been only when he was so overcome with emotions that he could no longer control it, but right now he was actually asking for it.

"Sure," Desiree said gently uncrossing her legs. A look of relief washed over Leo's face as he eagerly put his head into her lap and she began to stroke his back. Desiree was glad to see Leo being so open with his feelings. If he could be honest with himself and others about what he needed then it was a

good thing. However some time later Desiree looked down to see that Leo was asleep and she wondered, just how much time he had left before he regressed completely. She changed the channel from the game to something else yet her thoughts wandered. She needed to find that family for him. She could not allow Tanner and Leo to join the list of people she hadn't been able to help. She needed to do right by them.

It was late as Desiree heard the garage door open and close and moments later the door opened. Desiree looked over and was surprised to see RJ carrying a sleeping Tanner in his arms.

“If he finds out, he is going to kill you,” Desiree said with wide eyes.

“I know,” RJ hissed bringing a finger up to his lips. “So lets keep this a secret.”

RJ returned after putting Tanner in his bed, thankfully the boy was none the wiser. If he asked, RJ figured he could just lie and say that Tanner had walked all on his own. He just didn't remember because of how sleepy he had been.

“How did your night go?” Desiree asked.

“It was a rousing success,” RJ said with a smile before he went into details. Desiree listened on with intrigue as she heard all about the events of the game, although he kept out the parts that suggested Tanner was perhaps slipping. He would bring them up later, he didn't want Leo to overhear. As RJ came to the end, Leo stirred. He sat up groggily wiping

the sleep from his eyes.

“You're back,” Leo said drowsily.

“Hey pal,” RJ said. “Feeling better?”

“A little,” Leo said before coughing a little.

“You look better than you did this morning,” RJ noted.

“He's been resting,” Desiree said. “I'm gonna have him sleep out here on the couch for tonight though.”

RJ nodded, agreeing with the sleeping arrangements. “I'll stay down here,” he said, grabbing a blanket off of the couch.

“I don't mind,” Desiree said.

“Nah,” RJ said, shaking his head. “You played nurse all day, I'll take the night shift,” he said taking a seat in the recliner kicking off his shoes and reclining back with his feet in the air.

“Guess I'll go take a shower,” Desiree said standing up and stretching her arms. Leo on the other hand was feeling guilty again that they were making all these arrangements because of him.

“I'll be fine by myself,” Leo mumbled. Desiree turned around.

“None of that,” she said gently as she pushed Leo down onto the couch. “You need to accept help

when its offered,” she said as she tucked Leo in. “Besides we would just end up worrying about you.”

Leo let out a sigh. He knew there was little point in arguing. When they had made up their mind about things like this they somehow were always able to convince him. “You get some rest now, and in the morning I'll bet you'll be feeling back to normal,” Desiree said. She went and gave RJ a kiss before leaving the living room. RJ then flipped on the the tv, turning the volume down low.

“You don't mind do you?” RJ asked. Leo shook his head. The news was playing highlights from the baseball game.

“Was the game fun?” Leo asked.

“It was,” RJ said. Leo frowned.

“Wish I could have gone,” Leo grumbled.

“Oh yeah,” RJ said with a raised eyebrow.

“Of course,” Leo replied. “Is that weird or something?” Leo asked.

“No,” RJ said. “Its just I didn't really know how interested you would have been. I've never really heard you mention being into sports.”

“I just never really did anything like that before,” Leo said. “Maybe I would have like it.”

“There will be other games,” RJ said. “Honestly I was a little nervous. I wanted to do something nice for both of you guys, but this seemed like more of a Tanner thing.” RJ said turning towards Leo in the chair. “But maybe we could do something else, you know once you feel better, something that is more in

line with your interest.”

Leo gave a little smile. It was true. He wasn't really sure if baseball was something he would have liked. However that hadn't dampened his excitement in going.

“So what are you into?” RJ asked. Leo's smile fell from his face upon being faced with such a question. The truth was he didn't really know. There were plenty of things that he had shown an interest in, the only problem is he had never been given the chance to figure out if it was something he actually liked.

“I don't really know what my interest are,” Leo said morosely.

“Everybody is interested in something,” RJ said. Leo thought for a moment before giving an RJ a clueless look.

“Surely you don't walk around here doing nothing all day?” RJ prodded. Leo didn't know what to say, That he liked cartoons, or that he played with the toys that Desiree had gotten for him, something which he only did when he was sure no one was watching.

“Um well I like music” Leo said. “Playing your guitar was kind of fun.”

RJ nodded.

“And I guess I like Timothy so maybe something to do with animals,” Leo answered.

“You're a responsible pet owner no doubt,” RJ said. “Anything else? Maybe something you've always wanted to

try, but never got the chance?" RJ then asked. Leo thought for a moment when an idea popped into his head.

"Skateboarding," Leo said.

"Really?" RJ laughed.

"Kind of," Leo said feeling a little foolish. "I guess its kind of stupid."

"Not at all," RJ said. "You know I was into it too when I was younger. Not that I was any good but I could still ride around."

"I've just always thought it looked fun," Leo said.

"So music, animals, and skateboarding," RJ said as if he were thinking out loud. "I think we might be able to make that work. We could make a day out of it."

"A whole day?" Leo asked cocking his head.

"Sure, we'll find out what you're into. We can call it Leo day," RJ chuckled. Leo repeated the word Leo day back. It made him excited to think about a whole day just for him. No one had ever done something like that before. "So are you in?" RJ asked.

"Yeah," Leo nodded happily.

"Good to hear," RJ said. "But first you gotta get better, so why don't you try to rest."

"Okay," Leo said with an acquiescing tone, still pleased with

the plan. As Leo closed his eyes, he thought a lot about what sorts of things they were going to do on Leo day. More thoughts crossed his mind has he got ever closer to sleep. Desiree had promised to find him perfect parents. He wondered what that would be like. The idea of parents seemed weird to Leo. He had said all that stuff to her but was that what parents were? Probably not. He thought about Desiree and RJ and how they were around Kaylee, they were her parents after all. They were his parents too sort of, at least foster parents, but they treated Leo and Tanner differently. It felt like the four of them were a team all working together to keep Tanner and Leo out of the Hawthorne's clutches, they were more like friends. Leo was grateful for that, he didn't have very many friends in the world, it just seemed to be Robert, Tanner, Desiree and RJ. But having parents was different, wasn't it?

Leo eventually succumbed to sleep, fantasies of the worlds perfect parents playing across his mind.

Chapter 19

To Build a Nest: Chapter 19 - Chapter 19

Leo Day

It was Friday night as Desiree sat on her bed. She had just gotten off the phone with Robert. She had called to ask him about the possibility of his family taking in Leo, she had already explained everything that Leo had told her the previous day. Robert had been silent on the phone for some time.

“I know its kind of big ask but...” Desiree had began.

“I don't know about that,” Robert had interjected. Desiree was stunned for a moment. She had expected Robert of all people to be in favor. “Look I'm not saying that I'm against it, and I can certainly see why it makes so much sense, but I just think it may not be the best option.”

“What do you mean?” Desiree asked.

“First off let me ask, how do you feel about Leo? I mean really?” Robert had then posed.

“I think he is a wonderful person,” Desiree began.

“Do you love him?” Robert had asked bluntly.

“Of course,” Desiree said without a hint of hesitation. She hadn't know him long, but she could say truthfully she did

love and care a great deal about him, as well as Tanner. She wanted to do the best for them she could, at the moment thought it almost seemed like her plan was falling apart right before her eyes.

“Yeah I kind of figured,” Robert laughed. “Do you remember when I came by and spent the day with Leo?” Robert asked referring to a little while back when he had made the trip out and had taken Leo out for a day on the town so the two of them could hang out like old times. “The whole time he was with me, he seemed nervous and on edge. I just figured he was still a little weirded out with everything that had changed, like me being there was only making him focus on his transformation. It wasn't until we went to that restaurant where we would be meeting up with you guys that I realized what it had been. The second he saw you and your husband walk in he instantly relaxed, he was calm.”

“I don't think,” Desiree went to interject.

“It wasn't the first time,” Robert had said. “The first day we met, whenever Leo looked like he was getting overwhelmed with the conversation he would look back at you. All it took was a simple glance and smile and it seemed to reassure him and give him enough confidence to continue.”

“Don't you think you might be jumping to conclusions?” Desiree asked a little surprised to hear all the things that Robert had seemed to notice.

“I'll tell you the truth when I came by a couple of weeks ago I was going to bring up the idea of taking Leo back with me,

thinking it was perhaps better for him to be around people he knew, that he could trust wholeheartedly, but after seeing everything I saw, I changed my mind. I knew Leo was already in the best place for him, it was with you."

Desiree didn't know what to say. Was this really true? Had she really not noticed?

"I've known Leo for awhile," Robert continued. "And I know in all that he doesn't trust a whole lot of people, especially adults, which is understandable given his life, but even given that, he trust you."

Desiree was silent. Maybe it was true. Robert didn't need to say what he was suggesting, it was clear, and if Desiree was being honest with herself she wasn't against the idea. Yet it wasn't something she could just agree to. Would Leo ever accept something like that?

"Even if you say all that," Desiree said. "I don't think Leo see's it that way."

"Leo might not understand it," Robert said. "Not because he is thinking more like a child but because he doesn't understand that concept at all. You need to show him what is right in front of him, show him what it looks like to have a real family. I know its a big decision and I'll still float the idea to my parents regardless. I'm sure once they understand the situation they'll agree."

"Okay," Desiree had said. "Don't feel like you have to rush, I should probably talk to Leo more and see where his head is

at.”

That was how the conversation had ended. Desiree sat on her bed. Her head swirling with thoughts. What if Leo was her kid? Was that an option, could that work? Regardless she would need to talk to RJ. As if right on cue he came strolling into the room with some vigor.

“Alright, I think I got a perfect itinerary set for Leo day,” the man said obviously pleased with himself. Desiree gave him a small smile before looking back down at the bed sheet. “Seems like you got something on your mind,” RJ said sensing that something was up.

“I'm just thinking,” Desiree said.

“I'm all ears,” RJ said standing in front of her with his hands on his hips. Desiree got up from the bed crossing her arms as she started pacing the room.

“What do you think about Leo?” she finally asked after some time.

“Well,” RJ said looking somewhat confused. “I think he's cool and all needs some confidence though, hopefully tomorrow will be good for him.”

“I'm not talking about that,” Desiree said shaking her head. “I mean...do you think you could ever come to see him as something more?” RJ let out a sigh before taking a seat in a chair in the corner of the room.

“Why don't you tell me whats going on?” Desiree proceeded

to spill the whole story. Everything she had just talked about with Robert.

“I know you probably think I'm reading too far into this, but I just want to know...if we did, would you be able to accept him as your kid, if we adopted him?” Desiree asked coming to the end.

“Yes,” RJ said instantly taking Desiree by surprise. She had expected him to at least take a minute to think about it.

“You're sure?” Desiree asked.

“Why are you acting like this is some hard decision?” RJ asked shaking his head. “If we were able to adopt Leo, actually be able to call him our kid that would be a dream come true.”

“I mean I guess,” Desiree laughed a little. “We were always going to have another kid.”

“Exactly,” RJ enthused. “And I mean you know, I was kind of hoping the next one would be a boy.”

“I know,” Desiree chuckled. “You want a boy to do all that tough guy stuff with,” she said

sarcastically.

“Yeah,” RJ said as his face then took a more serious expression. “But you know this isn't just up to us.”

Desiree nodded. Of course RJ was right. Even if this is what the two of them wanted it wasn't their decision to make. “Do

you think he would ever see us like parents? How do you even ask a question like that?"

RJ turned looking out the window into the night. "Maybe Robert was right," he said. Desiree went and stood next to RJ. "Maybe we need to show Leo what his life could be, if he decided to stay."

"How on earth would we even do that?" Desiree said.

"Tomorrow," RJ said. They looked at one another before RJ continued telling Desiree everything that he had planned out. They talked for a long while as a plan began to formulate between the two of them, of how they would show Leo what they both desperately wanted him to see.

"So we're doing this?" Desiree said sounding apprehensive.

"Its our best shot," RJ said. "All we can do is make our case."

"And what if he doesn't accept it?" Desiree asked sadness tinging her voice.

"Then that's that," RJ said. "Its his decision after all."

Desiree nodded. It was what they had to accept. As soon as the idea of Leo being her son had entered into her head the desire for it to become a reality had overtaken her. She just knew that if Leo rejected it, that her heart would shatter.

"What about Tanner though?" Desiree then asked, the elephant in the room that neither of them had wanted to think about. "You know he would never go along with this."

“Tanner is...” RJ said coming to a pause. “I think he is having more trouble than he lets on,” RJ said quietly. “That's for another day though,” RJ said waving the thought away. “Tomorrow is Leo day.”

***

Leo awoke, sitting up in his bed with excitement. It was Saturday morning, Leo day had arrived. He got out of bed quickly crossing the room to his dresser. He took a moment to grab the clothes that he thought would be perfect. The orange Nike shirt and a pair of blue shorts seemed to fit. He rushed off to the bathroom and got himself changed in quick order, before rushing downstairs into the kitchen.

“Whats first?” Leo asked breathlessly as he bounded into the kitchen.

“Someone's excited,” RJ said with a smirk from the table where he sat reading the newspaper as he sipped on some coffee. Leo felt his cheeks go a little red upon realizing how much like an excitable little boy he was acting.

“Oh well you know,” Leo flustered a little as he stuck his hands into his pockets. “I'm just curious is all.

“That's all right,” RJ laughed. “Its your day after all.”

“First thing is breakfast,” Desiree said setting a plate down at the table as she pulled out a chair for Leo to sit in. “Its waffles,” she said.

“That sounds good,” Leo said as he took his seat before

Desiree pushed in his chair for him. Leo looked down at the plate in front of him and saw something was different. For one his food was already cut up, something that had never been done for him before. The second thing was the plate itself. It wasn't just a normal plate, this one had three compartments to it. Around the rim were little pictures of frogs. As Leo looked closer he could also see underneath were smiling cartoon frogs. Desiree then set some silverware down on the table for Leo. They were plastic and smaller than normal and given their color scheme of blue and green, went along with the plate.

“Whats with this plate?” Leo asked.

“Something wrong with it?” RJ asked.

“Its umm...colorful,” Leo said somewhat put off.

“Its from when I used to babysit my nephew,” Desiree said. “I'm a little behind on dishes right now and I found it in the cupboard. You don't mind do you?”

Leo looked over to see that the sink was in fact filled with dishes. He assumed Desiree wasn't lying, why would she?

“Not really,” Leo said picking up the fork and stabbing into a piece of waffle. Desiree smiled a little before setting a cup of milk near Leo. It matched the plate and had a cap on it. There was also a crazy straw coming out of the top of it. Leo eyed it suspiciously. Usually they asked him what he wanted to drink. He decided ultimately not too make a fuss. It was a small thing after all. Not too mention he actually kind of

liked the straw, each time he took a drink it was fun to watch the milk twist and loop about. Leo finished eating. He brought the plate and cup over to Desiree at the sink.

“Someone was hungry,” she chuckled taking the dishes from him. “Guess we can say you feel all better.” she said before ruffling up his hair a little. Leo felt a little awkward, but it did feel kind of nice when she did that.

“Hey Leo is that what you're wearing?” RJ asked. Leo turned around looking at his outfit.

“Yes,” he said not seeing a problem with it.

“Why don't you go put some pants on instead,” RJ suggested.

“How come?” Leo asked. RJ gave him a knowing smile.

“It'll just be better that way,” he said. “Now scoot.”

Leo shrugged as he walked out of the kitchen. On the way to his room he figured something was up. Desiree and RJ were acting kind of strange, but he couldn't quite put his finger on how exactly. Leo went through his dresser searching for a pair of jeans. Finally finding a pair he changed into them. He still wasn't sure why, but felt like he should listen, they wouldn't tell him to do something without good reason. Leo returned to the kitchen to see Tanner at the table. He noticed that unlike him Tanner had a normal plate and his food had not been cut up either.

“Ouch” Tanner yelped wincing as he dropped his fork.

“What's the matter?” RJ asked looking a bit concerned.

“Its this tooth, its been bothering me,” Tanner said touching a tooth in his mouth with his finger.

“Show it to me,” RJ said. Tanner lifted up his lip pointing out the offending tooth. RJ let out a small laugh.

“You have a loose tooth,” he said sitting back in his chair.

“That can't be possible,” Tanner said with a look of shock.

“When it falls out make sure you put it under your pillow for the tooth fairy,” RJ chuckled as he went back to reading his paper seeing there was no cause for alarm.

“Hardy har har,” Tanner said sarcastically.

“Whats the tooth fairy?” Leo blurted out. The room fell silent as everyone's eyes turned on him. Leo felt for a moment that he had said something stupid.

“You don't know the tooth fairy?” Desiree asked as she exchanged a worried look with RJ. Leo just shook his head.

“Like Santa Claus and the Easter bunny, you've heard of them right?” Tanner asked. Leo nodded his head showing that he at least knew those two. Tanner sort of shook his head, although he wasn't all that surprised knowing about Leos' parents, They seemed the type not to buy into some charade like that. “Its just another fake –“

“Hey Tanner can you help me for a moment,” Desiree interjected quickly. Tanner paused looking confused for a moment. “It won't take long, promise,” Desiree said walking out of the kitchen. Tanner frowned but followed nonetheless.

Once they were out of earshot of the kitchen Desiree turned to face Tanner.

“Don't tell Leo there is no such thing as the tooth fairy,” she said.

“Huh,” Tanner said looking mystified.

“Its seems like he doesn't know, so why ruin it for him,” Desiree said trying to make it sound like she wasn't asking for something weird.

“He's eighteen,” Tanner said plainly. “He already knows that stuff ain't real.”

“You've noticed that Leo sometimes has these little moments where he acts a little differently, right?”

“Well yeah,” Tanner said.

“So he's probably just having one right now, that's all,” Desiree said.

“But we shouldn't just let him do that,” Tanner countered.

“Look Tanner, I know why it worries you, it worries me too,” Desiree said. “But today is really important for Leo. Me and RJ just really want him to be able to make some happy memories today, you know more than anyone that Leo really needs that.”

“I don't see how the whole tooth fairy thing has anything to do with that,” Tanner said crossing his arms.

“Leo will come out of this little moment on his own,” Desiree

replied. “And when he does what will he think if we all jumped all over him for this?”

Tanner didn't say anything in response as he thought about Desiree's words.

“He'll feel like we were making fun of him, wont he?” Desiree answered. “And then he'll start to stress out over it. But if we just accept his little moments maybe he will feel better, like he's able to relax around us and just be himself without worrying if he's acting weird.”

“I guess I see where you're coming from,” Tanner said although he still looked uncomfortable with the situation.

“Good,” Desiree said. “You're a good friend.”

Tanner rolled his eyes a little as he turned around walking back towards the kitchen with a mumbled “Whatever”.

As Desiree returned she saw Leo sitting on his knees on a chair close to RJ as he leaned over close, apparently intrigued by the conversation they were having.

“So you put the tooth under the pillow and then she gives you money?” Leo asked.

“Yep,” RJ nodded sagely. “That's pretty much how it works.” Leo turned to Tanner with an excited look.

“Are you going to put your tooth under your pillow?” Leo asked.

“Yeeeeah,” Tanner said with his face scrunched up.

“Maybe you'll get like a million dollars,” Leo exclaimed.

“Million dollars huh,” RJ chuckled. “What would you do with all that money Leo?”

“I don't know probably buy a sports car or something,” Leo replied shrugging his shoulders.

“Why so you could go pick up chicks or something?” Tanner laughed. “Or I guess in your case it would be du –“

“Shut up!” Leo exclaimed silencing Tanner who looked back with a befuddled look. “Just don't talk about that,” Leo said in a half whisper. Tanner's face softened.

“Yeah okay,” Tanner said taking on an understanding tone putting an arm around Leo. He wasn't exactly sure why Leo was acting like it was a secret. Tanner knew full well that Desiree had gotten the whole story from Robert of the incident that had sent Leo to Hawthorne. She had even asked Tanner about it one day. He wondered if Leo knew that they were well aware of it.

After getting packed up everyone made their way out to the car. Leo followed behind Tanner who slid open the door to the minivan climbing in first. Leo then felt himself be lifted up from behind by RJ who set him in his carseat, before quickly snapping the chest buckles together and then buckling him in at the bottom.

“Ready to go,” RJ said with a smile before shutting the door and making his way to the driver's seat. Leo was a little taken aback by how sudden it had all been. He did have a little

trouble buckling the bottom part in sometimes but he at least could do the chest snaps by himself. They at least waited for him to try before jumping in themselves. Leo shook his head. RJ seemed to have a lot planned for today maybe he was just in a hurry. Leo's thoughts turned to other things, such as what they were doing. He had only given some suggestions of things he might like, yet RJ had remained secretive about what he actually had planned.

“What are we doing first?” Leo asked.

“Nuh uhh,” RJ said with a smirk. “No spoilers.”

“Awww come on,” Leo whined. “At least tell me where were going.”

“Leo, its a surprise, so just sit back and enjoy the ride,” Desiree tutted. She then turned around handing him a bag of assorted markers and a book.” “Here why don't you work on your letters for a bit.” she said with a smile. Leo looked down to see the activity book she had given him about a week ago. She had said it would be good for him to work on. It was meant for preschoolers of course who hadn't even mastered their ABC's yet. Yet as things stood Leo could not deny that the activities were perfectly geared for his skill level. He had been working on the book for a little bit and it actually seemed to be helping. He was now able to recognize more letters and he could even spell out his first name. There was really nothing better for him to do at the moment, so he opened the book and picked up where he had left off.

After a while Desiree looked in the rear view mirror to see

Leo who appeared to be coloring in a picture at the moment. She wasn't the least bit surprised at how easily he had been re-directed, it was starting to become easier to do that. She was suddenly reminded about something she had read in his file from Hawthorne. It had said he responded well to age appropriate activities. She sometimes wondered if it was really okay – it honestly felt like she was manipulating him. On the other hand it just proved that Leo was right. He was fast becoming a little kid and it only made the stakes feel that much higher. Today was important for all of them – and it just had to work.

The car pulled into a parking space as RJ announced they had arrived. Leo looked up to see they were at a shopping center that had many different stores lined up all in a row. He still couldn't tell what they were doing here. As everyone started to get out Leo let out a gruff of discontent watching Desiree unstrap Kaylee. He had gotten used to the car seat but he still hated that he could not push in all the little tabs and button well enough to release them, he was stuck until someone else unstrapped him. Desiree came over to his side with the baby on her hip effortlessly unbuckling him with one hand. Leo jumped out of the car onto the pavement happy to be released. Desiree then grabbed his hand and began walking.

“I uh can walk,” Leo said awkwardly.

“Just hold my hand for a minute,” Desiree said looking down at him with a smile. “The parking lot is a little busy right now.”

Leo could see that she was right. There were a lot of cars zooming about. He then saw that Tanner was walking a little ahead of them with RJ, yet he wasn't made to hold the other man's hand. Leo did think it was strange, Tanner wasn't that much taller than him. Why did'nt they think he was as in just as much danger of getting run over as Leo was? Yet he didn't dwell on it too much, as he began to look towards the stores they were walking towards to see if he could pick up on clues as to what they were doing here. As they got closer he could see they were headed to a store that had guitars and other instruments displayed in the front window and he deduced they were at a music store.

Upon walking in Leo was hit by a wall of sound. Blaring guitars seemed to emanate from every corner. The sound of drum cymbals crashing could be heard further off and a cacophony of other instruments mixed into the ambient sounds of the store.

“First stop,” RJ said talking loudly over the noise. “Lets find out what kind of instrument suits you.”

“Its a little loud in here,” Desiree said looking concerned at the baby in her arms. “Leo its not too loud is it?”

Leo shook his head. It was loud no doubt but not too the point that it hurt his ears.

“I'll be back in a minute,” Desiree said exiting from the store. Leo walked along looking at all the guitars and basses hanging from the walls. They all looked shiny and cool.

“You ever play an instrument before?” RJ asked.

“I did violin and piano,” Leo said. “I wasn't really good at them though,” he mumbled.

“I think they got those over there,” RJ said pointing to a room near the back.

“I'm not really interested in them,” Leo said. “Piano was alright I suppose, but I hated the violin.”

“Whatever strikes your fancy,” RJ said putting an arm around Leo. “This about you right now.”

“I'm gonna go check out the drum department,” Tanner said. RJ just nodded as Tanner walked off. RJ and Leo continued walking along the wall until they were approached by one of the salesman. He was wearing a black button up whose short sleeves showed off the tattoos covering his arms.

“Hey I'm Dan,” the man said smiling. “Couldn't help but notice you guys checking out the guitars. You looking to get yourself something?” Dan asked looking at RJ.

“Actually we're here for him,” RJ said pushing Leo a little forward. Dan looked down at Leo with a little surprise before his smile returned to his face.

“I see,” the man said regarding Leo with some interest.

“Just trying to figure out what he's into,” RJ added.

“Well little dude we got lots of options, anything jumping out at you?” Dan asked. Leo felt a little nervous around this guy.

He looked back at RJ who gave him a reassuring nod. Leo looked back at the guitars, there had been one that caught his eye.

“That one's cool,” Leo said pointing at a cherry red Fender Stratocaster.

“The strat eh,” Dan said picking it off the wall. “You got a good eye, this is an exceptional model.” Dan walked over to one of the shelves in the middle of the store where amps were set up. He plugged the guitar in before patting a stool nearby. “Come and take it for a spin.”

RJ picked Leo up from behind before plopping him atop the stool and then Dan handed the guitar to Leo looping the strap around the boy. Dan then took a pick out of his breast pocket and gave it to Leo.

“You know how to strum?”

Leo nodded as he pulled the pick across the strings hearing a clean tone come out of the amp.

“And here is what it sounds like when you want to rock out,” Dan said pressing a button on the amp. Leo took another strum and heard the loud distorted wail. He was instantly filled with the same excitement he had felt when RJ had let him try out the guitar back at the house. Leo listened to the note hold out feeling it in his bones, this was magic. He then plucked a few notes across the neck, his violin training not having completely left him. Although with his small body the guitar was unwieldy in his arms and the neck was too big for

his small hands, not too mention he was having trouble pressing down the strings.

“What do you think?” RJ asked. Leo grimaced a little.

“Its kind of heavy and I can't do the strings,” Leo said with a hint of sadness. “I don't think I can really play it.” It was a hard pill to swallow. It would be cool to play the guitar. He had always wanted to give it shot, yet now it looked like he was gonna have to wait.

“Hmmm,” Dan said hearing Leo's issues. “Hang on a sec I'll be back,” the man said before disappearing into the store. Leo strummed the guitar a little as they waited.

“Look at you,” Desiree said appearing with Kaylee in her arms who was now sporting some headphones. “You look like a proper rock star.” Leo couldn't help but smile as he let out another loud strum which made Desiree wince a little at the volume.

“I just wish I could hold it right,” Leo said as he looked down at the guitar sadly. “Its too big for my hands.”

“They have lots of things here, I'm sure we could find an instrument more your size,” Desiree said sympathetically. “I know, you could try out a ukulele those are small.”

Leo scrunched up his face a little. He wanted to play guitar not the ukulele, he wanted to be loud and in your face, like the music he listened too.

“We'll find something,” Desiree repeated. “Where's Tanner?”

Desiree then asked.

“Oh he went to go look at the drums,” RJ said. Desiree gave an affirming nod seemingly not at all worried that Tanner was off on his own. Leo was only more convinced now that RJ and Desiree were acting strange. He was starting to get the impression they were treating him more like a little kid, yet they were treating Tanner just as they had always. Leo wondered if it had anything to do with what he had told Desiree a couple of days ago.

“Anyways here,” Desiree said brandishing another pair of headphones in her hands. “I thought you could use these since its so loud in here,” she said holding them out to Leo. They were blue and had brightly colored music notes on them.

“I'm fine,” Leo said moving his head back a little, his suspicions beginning to deepen.

“Leo you need to protect your ears,” Desiree said sounding as if she wasn't taking no for an answer. RJ then stepped in.

“Desi, he said he's fine.”

“I just think its better to be safe,” Desiree pushed.

“A little noise won't turn him deaf,” RJ said. Leo was starting to feel awkward having them talk about him like this. Desiree glanced at Leo's uncomfortable expression before pulling back the headphones.

“I suppose,” she said with a apologetic smile. “Sorry I guess I was being an over cautious Mom right there,” Desiree

chuckled as she turned to Kaylee. “Mommy is a worrier isn't she,” Desiree cooed bouncing the girl up and down a little as the baby giggled. Leo felt his stomach twist up a little not sure if she was referring to herself as if she were his Mom or just in general.

“Alright,” Dan said returning. “ I think this will work better.” He was holding another guitar that looked identical to the one Leo had, except it was smaller. Dan switched out the guitars. Leo plucked a few notes finding that he could do it a lot easier now, he even had enough dexterity to string together a few notes.

“Hey this kid seems like a natural,” Dan said somewhat impressed. He was no doubt used to kids even older than Leo just hammering whatever noise they could make out of the instruments.

“Well dude what do you think?” RJ asked. “You want to get it?

“You mean buy it?” Leo exclaimed.

“Of course,” RJ smiled. “If you want it, we can also look around a little more if you're unsure.”

“No,” Leo yelped “I want it,” he added quickly. Leo then caught himself. What was he doing? He couldn't accept this – especially after everything that they had already done for him.

“I mean you don't have to get me anything really, I don't really want you to spend money on me” Leo said meekly. RJ raised an eyebrow before leaning down.

“You don't need to worry about stuff like that,” RJ said. “Me and Desi have it all taken care of, you just focus on having fun, okay.” RJ said ruffling up Leo's hair. The boy wore a muddled expression before giving a smile back. It seemed like an okay thing to do. Maybe it was okay just to be happy for once.

“You folks are in luck,” Dan then chimed in. “We're running a promotion now. If you sign up for one month of lessons we throw in the guitar and an amp for free.”

RJ's eyes narrowed a little. “How much are lessons?”

“Twenty dollars,” Dan countered. RJ seemed to mull it over in his head for a moment.

“That's not unreasonable,” RJ said seemingly finding the deal favorable. Leo however felt himself seize up. Lessons? He had done enough of those. In fact he felt like things were starting to repeat. Just how long would it be before he was being forced into some practice regiment. How many more times could he sit and be chastised by a teacher for not going over the scales enough. He could almost bring up the image in his mind of Desiree and RJ nagging him, talking about how they had done so much to get him this guitar and the least he could do was apply himself wholeheartedly for their kind gesture. Leo took off the guitar strap passing the instrument over to RJ.

“So we're doing it?” RJ asked with an expectant look.

“I can't,” Leo said. He could see all the adults look at him. To

Leo it felt they were all staring at him with disapproving looks. He couldn't take it anymore as he hopped off of the stool and took of into the store. He heard RJ call after him but Leo couldn't stop. He didn't know where he was going but he knew he couldn't stay there.

He eventually found himself in a deserted dark room that had all sorts of lighting for DJ's on display. Leo found a little corner wedged between two display shelves he crawled back into bringing his knees to to his chest. He felt stupid for running away like that. He had no doubt embarrassed Desiree and RJ. He felt completely hopeless. It honestly felt like his life was repeating back on itself. How could he have been so stupid to expect anything less. Even if he let himself become a little kid and he got adopted by some new parents how could things get better? Leo was positive now that he was the problem. Parents wanted kids who could achieve things, make them proud. But Leo couldn't do that. He wasn't good at anything.

Some time later he saw Desiree walk into the room. Leo scrunched down he didn't want her to find him. Desiree scanned the room before seeing Leo hidden away.

“There you are,” she said with a sigh of relief. Why don't you come out from there.”

“No,” Leo replied. “I don't want too.” he said.

“Well you can't live back there.”

“Maybe I should,” Leo replied back. Desiree frowned a little.

She wasn't really sure what had seemed to set him off, but she wasn't going to get anywhere with him like this. Desiree straightened up.

“Leo come out from there right now,” she said sternly. To her utter surprise it seemed to work as Leo came crawling out from the corner and coming to stand in front of her. Leo felt like it was the only thing he could do hearing the authoritative tone of her voice. If he refused it was only going to get worse. He stood with his eyes glued to the ground, a nervous trembling in his knees. He was in big trouble now and there was nothing he could do about it except brace for punishment. Desiree instantly dropped her commanding stance as she scooped him off the ground. She took him over to a bench near the middle of the room sitting down with Leo in her lap.

“Now why don't you tell me why you ran off?” she asked calmly. Leo shook his head unable to look her in the eye. He was positive that she was going to punish him. After all he had acted like a dis-obedient child.

“Were you scared?” she said running a hand along the side of his head. Leo looked up at her with saddened look as he nodded yes. Meeting her gaze dispelled any fear of punishment from Leo. What had he been thinking? Desiree wasn't like that. She was his friend, he felt like he could tell her just about anything in the world.

“You started talking about lessons.” Leo said with a squeaky voice.

“And whats so scary about that?” Desiree asked.

“It reminded me of my parents,” Leo said with a hint of bitterness.

“I see,” Desiree said with an understanding tone. “What did they have you play?

“The piano and the violin,” Leo answered.

“Did you like those instruments?” Desire then asked.

“The piano was okay, the teacher was this old guy, but I hated the violin and the teacher was really mean.” Desiree wrapped her arms around Leo bringing him closer to her.

“I'm really sorry to hear that, but you know it wouldn't be like that,” Desiree said as she began to stroke Leo's hair again which seemed to relax him as she laid his head against her chest. “You actually like the guitar don't you, and if you take lessons it will help you get better, then you can play like all those musicians you like listening to so much.”

“But what if I'm bad it?” Leo whimpered.

“You don't need to worry about that, and if so, then its not a big deal. Whats important is that you try your best, that's the only way you'll ever know.”

Leo sat for a moment. Was it really okay for him not to be good at it even after they had went through all the trouble of getting him a guitar and lessons? Leo decided that maybe the lessons weren't a bad idea. If he really practiced he bet he

could play really well. Desiree and RJ would probably be really happy about it, he seemed to want them to be proud of him.

“Okay,” Leo said lifting his head up. “I'll do it.”

“Then we better go tell them,” Desiree said standing up with Leo still in her arms as she carried him back out, and he didn't really seem to mind at all.

Getting back to the group Leo said he would really like to take the lessons.

“That's great news,” Dan enthused. “Follow me to the front desk and we'll get Leo here all signed up.

“Suppose I'll go find Tanner and tell him we're done here,” Desiree said as she and RJ traded kids. As RJ followed Dan through the store, Leo realized he had been letting them carry him around like a little kid. He squirmed a little. He was about to ask to be let down but they had already made it to the counter which RJ set him atop. Dan was at a computer on the other side typing away.

“So what day works best for you?” Dan asked.

“Thursdays would probably be good,” RJ mused.

“Looks like we have a four thirty spot and a spot at six,” Dan responded.

“Four thirty,” RJ answered.

“Very good,” Dan smiled turning to Leo. “That means you'll

be with me, sound good?”

Leo nodded with a smile as he and Dan fist bumped. Dan seemed like a nice guy and Leo couldn't imagine him being like his old violin teacher who was nothing more than an old crone. Dan handed RJ some papers to fill out. It wasn't until RJ was done that Leo looked at the paper. He could see his name written out at the top, but something was off. He didn't recognize his last name at all, or rather it didn't look like his last name. Leo went to take a closer look but Dan had swiped up the paper quickly. Leo was a little confused at what RJ could have written, yet he chalked it up to the fact that he just didn't recognize it. He didn't really practice his last name all that much. Leo's new guitar was placed in a fabric carrying case which RJ let him wear on his back, as he took a box containing a small amp in his own.

Getting back to the car Tanner and Leo stood by the trunk as RJ opened it taking Leo's guitar off of his back.

“You got a guitar?” Tanner asked.

“Yeah and lesson's too,” Leo said in a happy sing song voice.

“You seem to be getting comfortable,” Tanner said derisively. Leo gave him a questioning look.

“We're not staying here forever,” Tanner said.

“Its just four weeks,” Leo mumbled.

“What if we are moving on before that?” Tanner questioned.

“I guess I'll just ask my new...” Leo stopped himself from

finishing his sentence. He hadn't told Tanner yet about his decision. The truth was he didn't know how. Tanner was probably going to be furious with him. Leo knew he was going to have to come clean soon, but right now didn't seem to be a good time.

Tanner cocked his head a little, but before he could interrogate Leo any further RJ had lifted the smaller boy up into his arms and carried him over to his car seat to get him buckled in. As much as Leo still found it incredibly strange that they had seemed to decide that he needed help with the task he was a tad bit grateful that it had gotten him out of the tense exchange with Tanner.

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A little later the car pulled in and came to a stop.

“Here we are activity number two of Leo Day,” RJ cheered. Getting to the back of the car Tanner and Leo looked around but it didn't seem like they were anywhere special.

“Where are we?” Leo asked as RJ was digging around in the trunk.

“The park,” RJ answered.

“What are we doing at a park?” Tanner then asked furrowing his brow. Leo followed suit, he was just as curious as to what could be special about a park.

“Yours truly is going to be giving Leo a little lesson,” RJ said.

“In what the monkey bars,” Tanner said sarcastically causing

Leo to nudge him a little out of embarrassment.

“Not quite,” RJ chuckled turning around revealing that he was holding a skateboard in his hands.

“Whaddya say Leo, ready to shred?”

Chapter 20

To Build a Nest: Chapter 20 - Chapter 20

Finding One's Footing

Leo stood before the skate park. It was quite a shock to see it. When they had first arrived at the park it didn't look like there was anything around. Yet upon getting to the top of the hill, Leo had discovered that not only was there a large playground but also a small skate park. RJ had brought along a smaller skateboard special for Leo while offering the larger one to Tanner. Leo had looked on enviously at Tanner's board. It looked cool with the logo for the skate company prominently displayed on a black background, not at all dissimilar to the board Leo had gotten from a kid at school long ago, before his Dad had snapped it in half. Leo's board however was the epitome of childish, emblazoned with colorful dinosaurs on their own skateboards decked out in pads and sunglasses.

“Sorry bud,” RJ said noting Leo's obvious displeasure at the graphics on the underside of his board.

“Its the best I could find on short notice, all the other ones at the store were plastic.”

Leo gave the man a small smile, shaking his head. “Its fine, I don't mind.”

“Alright then put on your helmets,” RJ said handing the boys

each a helmet. Once again Leo could only look on with some jealously. Tanner's helmet was a plain black skaters helmet, although there were rubbery spikes going along the top of it that made it look like Tanner had a multicolored spiky mohawk. Leo's helmet went along with his board. It looked like the head of a dinosaur sporting large spikes on top. Tanner put on his own helmet well RJ plopped Leo's on his head buckling it for him, he then fiddled with the straps tightening them so that Leo's helmet didn't shift around on his head.

Leo grimaced a little, yet held back any complaints. He knew RJ was doing his best, and its not like this wasn't something Leo had always wanted to try, but he was really starting to feel like this was somehow done on purpose, which was ridiculous to think. Why would they all of a sudden start treating him like a little kid?

Tanner was already on his board rolling a round a little, although looking a little shaky.

“Pretty good there Tanner,” RJ said with a smile.

“Oh yeah,” Tanner said hopping off the board. “I did a little skateboarding back in the day.”

“You never told me you knew how to skateboard,” Leo said surprised.

“I didn't do it for long,” Tanner shrugged. “I just know enough to roll around, its not like I can do any tricks. Leo put his own board on the ground ready to jump on. He was eager

to be able to do it like Tanner.

“Not so fast,” Desiree said putting a hand on Leo's head. “You're not quite ready yet.” she said. Leo was a bit curious as to what she meant. He had a helmet on didn't he? He followed her over to a bench where she had Kaylee sat nearby in a stroller. There was a drawstring bag sitting on the bench which Desiree loosened and dug around in for a moment before pulling out an elbow pad.

“You need pads first,” she said holding Leo's arm as she fastened the pad around his elbow. Leo's mouth twisted up in confusion and indignation. First off the pads matched everything else and had similar images on them that his skateboard did, second why did he need pads, Tanner wasn't wearing any?

“Why do I gotta wear these?” Leo said pulling his arm back.

“So you don't get hurt,” Desiree said as if it were obvious.

“But you're not making Tanner do it,” Leo argued.

“You know how Tanner is he would never agree,” Desiree said as she lifted up Leo's arm to put on another elbow pad.

“Well I don't either,” Leo said furrowing his brow. “Its not fair, if he doesn't have to wear them then neither should I.”

Desiree paused for a moment. She was unsure of how to proceed. Right now he certainly sounded like a pouty four year old, but she could certainly understand why an eighteen year old would protest. Given what today was about though

and also what had happened at the music store when she had gotten just a little stern with him, she decided to push it a little.

“If you don't wear the pads then you can't skateboard,” Desiree stated. Leo's mouth dropped a little as he stammered out a little gibberish before falling silent. “Whats it going to be?” Desiree asked holding up a knee pad.

“Fine,” Leo grumbled crossing his arms. He let Desiree put the knee pads on him followed by some wrist guards. He probably looked ridiculous with all the pads on. He still didn't understand why he had to wear them, but he really wanted to skateboard, and if this is what he had to do then there was no other choice. When Desiree was finished she sat back. Leo looked somewhat dejected. She proceeded to wrap him up in a big hug.

“I just want you to be safe, okay,” she said releasing him. Leo gave a half smile nodding his head. She could tell the hug had actually made him feel better. “Are you going to go?” she then asked. Leo seemed to break out of his funk.

“Y-yeah,” he stammered a little flustered as he turned and ran towards the skate park where RJ and Tanner were. Desiree let out a sigh of relief, happy that she hadn't caused Leo to have a meltdown. She looked over to Kaylee who was looking at her with a content look.

“That was a close one hmm?” Desiree asked as she leaned towards her daughter. The baby gurgled a little as if she were responding to the question. “I know,” Desiree said. “I have to

remember not to push him too much. Don't want him to think I would be an overly strict Mom.” she said as she began to let Kaylee play with her fingers. “What do you think, would Leo be a good big brother?”

Kaylee let out a gleeful little laugh.

“I think so too,” Desiree said.

Leo approached Tanner and RJ.

“Looks like you're ready to go,” RJ enthused.

“I guess,” Leo mumbled feeling completely foolish standing next to the them and being the only one in full pads. RJ set the skateboard down in front of Leo. “What do I do?” Leo asked almost looking as if he were mystified at what the object was for.

“You stand on it first of all,” RJ chuckled. Leo took a couple of cautious steps. Upon getting on the board he found it wobbled a little. RJ was nearby though putting his hands on Leo's back to help steady the boy. Once Leo got his balance he then looked to RJ.

“How do I go?” he asked sheepishly. Tanner rolled his eyes.

“You do it like this with your foot,” he said getting on his own board and propelling himself forward a little. Almost as if on cue, Tanner's board came to a sudden stop propelling him off the board and down on the ground. Tanner let out a pained yelp grabbing his leg which he had landed on.

“You okay,” RJ asked with some concern as he ran over and knelt down towards Tanner.

“I'm fine,” Tanner said gritting his teeth as he sat up. RJ could swear he saw tiny tears starting to form in Tanner's eyes. RJ moved Tanner's hands away seeing that he now sported a good scrape on his shin.

“You're going to want to get that cleaned,” RJ said. “Go and talk to Desi she has a first aid kit with her.”

“Yeah, okay,” Tanner said getting up off the ground and walking off. RJ then turned to Leo who was now standing off his board.

“Okay ready to try?” RJ asked. Leo shook his head. RJ cocked his head.

“I don't want to fall,” Leo said. “What if I scrape up my leg like Tanner?”

RJ gave a patient smile as he knelt down in front of Leo putting a hand on his shoulder. “You are going to fall,” RJ said. “No if's and or buts about it, hence why you got the pads on, its also the reason I told you to put on pants this morning so you don't scrape up your legs.

Leo looked a little surprised. Suddenly a lot of the little things that had been happening all morning made a lot more sense. Of course they had good reasons for making him do all those things. Leo felt a little silly now for thinking it had been weird at the time.

“So ready to try?” RJ asked. Leo gave a confident nod.

Meanwhile Tanner was sat on the bench as Desiree was knelt in front of him with a small first aid kit sitting on the ground next to her. She had an antiseptic cloth in her hand. As she put it on Tanner's knee, he let out a startled yelp.

“Oh sorry, does it hurt?” she asked, quickly withdrawing her hand.

“N-n-no,” Tanner stammered. “You just surprised me was all.” Desiree gave him a understanding look as she began to dab at his scrape gently. Tanner took in some air through his teeth with each dab. Desiree could only worry. It probably didn't feel great, but to an eighteen year old it would be just a mild discomfort if anything at all. This reaction from Tanner could only be another small tell that he and Leo were in the same boat. She just wondered if Tanner knew that as well? It was hard to think that he was unaware, the only question was if he was in denial about it or not? Desiree finished applying a band aid to Tanner's scrape. She then took a seat back on the bench after packing everything away. Tanner had not moved.

“You going back?” Desiree asked.

“I don't really want to skateboard anymore,” Tanner grumbled looking away. Desiree wasn't exactly sure what to make of this. Was he embarrassed, or was he actually scared of getting hurt again?

“Why don't you come join me and Kaylee, we were going

over to the playground.” Desiree suggested.

“I'll just stay here,” Tanner said morosely as he leaned forward with his chin in his hands. Desiree picked up Kaylee out of her stroller holding her towards Tanner.

“C'mon, I'm sure Kaylee would like it if you pushed her on the swing,” Desiree said. Tanner turned to look at the baby with a stony look. Kaylee gave a laugh which seemed to soften Tanner's features. .

“Well, okay I guess,” Tanner said smirking. As the three of them walked towards the park Desiree looked over to where Leo and RJ were. Desiree smiled seeing the scene play out in front of her. Leo was riding on the skateboard his arms held out while RJ was holding both of his hands to keep him balanced while Leo rolled along. Leo had a huge smile on his face, while RJ shouted out encouragement. Turning away Desiree became confident that this was going to work.

Leo sat on his skateboard taking a breather. Things were going well. It had taken a little while but he was able to at least ride the board now, yet he still fell most of the time if RJ didn't at least have a hand on his back. RJ had left for a moment coming back with some drinks. He gave Leo a juice box with the straw already in the top. Leo was grateful however since he had worked up a little bit of a thirst. As Leo sat drinking his juice he looked over at some other kids who were atop a quarter pipe. He watched as they set their boards on the lip before stepping onto them and riding down the ramp, most of them were bailing out, yet a few of them made

it to the bottom. Leo knew that if he really wanted to ride a skateboard he ought to be able to do that, right now he was doing little kid stuff. What the other kids were doing was real skateboarding.

“Ready to get back to it?” RJ asked. Leo stood up a rash of confidence filling him.

“I want to do that,” Leo said pointing to the ramp. Watching the other kids made it look easy and the ramp wasn't even that high up. RJ gave a muddled look.

“I don't think you're ready for that,” he said.

“Aww c'mon,” Leo mewled. “I have all these pads on, right?” RJ gave another look at the ramp and then back towards Leo, it was obvious he didn't much like the idea.

“Well if you really wanna,” RJ said relenting. Leo gave a happy chirp as he picked up his board and rushed off towards the ramp. Standing far away he had been rather confident, yet upon getting to the ramp it now looked bigger and more imposing. RJ came from behind and lifted Leo to the top of the ramp. A couple of the other kids took notice looking on with some interest. Leo found himself frozen as he looked down, he was really regretting his decision. RJ had been right, he wasn't ready for this.

“Are you going down,” one of the older boys asked. Leo looked at him like a deer in headlights. The other boy was probably around nine or ten years old. He wore a Sonic the Hedgehog shirt with some brown cargo shorts. His long

blond hair spilling out from under his helmet. In Leo's estimation he looked much more like a skater than himself. Leo shirked back a little as an intense feeling of shyness overtook him. For some reason this kid seemed so much bigger than him, older even. Even if Leo knew that it wasn't technically true he still couldn't shake the feeling.

“He wants to try,” RJ spoke up putting hand on Leo's back if only to step him from stepping off the side of the ramp backwards.

“Oh you want some help,” the boy offered. RJ looked at Leo with a smirk.

“What do you think?” RJ asked. Leo gave a nervous look before nodding his head. He had wanted to try this, so he couldn't back down now.

“I'm Eli,” the boy beamed. “I'm here like every day so I can definitely teach you.”

“I'm RJ and this is Leo,” the man said. “Although this is Leo's first time skateboarding so I don't know if he's ready for this.”

“It shouldn't matter,” Eli responded. “My brother taught me how to skateboard and he made me go down the big ramp on my first day” Eli recounted finding nothing wrong with Leo's level of skill.

Eli then motioned Leo over to the lip and showed him how to put his board on the edge and hold it with his foot. “Then you just put your other foot on the front and down you go, easy

peasy.”

Leo looked down, the height now seemed dizzying even if they weren't all that high up.

“I can't,” Leo said with a shaky voice. “I'm gonna fall.”

“Thats not a big deal,” Eli laughed. He then positioned his own board on the lip before going down as he did he fell going to his knees and sliding down the ramp. “See,” he said getting up. “You just got to fall on your knee's and then slide down on your pads. Leo was thanking his lucky stars now that he had the pads. Leo continued looking down, he was starting to feel like just refusing to go.

“C'mon Leo you can do it,” RJ cheered.

“I'm gonna fall I just know it,” Leo yelped. RJ then went and stood at the bottom stretching his arms out.

“I'll catch you if you do, so just go for it,” RJ said with a reassuring look. Leo looked at the man with his outstretched arms. Just knowing RJ was there was making him feel as if he just might be able to go through with it. Some of the other kids were now gathered around. They started chanting Leo's names and some of them were banging there boards on the ramp. Leo took a deep breath, it was now or never. He put his foot on the front and the board leaned forward, as soon as the front wheels hit the ramp Leo realized what a huge mistake this was. He instantly felt his feet leave the board as he fell forward. He let out a scared yelp before a moment later he felt himself falling into RJ's arms.

“Gotcha,” RJ said. Leo was frozen. It had all happened so fast. As soon as his mind caught up with his body he couldn't help the tears that bursted from his eyes and he began to cry. It had been so scary. RJ hugged him close before lifting him off the ground. Leo buried his face deeper into RJ's shoulder.

“Its alright, I got you,” RJ said as he patted Leo on the back.

“You should try again,” Eli said enthusiastically. Leo couldn't bear to face anyone at the moment. He felt so stupid and useless. He had failed and everyone no doubt thought he was the world biggest loser.

“Lets give him a minute,” RJ said offering Eli a smile before walking off a little from the crowd. Leo continued to cry as RJ bounced him up and down a little continuing to give Leo reassuring words.

After a little bit and after Leo's crying had subsided some RJ shifted him onto his hip. RJ put a hand on top of Leo's helmet making the boy look up at him.

“Leo its okay,” RJ said.

“No its not,” Leo said sniffling. “I couldn't do it, and now everyone thinks I'm dumb.”

“Nobody thinks that,” RJ said chuckling. “In fact I'm really proud of you.” The words hit Leo like a freight train as he was stunned into silence.

“P-proud,” he stuttered back.

“Of course,” RJ said. “You really went for it, that was a really brave thing.”

“But I failed,” Leo said screwing up his face.

“You absolutely did not,” RJ said with a serious look. “You aren't going to be good at things right away. But it doesn't mean you won't ever be able to do it.”

Leo looked down, so many things were playing across his mind. Two wills were battling it out. On one side was those old feelings, the ones that told him he wasn't good enough, that all the bad things that happened to him were his fault. Then there was the other one, a new feeling, the one that told him to trust what RJ was saying – the one that told him he was okay.

“You gave it your all,” RJ said. “That's all that anyone can ask.”

Leo looked at RJ his eyes wide like saucers.

“So what do we do now?” RJ asked. Leo wiped the tears from his eyes.

“I want to try again,” Leo said.

“You sure?” RJ said. “You don't have to push yourself.”

“I want to do it,” Leo said shaking his head. RJ carried him back over to the ramp setting him at the top.

“You gonna go for it?” Eli asked handing Leo his board. Leo nodded.

Leo tried for some time. He never made it down all the way but he got used to it enough that now when he did fall he slid down onto his knees as Eli had instructed and falling wasn't even scary anymore. After a while RJ didn't even need to stand at the ready to catch him. Leo looked ever determined as the rest of the kids were now crowding around cheering him on. After each attempt they would offer up advice. On Leo's last attempt he had even managed to stay on the board long enough to make it down the ramp. Thankfully RJ had plucked him out of the air before he face-planted onto the ground.

“Hey you made it down on that one,” RJ enthused.

“I did,” Leo cheered. He then let his arms fall down to his sides with a tired look. RJ could see that his hair was sticking to the side of his head with sweat.

“Maybe that's enough for today, you're looking pretty tired.” RJ noted.

“Kind of,” Leo said not able to stop a yawn from escaping. They said their goodbyes to the other kids.

“Come back soon okay,” Eli said extending his fist up towards Leo. “I'll teach you how to do an ollie next time.” Leo smiled as he gave the other boy a fist bump. As they walked back towards the bench, Leo squirmed a little.

“Can I ride my board back?” he asked. RJ smiled as he set him down on the ground with his board.

Desiree was walking back to the bench with Kaylee and

Tanner, who seemed to be in a much better mood after having pushed Kaylee on the swing.

“Desi,” she heard Leo call out. She looked over to see Leo rolling across the skate park on his board. RJ was pushing him along as Leo wasn't yet coordinated enough to propel himself yet. He had a big smile on his face. Desiree was a little surprised to see how much progress he had made. Getting to the grass Leo ran towards her.

“Did you see me riding my skateboard?” he asked hopping up and down.

“Sure did,” Desiree said. “You looked like a real skater,” she praised patting him on his helmet, which seemed to make Leo smile even wider.

After a bit, Desiree found herself sat upon a picnic blanket eating lunch with the rest of the group. RJ and Tanner were engaged in some baseball argument, while Leo was making silly faces at Kaylee. She took a moment to really take in the scene. It was something she wanted to remember. Them all here perfectly happy, all their problems seeming so far away.

After everyone was done eating RJ began to pack up with Tanner's help. Leo was sitting next to Desiree sipping on another juice box.

“So how is Leo Day going so far?” Desiree asked.

“This is like the best day ever,” Leo said.

“Good to hear,” Desiree said with a small laugh. “And the fun

isn't over yet.”

“Mhmm,” Leo said with a dreamy hum as he slumped against Desiree's side. She paused for a moment noting how naturally he had done so. Maybe this wasn't such a crazy idea. Leo seemed to be responding well. In fact he didn't even seem to question it any more when they did little things for him that any parent would do for their young child. She could see that he was seeking their attention, just like any little kid would do with their parents. Even now he had cuddled up to her completely unprovoked, as if he trusted them to be a source of comfort for him. Desiree then thought that perhaps now was a good time to ask him how he would feel if they adopted him. Maybe they didn't need to keep their plan a secret, perhaps they didn't need to convince Leo of anything? Desiree went to ask him looking down at Leo when she noticed he was out like a light. She looked at her phone noting the time. It was thirty minutes after his usual nap time. She smirked a little. RJ came back seeing that Leo was asleep.

“Guess we tired him out,” RJ said putting his hands on his hips. “Do you think we should call it early?”

“Nonsense,” Desiree said as she gathered Leo up into her arms. The boy stirred a little before nuzzling into her, remaining asleep. “He'll be ready for the next thing after his nap,” she said as she began to walk towards the car.

Chapter 21

To Build a Nest: Chapter 21 - Chapter 21

Misfire

“Leo wakey wakey,” the soft syrupy voice of Desiree sounded out. Leo blearily opened his eyes looking confused. He was sitting in his car seat with no recollection of how he had gotten there, the last thing he remembered was closing his eyes for just a moment at the park.

“Whats happening?” Leo asked groggily rubbing his eyes.

“We're here,” Desiree exclaimed unbuckling him from his seat. Leo hopped out of the car taking a look around. They were in a grassy field, there were lots of other cars parked all over.

“This is our last stop,” RJ mentioned. “You said you liked animals so at first I though of a zoo, but the closest one is hours away, so I found this place.”

Leo continued to look around a little mystified, he certainly didn't see any animals. Off in the distance there looked to be some barns just over the horizon but that was all he could really see. RJ then began to lead the way as Leo followed.

“Leo what did we say about parking lots?” Desiree tutted.

“Oh yeah,” Leo said, as he went and grabbed Desiree's

outstretched hand. As they walked Leo balked a little. He had just grabbed her hand so naturally, as if he had thought nothing of it. Leo pursed his lips a little. Some part of him wanted to pull his hand away, there weren't even that many cars in the parking lot, yet he relented. He sort of liked holding Desiree's hand. It was apparent to him that when he was near her and RJ it made him feel a certain way. It made him feel...something, he couldn't quite put his finger on exactly, it was a nice feeling though. As they neared the entrance, Leo could see large signs all over the place, they were decorated with pictures of smiling animals. Yet aside from recognizing some letters he couldn't read them.

“Em-pire Sa-safari,” Tanner said slowly as if he was sounding out the word.

“Yes sir,” RJ said. “You guys ready for a safari?”

“This place looks like a farm,” Tanner said with some apprehension.

“I assure you they have more than cows and chickens,” RJ laughed.

They walked up to a ticket booth as RJ paid and then handed out wristbands to everyone. Desiree helped Leo get his on. Leo's wristband was tie dyed and matched Kaylee's, while Tanner's was yellow and Desiree and RJ's were blue. Walking in Leo heard Tanner laugh.

“Whats so funny?” Leo asked.

“Your wristband,” Tanner said pointing. Leo looked down

confused. What was so funny about it?

“It says under five,” Tanner chortled. “That means you got in for free.”

“So what?” Leo grumbled. “I am under five.” A serious look then came to Tanner's face.

“Leo how old are you?” Tanner then asked.

“Eighteen,” Leo said looking back at Tanner with an awkward look.

“Good,” Tanner said nodding a little as if Leo's answer had somehow relieved him of some worry. Did Tanner think that Leo had somehow forgotten his true age? Did he actually think that Leo had believed he was really four?

“All right lets go line up,” RJ said waving the boys over to a queue line. Before long Leo found himself sat on a hay bale in between Tanner and RJ who was holding Kaylee on his lap, as they rode on a trailer being pulled behind a tractor. Everyone had been given a large cup of food. Desiree was currently snapping pictures of the four of them, which seemed to only annoy Tanner somewhat. Leo didn't mind, his mind was elsewhere. The anticipation was killing him. They hadn't seen a single animal yet. He thought this was supposed to be a safari.

Almost on cue the tractor lumbered through an archway, as Leo looked out he saw a large field and not only that but there were animals of all sorts running towards the patrons with

food for them. Leo's eyes went wide. He saw Llama's and deer, there were even some bison in the mix.

“Look at them all,” Leo exclaimed shooting up to his feet on top of the hay bale.

“Leo,” RJ said with a sort of exasperated laugh as he grabbed the boy by the back of his shirt with his free hand and pulled him down causing Leo to land with a poof back on his butt. “Stay seated pal, or you're going to fall in.”

Leo didn't seem to have any reaction as his eyes were glued on the animals. Some Llama's approached the side.

“Can I get up now?” Leo asked, bouncing a little on his seat.

“Just wait until we stop,” RJ said. Thankfully for Leo the ride came to a halt. Leo was on his feet instantly, leaning over the side with his cup extended as some of the animals came and started to eat out of his cup. Leo let out an excited squeal watching the feeding frenzy.

Tanner on the other hand narrowed his eyes. There wasn't a single doubt in his mind now, they were absolutely treating Leo like a little kid – and what was more troubling is that Leo seemed to not care at all. It didn't make sense at all, why in the world would they do that. Desiree and RJ had been pretty good about not doing stuff like that outside of the instances where it was necessary to keep up appearances. What was still a mystery to Tanner is why would they only be doing it to Leo? They weren't treating him any different. Tanner got up and went and stood next to Leo. He felt like he should say

something. He was thinking the best way to go about it. Should he just come right out and accuse them? Or maybe he should say something to Leo. Tanner then looked at Leo for a moment. He had a big smile on his face. He wondered when the last time he had ever seen Leo so happy. It seemed to dawn on him that the answer was never. Tanner then remembered what Desiree had told him that morning, about how today was important for Leo, a chance for him to make some happy memories. Tanner gave a small hum. Maybe now wasn't a good time. If Leo was okay with whatever was going on for the moment then Tanner could wait. No reason to rain on the parade for nothing. The wagon began to move again as RJ wrapped a hand around Leo hoisting him up onto his lap securing the boy with an arm around the tummy so now he had a kid on each leg.

“You still got food in there?” RJ asked.

“Yep,” Leo said holding his cup up to show RJ he still had half a cup full.

“Lots of hungry animals out here,” RJ mused. “Pace yourself.”

“I got it,” Leo said.

The wagon continued along. In one area there were lots of strange looking cows. One the staff people was giving out info and said they were from India. Leo found himself wondering where India even was. He sat for a moment thinking hard on it. A moment later it just seemed to pop into his head. He could even see it on a world map. Leo felt a little relieved. Maybe Tanner was right, all the knowledge that had

seemingly left him would come back sooner or later.

As they continued along the safari Leo was delighted seeing all the strange and new animals in front of him. At one point a bison had come up to the wagon sticking its large head underneath the bars. Leo was crouched down petting the giant animal, even Tanner was next to him feeding the animal out of his cup so Leo could continue to pet him. Some time later Leo was crouched down feeding some more Llamas next to Desiree. He looked over to see Tanner stood by RJ with his cup above his head as he let a camel eat. Leo smiled, everything about today had been perfect and for a moment he found himself wishing things could just stay like this.

The wagon ride came to an end as the patrons were dropped off in a petting zoo area where there were smaller animals roaming about. In the middle was a large metal jungle gym. Desiree asked Leo if he wanted to go play on it. Yet Leo had refused. He was here to see the animals after all. That was until he looked down to see that his cup was empty. Leo gave a frown thinking his fun was over. Luckily RJ came by with a fresh cup for everybody. Leo had wandered into a grassy area where there were some ducks and chickens. He was spreading his food around enjoying the sight of the birds all crowding about together. A goose then approached ruffling its feathers. Leo offered some feed to goose which it greedily ate.

“Okay,” Leo said with nod. “That's enough,” he said withdrawing his cup as he turned to feed some more ducks that had arrived. However the goose wanted more as it

crowded Leo craning its neck towards Leo's cup. “Hey, you gotta share,” Leo said with some offenses as he turned away from the goose. Leo then felt the goose barrel into him sending him tumbling to the ground as his cup spilled all over him. A moment later all the birds were over him pecking the food off of him. Leo couldn't see anything except for feathers as he felt their feet all over him and the sharp little stabs of their beaks. He thrashed about but to no avail. Leo let out a panicked yelped before feeling two hands grab him and pull him up into the air.

“Woah there,” RJ said. Leo was too shocked to even respond. RJ then shifted Leo so that he was perched upon RJ's arm as the man with his free hand began to dust the great amount of dirt and dust that now covered the small boy.

“I-I was trying to...” Leo stammered before his face twisted up as he looked at the goose. “And then that stupid goose pushed me down,” Leo shouted before the corners of his mouth turned down. “Now I don't have any food left,” Leo said sadly.

“You can have the rest of mine,” RJ said handing Leo his own cup. “We're going to be leaving soon though so you better pick out the last animals you want to feed. Leo looked around a little before spotting some goats.

“I want to feed them,” Leo said pointing.

“Alright bud sounds good,” RJ said carrying Leo over to the goats before setting him down. Leo held the cup with both

hands as he let the goats eat. They were much nicer than the goose and Leo's anger subsided. Afterwards it was time to go as everyone stood gathered in the center of the petting zoo .

“I'm gonna go to the bathroom,” Tanner said.

“Me too,” Leo piped up.

“Alright I'll take you guys over,” RJ said, which caused Tanner's face to scowl.

“We don't need you to accompany us,” he snapped. “We're old enough, or have you forgotten?”

RJ's mouth twisted a little making Leo a little nervous. RJ's face then relaxed.

“Okay,” he said. “You're right. Hurry back."

Tanner walked off as Leo quickly followed behind. Leo went into the smaller porta potty that was meant for kids, upon coming out he found Tanner by the sink as if he were waiting for Leo.

“They're acting weird, don't you think?” Tanner asked.

“I don't know,” Leo said as he washed his hands. Even if he knew that Tanner was right, he did'nt really want to admit it.

“Oh come on,” Tanner said with a huff. “They're treating you like a little kid.”

“They're just being nice,” Leo said, shaking his head.

“Not even you are that clueless, its like they're acting like

your parents or something. Buckling you into the car seat, making you hold their hands in the parking lot and all that other stuff." Tanner retorted. Leo balked for a moment. He could'nt deny Tanner's accusation. They were acting strange. But to treat him like their kid was a bridge too far.

"They aren't treating me like their my parents," Leo said, the very idea making his tummy twist with an awkward squeeze. "They're just being extra cautious I guess," Leo reasoned.

"Why would they do that?" Tanner said as his brows furrowed. "They're only doing it to you, did something happen?"

"No," Leo shook his head. He had a few ideas though. The biggest one being the fact that he had admitted to Desiree he didn't think he could really consider himself an eighteen year old anymore.

"Look they went through a lot of trouble for me today and I don't want them thinking I'm ungrateful or nothing," Leo said looking at the ground before he looked up at Tanner with a pleading look. "Just don't make a big deal out of it, please."

Tanner looked at Leo for a moment, as if he were deep in thought.

"I understand where you are coming from," Tanner finally said. "So I wont say anything, that being said though we should really start to think about moving on. We can't stay here forever you know."

Leo was about to question why, but stopped. Tanner was

right. As much as Leo would have been fine just keeping things as they were, he knew they couldn't stay here forever. They would have to move on. Leo had made his decision after all. Desiree was going to find parents for him. Leo came to realize the full extent of his decision now. No matter what he and Tanner were going to go their separate ways. He had been trying to not think about it too much. He knew he would have to tell Tanner eventually. Leo resolved he would tell him that night.

They had left the safari and had stopped off at a fast food joint for dinner. There was a playplace there. Desiree had asked Leo if he wanted to go play. Leo had refused though. Even if part of him had wanted too, he was in no mood thinking about what he was going to have to do.

Upon getting back home Leo had begun to psyche himself up for the conversation with Tanner. Yet just as he was about to go to their room, Desiree had appeared out of seemingly nowhere swooping Leo up into her arms.

“You know what time it is?” she asked.

“Not really,” Leo said not really seeing what she could be talking about.

“Its time for a certain kid to go into the tub,” she said.

“Oh well umm,” Leo stammered.

“I'm not taking no,” Desiree tutted. “You are absolutely filthy young man.”

“I guess I could,” Leo said noting the dirt stain on his shirt.

“Good, and better yet I'm going to help you,” Desiree said as she began to carry him to the bathroom.

“You don't have to,” Leo flustered.

“Its okay,” Desiree said. “You really got yourself messy, so I'm going to make sure we get all those hard to reach spots that you seem to have trouble with.”

Leo found that he couldn't refuse, not too mention he wasn't exactly looking forward to the talk he needed to have with Tanner – he would go along with just about anything at this point just to put it off.

In short order he found himself in the tub of warm water. Desiree had even added in a ton of bubbles. Leo was feeling a little embarrassed. It was true that just a couple of days ago she had put him in the tub herself, but he had been sick then. Usually she would stick close outside of the door. It had kind of annoyed him how she would give him reminders to make sure he washed up properly. Although if she didn't he would inevitably miss some spot and he would often not wash his hair out all the way. Leo just reasoned that she was making sure he did a good job that night since he was especially dirty, even with that thought though, it didn't exactly make him feel any better.

“You like the bubbles?” Desiree asked scooping up a handful of suds into her hand.

“I guess,” Leo mumbled flicking the top off of a peak of

bubbles near him.

“Look we can give you a new hairstyle,” Desiree said plopping the bubbles onto Leo's head. She fashioned them into large spikes. “And then we'll give you a big long beard,” she chuckled giving Leo a large bubble beard that stretched down to his chest. “You look like a total rock star now.”

“Yeah right,” Leo said with gloomy laugh. He was starting to feel a little down. The idea that it would be a long time before he could even consider growing a beard was causing him a moment of melancholy. He was going to be a kid again for a long time. Should he have really told Desi he wanted a family? Was that really an answer? Saying it was one thing, as if it were nothing more than a nice fantasy, but would reality even come close? What if Leo's first childhood wasn't really all that strange. His parents were controlling and overbearing for sure, but would different parents really be all that different? What if it was only a little better the second time around? What if Leo had the worlds most perfect parents yet still found his shortcomings too much, what if he really was the problem?

Leo?” Desiree's voice called out slashing through the myriad of doubts in Leo's mind.

“Huh what?” Leo asked blinking back to the present.

“C'mon you're looking like a rockstar, you gonna sing a song for your adoring fans,” Desiree chuckled. “Oh whoops forgot you're a guitarist right?”

“I can sing,” Leo sputtered.

“You can?” Desiree asked with a curious look.

“Yeah,” Leo enthused. “Back at Hawthorne we put on a play and I sang a song.” Leo said.

“You know I would like to hear that,” Desiree said grabbing a bath brush from nearby. “I bet you were pretty good.”

“I was,” Leo said shooting to his feet.

“No standing in the tub honey,” Desiree said quickly putting a hand on Leo's shoulder and guiding him back into a sitting position. Leo didn't pay any mind. For some reason the idea of proving to Desi that he was a good singer seemed more important than his modesty.

“I even got a solo in the show,” Leo smiled. He was proud of that. They didn't give you solo's unless you were actually good, so he knew it wasn't a lie.

“Here's your mic,” Desiree said, handing Leo the bath brush.

Leo took it eagerly. He began singing the puppy song that he had sung at Hawthorne. He still remembered all the words, he had practiced it a lot after all. As he sang, he rocked his head from side to side like it was a metronome keeping time as he performed acapella.

“Maybe there will be a bone for me,” Leo finished holding the last note longer. Desiree had a huge smile on her face as she began to clap.

“Bravo, bravo,” she cheered. “You are just so talented aren't you?” Desiree cooed. Leo felt his chest swell with pride. As the bath proceeded Leo was in a great mood as he began to splash around in the bubbles. It was so different than it had been had Hawthorne. Back then it was as if them bathing him only reinforced to Leo that he was too helpless to do it himself. But with Desiree it was different. He was happy to have her help, it was comforting to have her there. As Desiree soaped up his arms she took a washcloth and began to scrub one of his arms.

“Scrub scrub scrub, we gotta scrub scrub scrub, we are gonna be so clean,” she sang out. As she moved to the other arm Leo sang along with her. He couldn't contain himself. He especially liked it when she lathered up his hair, massaging his scalp with her hands. When Leo was clean as a doorwhistle Desiree drained the tub and wrapped him up in a towel drying him off. Leo was giggling the whole time as he made up some song about drying off. When she was done Desiree handed Leo one of his pull-ups. He stepped into it and pulled it up to his waist with gusto.

“Pull it up, Pull it up, pull it up to the sky,” Leo sang hopping from one foot to the other.

“You are going to have a song for everything, aren't you?” Desiree snickered.

“Maybe,” Leo said with a cheeky grin.

“Okay lets dry your hair out,” Desiree said picking him up and setting him on the bathroom counter before getting a

blow dryer out of the drawer. As she dried Leo's hair he came up with another song to go along with it. Desiree then blew the air into his face. Leo laughed as he opened his mouth wide which made his singing sound all the more funny. Desiree then took out a brush as she began to gently brush out Leo's hair.

“This hair of your's is starting to get rather long,” she noted. “Maybe its time for a haircut.” Neither boy had gotten their hair cut since becoming younger and it was starting to show.

“I want it long though,” Leo said putting his hands on his head as if Desiree was about to snatch it right off.

“Its getting in your eyes though,” Desiree said as she brushed his bangs to the side. “But I suppose we could always just put it up with a clip, that would be kind of cute.”

Leo gave Desiree a muddled look. He didn't want to be cute, he wanted to be cool and suave.

“Well maybe just a little bit,” Leo offered.

“Of course, just a trim” Desiree said. “I wasn't going to shave it off, I like your shaggy hair due. I think it makes you look handsome,” Desiree said as she took a step back to admire Leo. “Mommy's handsome little boy.”

Leo felt his body stiffen. Desiree lips immediately pursed upon realizing what she had said. Leo felt his stomach flop over. He suddenly felt very small, babyish even. Tanner had been right. They had been treating him like a kid – their kid. Leo couldn't deny it or make excuses anymore.

“Leo I...” Desiree began.

“I'm gonna go to bed,” Leo said abruptly as he hopped off the counter making a hasty exit out of the bathroom. Desiree stood motionless. She grimaced as she leaned down on the counter putting her face into her hands.

“Nice one Desiree,” she muttered to herself.

Leo came into his room. Tanner was on his bed, he was looking at a book all about world records. Leo went to his dresser pulling out some pajamas. He pulled on the blue and white striped shorts before pulling out the white shirt adorned with a pirate ship. He went to put it on only to struggle realizing he was trying to pull his head through an armhole. Leo then felt some hands grab his shirt putting it the right way so that his head popped out of the collar, only to see that it was Tanner who had been the one helping him.

“I didn't need your help,” Leo muttered.

“Didn't look that way,” Tanner shrugged.

“Leave me alone,” Leo spat back. Tanner's brow furrowed.

“Whats with you all of a sudden?” Tanner asked putting his hands on his hips.

“Nothing,” Leo said going to his bed and getting under the covers. He heard Tanner mutter something before returning to his own bed and opening the book back up. Leo didn't know what to do. Something about what Desiree had said just didn't sit right with him. Where in the world did she get off treating

him like that. Yet another part of him reasoned that he had asked for it all the same. Yet another part of him couldn't accept that. Them, as his parents? No way. That would never work. They could never want someone like him.

As Leo continued to stew he questioned why he had even wanted parents in the first place. Just what about the idea has seemed so alluring? He though about it for awhile. What did parents mean to him? What could they offer. Perhaps it was the idea of a blank slate, a fresh start. Was that it, did he just want to abandon his old life and start anew. Maybe so, which made it all the more ridiculous to imagine Desiree and RJ as his parents, it was too weird and awkward. They knew who he was, who he had been. He had baggage with them. Still as he tried to remain mad at them, memories kept coming back to him. All the times they had been there for him. All the times he had felt so hopeless they had been there to offer a helping hand, and to make him feel that the world wasn't about to end. But that wasn't what parents did...right? He didn't really know. Desi and RJ would good friends, would that make them good parents? Maybe. But what if Leo was wrong? What if he accepted Desi and RJ as parents and he found that they would become similar to his own upon taking on that role. He didn't want to lose his friends.

Leo felt so alone in his uncertainty. He poked his head out from under the blankets. He looked at Tanner still reading his book. He couldn't talk to him about this. Leo got up from his bed as he walked out into the hallway. He looked towards the kitchen he could hear some voices. Leo crept down quiet as a

mouse. Coming into the kitchen he could hear that Desiree and RJ were in the living room. He went and stood by the entrance way making sure to stay out of sight as he listened in on their conversation.

“Everything was going so well,” Desiree said. “And then I just let that slip out of my mouth, I absolutely ruined the entire day.”

“C'mon you didn't ruin anything,” RJ comforted. “Just give him the night to sleep it off and then you can apologize in the morning. Maybe it wont seem like such a big deal then.”

“I hope you're right,” Desiree said morosely.

Leo thought for a moment that he might have blown things out of proportion. Maybe it was all in his head. Them treating him like a little kid, Desiree's comment, it could have been a simple slip of the tongue, he had been acting pretty foolish in the bathroom. Could they both have just gotten caught up in the moment? Leo stood up going and standing in the entrance way. It was RJ who first noticed him.

“You need something?” he asked casually.

“I was just wondering if I could watch some tv?” Leo asked.

“Sure,” RJ said, moving aside to open up a space between himself and Desiree. Leo went and climbed onto the couch. He had half expected them to tell him it was late and he should go to bed, which would have only confirmed that they had been treating him like a kid. Now he was really starting to think he had been mistaken about everything.

“You want some cartoons on or something?” RJ asked.

“No this is fine,” Leo said, not even looking at the screen. RJ seemed to give a hum of affirmation. Leo sat for a minute or two keeping his eyes down as he twiddled his thumbs. Despite the awkwardness he felt he still had to admit their was something comforting about being sat in between the two of them. Leo took a deep breath. “Can I ask you guys a question?”

“Sure,” RJ said nonchalantly.

Leo gritted his teeth for a moment. “Were you guys treating me differently today?

Chapter 22

To Build a Nest: Chapter 22 - Chapter 22

The Hesitant Child

RJ muted the TV. Leo could feel the the room change. When he had entered there had been a sort of apprehension in the air. Upon asking his question that had now given way to a certain intensity.

“Do you think so?” RJ asked. Leo kept his eyes glued downwards as he clasped his hands together.

“I guess so,” Leo mumbled.

“So then tell me how we were treating you then,” RJ said.

“Like a little kid,” Leo squeaked, feeling like he was in some sort of trouble for even suggesting such a thing.

“And if we were, then what?” RJ asked. Leo remained silent. “Does that bother you?

Leo let out a little grumble. Maybe it did. Though he hadn't exactly acted like it. In fact if Leo was honest it was the moments he had been acting little without even giving it a thought that were the times he was happiest that day. It was only when he had to think like his old self when the doubts came in.

“I guess not,” Leo said.

“I see,” RJ said quietly. “But it did bother you when Desiree said what she said in the bathroom.”

Leo could almost feel Desiree cringe.

“Well I guess it just kind of made me feel a little uncomfortable.” Leo said.

“I'm so sorry, I didn't meant to,” Desiree said.

“Were you guys actually treating me like I was your kid?” Leo asked laying the question of the hour out in the open. Although he didn't need the answer, but he wanted to hear them say it all the same – he wanted them to admit it.

“Yes, we were,” RJ answered bluntly.

“But why?” Leo asked scrunching his face up as he looked from RJ to Desiree.

“You told me you wanted parents,” Desiree said. “And I began to look, to find what you wanted, like I said I would. I even asked Robert if his family would take you in. But somewhere along the way the idea came up that maybe we could be those parents for you.”

“But you can't,” Leo yelped jumping to his feet. He walked a few paces away from the couch before turning back towards the couch. “You just couldn't.”

“Is there something wrong with us?” RJ asked.

“No,” Leo said shaking his head. “Its me. I think the only reason I even asked for parents was because I just thought

that I could start over and be a different person, with a whole new life and then none of this would matter anymore, I could act like it never happened. I just wanted to run away, like a coward. A stupid coward who thought this would work."

Desiree and RJ were silent as they listened. RJ was expressionless and Desiree had a pitied look on her face.

"Who would want me?" Leo asked aloud his face contorted in confusion. "I can't do anything right, no matter how hard I try. I mean I've done nothing worth anything in my entire life. I'm completely selfish as well. All I had to do was keep my head down and everything would have been fine, none of this would have happened. You guys would have never had to deal with this and I pulled Robert into it as well and then Tanner..." Leo said coming to a pause. "I was just going to abandon him," Leo said quietly as he levied the most damning accusation at himself. Leo stared off into space his face painted with guilt, as if saying it aloud had finally revealed the ramifications of what his decision had been. Leo slumped onto the ground the strength going out of his legs. RJ got up picking Leo up off the ground and returning to the couch setting the boy in his lap. He took a moment to pull Leo's shirt down having ridden up a little before he began to rub his back.

"Leo you are a liar," RJ said. Leo gave a RJ a befuddled look. "Everything you just said was completely untrue."

"I agree," Desiree said nodding her head. "I just want to know why you can't see what we do?"

Leo was silent as his mouth hung agape.

“You are not a coward,” RJ said.

“And you are not selfish,” Desiree added. “Leo you are one of the most giving people I've ever known. I see you constantly going out of your way to try and make things easy for everybody, except yourself. You do nothing but sacrifice your own happiness for others.”

“And those times when you do allow yourself the tiniest shred of happiness,” RJ said. “You turn around a minute later to beat yourself up.”

“Leo we care about you so much, and we would be overjoyed if you decided to stay with us.” Desiree said. “We weren't trying to trick you or make you feel uncomfortable. We just wanted to show you what your life could be like.”

“We also aren't saying that you have to choose us,” RJ said. “This is your decision, and you do have options.”

“Hmm hmm,” Desiree reiterated. “I know you and Tanner have talked about moving out together.”

“But that'll never work,” Leo said gloomily.

“Maybe not right away,” RJ said. “But its not like you have to do it right away.”

“We're not kicking you two out, just because you don't want to be adopted,” Desiree said.

“Yeah,” RJ said. “We would let you guys stay, you would be

like roommates I guess. ”

Leo thought about it for a moment, would something like that work? He remembered Tanner saying something about Leo becoming a child model. If he did something like that he could make money and give it to Desiree and RJ. In that scenario Desiree and RJ would carry on treating them like they had been once they had finally seen the truth. Not like kids, but something in-between. As Leo thought about it he remembered wishing things could stay as they were, specifically how things had been that day, but it wouldn't be like that. Desiree and RJ had treated him like they're four year old child. But in the hypothetical situation where Leo and Tanner stayed not as kids but their real ages, they wouldn't be like that anymore. Leo realized that today had been possibly the best day of his life, and not just because of all the fun stuff they had done. For the first time he had felt something.

He felt like what it was like to have people around whom he could run to for safety, who would watch out for him, like RJ had done at the skate park and when he had saved him from the goose at the safari. He also felt like what it was like when he needed someone to comfort him, when he was scared and also to give a firm hand back on track when he was letting his emotions get the better of him and to help him out when there were things that were hard for him to do on his own, like Desiree had done at the music store and when she had lovingly given him a bath, not for a minute making Leo feel like he was being a burden. The examples didn't end there as

he thought about all the times the two of them had been there for him. The clothing store, his accident, when he had been sick, all of it.

“Whatever you want, we'll do it,” Desiree said. “If you want to work towards moving out with Tanner we'll come up with a plan to make that possible, and if you want to go in a different direction I can call Roberts family and have them take you in, and if you would rather have different parents that would give you that fresh start, I will go and search the whole world over to find the worlds most perfect parents for you.”

“I don't want any of that,” Leo said his voice shaking. He knew what it is he truly wanted...what he needed but he was held back by one thing. “Tanner would –“

“Its not about Tanner,” RJ said cutting him off. “This is your decision, nobody else can make it for you.”

Leo frowned as he got off of RJ's lap. He paced back and forth a little before finally coming and standing in front of the two on the couch.

“I...I...” he started, becoming a little choked up. “I want you.” he said looking at them with a mix of apprehensiveness and shyness as he batted away some stray tears. “If you think that you can learn to like me, then I want you to be my parents.”

“Oh Leo,” Desiree sighed resting her chin on her hand. “We already love you,” she said opening her arms wide. “Now come get a hug.”

Leo's face erupted into the biggest smile he had ever had as he leapt into Desiree's arms hugging her tightly with no reservations that he shouldn't be doing this.

“I'll be the best kid ever, I promise,” Leo said burying his face into Desiree's shoulder.

“Leo you don't have to promise things like that,” Desiree said as she released him.

“I don't?” Leo questioned.

“Of course not,” RJ said coming from behind and plucking Leo up off the ground as he proceeded to hug the boy. “We're the ones who wanted you, you're already perfect.”

Desiree sat back watching as Leo squeezed RJ.

“Guess you got the son you wanted,” Desiree chuckled.

“Huh?” Leo said as he looked between Desiree and RJ.

“We always talked about having another kid,” RJ explained. “And I kind of was hoping the next one would be a boy.”

“Oh well,” Leo said hesitantly, feeling a little bit of pressure hoping that he could be the kind of kid RJ wanted.

“And I think I got a pretty great one,” RJ said lifting Leo high up into the air as he spun him around causing Leo to squeal a little.

After some more hugs and celebration, the three were sat on the couch with Leo cuddled up between his two new parents. He looked up at the two of them. He felt content to be

between them, it was comforting. He remembered the last time he had seen his other parents, something they had said to him gave him pause.

“So umm can I call you Mommy and Daddy?” Leo asked.

“If you want to,” RJ said reaching hand down and ruffling up Leo's hair. Leo though he would feel weird about it, just as he had when his other parents had insisted on it, but this felt different, it felt natural.

“Yeah,” Leo said. “I want to.”

“On that note,” Desiree said looking at her phone. “Its time for our first official act as your parents to declare that it is bedtime.”

“I can't,” Leo yelped sitting up.

“Sweetheart, you had a big day,” Desiree began. “And it is part of our duty to make sure you get a proper nights rest and that means getting to sleep at a certain time. So with that being said I think me and RJ will just end up fighting about it, so how about both of us come and tuck you in.”

“Its not that,” Leo said as he shirked down a little. “It's Tanner...I have to tell him tonight.”

Desiree and RJ gave each other a look, in their flurry of excitement and happiness they had forgotten about the biggest loose thread. RJ took a knee in front of Leo.

“We can come with and help you,” RJ said putting a hand on Leo's shoulder.

Leo shook his head. “Its probably best if I do it myself.”

RJ nodded noting the serious demeanor that Leo now had etched across his face. Where only a minutes earlier Leo had been fully behaving like their cuddly affectionate little boy, he was now back in his eighteen year old mindset. RJ wondered how long Leo would be able to switch between them. At the moment though it seemed to be a blessing. Leo was going to need whatever semblance of his older self that he still possessed to deal with the task in front of him.

“We'll be in our room if you need us,” RJ said giving Leo a big hug, which the boy eagerly returned.

“Thanks Daddy,” Leo whispered. He found himself wishing he could just stay wrapped up in RJ's arms and not have to deal with the tough conversation ahead. It was then Desiree's turn to hug him as Leo found himself cuddling into her as if to suck up whatever shred of confidence he could from her hug. She leaned in and gave him a gentle kiss to his cheek. Leo brought his hand up to his cheek with an overwhelmed smile on his face as he she seemed to lean his cheek into his hand as if he were holding her kiss against his face.

“I love you,” she said softly.

“You do?” Leo asked looking a little flummoxed. Desiree could only laugh.

“Just how many times do I need to say it before you believe me?” Desiree chuckled.

“ I dunno,” Leo said.

“Well starting tomorrow I'm going to say it a hundred times a day, from when you wake up in the morning to when you get tucked into bed.”

“Okay Mommy,” Leo said giving her a bashful smile. Leo felt the warm fuzzy feeling in his tummy. It felt good to call them by their new titles, he didn't need to get used to it at all. It was the most natural thing in the world. It was almost as if they had been playing some sort of game for awhile where they didn't call each other by their real names, but now the game was over and everything was back to normal. Leo turned facing towards the archway into the kitchen he looked back at Desi and RJ as they both gave him a nod. Leo took a deep breath and began the walk back to his room.

Leo walked into the room. Tanner was standing near the dresser with his back turned towards the door. Leo couldn't see what he was doing. Leo shut the door somewhat loudly to announce his presence. Tanner spun around caught off guard. Leo could see Tanner had one of the action figures in his hands.

“Oh Leo,” Tanner said looking a little flustered as he tossed the toy aside. Leo wondered if Tanner had been playing with it? “So you like in a better mood now?” Tanner asked going and laying on his bed.

“Yeah,” Leo said. “I had a talk with Desi and RJ, about today.”

“So what,” Tanner questioned. “Did they admit it.”

“Yeah, they did,” Leo said slowly. Tanner sat up pounding his

fist in his hand as if he were a game show contestant who had just gotten the right answer.

“I knew it,” Tanner nodded. “I think that's a as good a sign as any.”

Leo looked at Tanner questioningly.

“I think its time for us to move on you know. We'll talk to them in the morning and make it known, and we won't take no for answer,” Tanner said sounding giddy at the prospect.

“I'm not leaving,” Leo said keeping his eyes to the ground. He didn't hear Tanner respond. “I've decided to stay here,” Leo said lifting his head to look at Tanner. “I asked Desi and RJ to adopt me and they agreed.”

Tanner sat with a stunned look on his face as he blinked in abject shock.

“What did they say to you?” Tanner exclaimed getting to his feet.

“Nothing,” Leo said. “This was my decision. I asked Desi a couple of days ago to find me parents, and well today just proved that they were the ones I wanted.”

“You can't be serious, why in the world would you ask for that?”

“Tanner,” Leo groaned. “I know the whole moving out thing was our plan, but its just not going to work out like that. I'm gonna be a little kid soon, and so are you.”

Tanner's lip curled up like Leo had just opened up a sealed container with rotten eggs in it.

“Don't look at me like that,” Leo said crossing his arms. “I used to just think it was me, but its happening to you too, isn't it.”

“You don't know what you are talking about,” Tanner growled.

“Yes I do,” Leo said sternly. “I've noticed it. That's why you stopped bringing those worksheets home for me right?”

“Huh?”

“You stopped when you realized you couldn't explain it to me anymore. The only way you would know how to do it would be if you had already gone over it in class beforehand.”

“That's a lie,” Tanner spat back. “They just weren't helping you anymore, is all.”

Leo went and grabbed the book of world records from Tanner's bed. He flipped it open to a page that had pictures of giant sized foods on it.

“Then what does this say?” Leo said pointing at the top of the page. Tanner looked at it for a moment. Leo could see his lips moving slightly sounding out the words silently.

“Mega foods,” Tanner finally answered.

“Exactly,” Leo said, snapping the book shut.

“That's what it said,” Tanner said with some offense. “Not like you would know, since you can't read.”

“And you're not doing much better,” Leo countered. “Any eighteen year old would have read that in a second, but you couldn't because you had to sound it out first, right?”

Tanner tried to say something in response yet his voice caught. “Just admit it already,” Leo said. In an instant Tanner shoved Leo onto the ground getting on top of him and grabbing the collar of his shirt with his fist.

“So that's it you're just going to let Hawthorne win!” Tanner yelled.

“I'm sorry,” Leo said turning his head to the side. “This is what I've decided.

“Fine,” Tanner said getting up off of Leo. “I thought you would be the last person in the world to abandon me, I really did think we were in this together.” Tanner said as he went and grabbed his backpack and began stuffing clothes into it.

“Tanner you know you could stay too,” Leo said sitting up. “We're going to have to grow up again, would it really be so bad doing it here, together?”

“You want to play family with your new Mommy and Daddy, that's fine by me,” Tanner said zipping up his backpack and slinging it across his back. “But I'm not sticking around for that little game of make believe.” Tanner went to the door.

“They didn't win you know,” Leo said turning his head slightly back towards Tanner. “Hawthorne didn't do what they did to make us kids again. They wanted us to be easier to

control, easier to program to their whims. But it wouldn't be the same here," Leo said. "You know that, right?" Tanner didn't say a word as he opened the door before exiting, slamming the door behind him.

Tanner marched down to Desi and RJ's room. He had a couple of things to tell them before he left. The first thing being what rotten people they were. Tanner opened the door roughly walking into the room as if he owned the place. The two of them were in bed watching TV as they looked over at him standing there with a fiery look.

"Congratulations," Tanner said. "I guess your little plan or whatever worked. I can't believe you would manipulate him like that."

"No one was manipulated," Desiree said. "It was up to Leo."

"Spare me," Tanner spat back venomously. "I think you'll be glad to know though that I don't have any intention of getting in the way of whatever you and Leo have deluded yourselves into."

"Tanner," RJ said plainly. "You are more than welcome to stay as well, and I don't mean having us adopt you either. I just mean until you get on your feet, the same offer we gave Leo."

"I'm leaving," Tanner growled. "Tonight."

Desiree and RJ regarded Tanner with an unsuprised look. Tanner was waiting for them to try and convince him otherwise. Give him the reasons why he couldn't leave. It was

RJ who got up first. Tanner felt a twinge of fear for a second as the large man walked towards him. He thought for a moment that RJ was going to grab him to stop him from leaving. Yet RJ walked past him going over to the large dresser behind Tanner, picking up his wallet that had been set on top. RJ opened the wallet taking out all the cash within.

“How much you got?” RJ asked looking over at Desi. She went into her purse taking out her own cash and walking over and handing it to RJ who proceeded to count the money.

“Altogether we got about two hundred and fifty,” RJ said handing the money to Tanner.

“What?” Tanner said eyeing the cash suspiciously.

“I'm sorry its all we got, I wish it was more, take it,” RJ said pushing the money towards Tanner who took the cash stuffing it into his pocket.

“Lets get you some food as well,” Desiree said. Tanner followed Desiree to the kitchen. She pulled out a canvas bag and began to put lots of stuff in it. A loaf of bread, some peanut butters, a couple bags of chips and some bananas and apples. She then gave the bag to Tanner which he put over his shoulder. He was wondering if they were serious, were they actually going to just let him leave?

“We don't have a lot of non-perishables,” Desiree said as she lead him out of the kitchen.

As they walked towards the front door he saw RJ standing

there. Tanner was waiting for them to break, and tell him it was all a big joke, that he couldn't just leave like this. RJ opened the door stepping aside.

“You're really letting me leave?” Tanner asked.

“Of course,” RJ shrugged. “If this is what you want to do then you are free to do so. We aren't running a prison here.”

“But what about the state and the investigation?

“We will have to report you as a runaway,” Desiree sighed. “So be careful when walking around, they will be looking for you.”

“Really?” Tanner asked looking unconvinced.

“You wouldn't be the first foster kid to run away,” Desiree said. “I believe you've done this before yourself, right?”

“Well yeah,” Tanner said.

“We know the truth about your real age, so we trust that you can take care of yourself,” Desiree said.

“That's right,” RJ said. “We are only interested in what you want for yourself, so if you want to leave then we won't stop you. Although if you wanted to stay and figure out a plan we wouldn't refuse you.

“No,” Tanner said shaking his head. “I want to leave, tonight.”

“Okay, but before you go” RJ said kneeling down before he gave Tanner a hug. “I just want you to know it was a pleasure having you stay with us.”

Tanner was a little taken aback as he was released from the man's arms. Desiree came and gave him a hug as well.

“You stay safe out there,” she said looking a little shook up. “I know you'll be just fine, though.”

“So there is a bus station about four miles down the road,” RJ said. “I could give you a ride if you want.” Tanner shook his head. He had to do this on his own. He was done relying on other people.

“I'll be fine,” Tanner said as he stepped out onto the front stoop. It was dark out and the only light around was the floodlight by the garage since Desi and RJ didn't have neighbors. Tanner turned back for a moment looking at Desi and RJ who were watching him.

“Thanks I guess,” Tanner said a little awkwardly. Only a few moments ago he had been furious with them, yet now he felt a sort of sadness to be leaving. All in all he couldn't hate them. They had shown him a great deal of kindness, perhaps more so than any other adults ever had. Tanner's gaze went past them towards the room where Leo was. He felt kind of bad leaving things like this with him. He figured he would contact him later and clear the air as it were. Tanner turned to face the pitch black darkness.

“You sure you don't want that ride?” RJ asked.

“No, I have to do this alone,” Tanner said as he took his first steps off the stoop. He gave one last look back before he walked off into the night.

As he went along it started to get darker. He took some cursory glances back noticing the only source of light becoming dimmer and dimmer the further away he went. Tanner felt his heartbeat start to quicken. He could feel his hands start to shake. He gripped the straps of his backpack tighter. No, he wouldn't admit it, such a thing was ridiculous. As he kept moving on, he started to become aware of the sounds of the night all around him. He was walking along a road with forest on either side. Every rustle caused him to jump a little and the hair on his on the back of his neck to stand. He was fighting to keep his nerves in check, he kept telling himself he was eighteen, he wasn't a kid – he wasn't scared of the dark.

It had been something he had noticed on the night Leo had been sick. Tanner awoke in the room looking around and seeing he was alone. For some reason a fear had overtaken him. He had spent the rest of the night with his head under the covers. The next morning he had just chalked it up to his brain over reacting the way it sometimes does late at night. As if to prove it to himself he had walked into the closet and shut the door. He had lasted about a minute before having to come back out into the daylight. But now there was no light to run into, it was dark and he was alone.

Tanner heard a crunch of a stick from within the woods which had caused him to leap into the air. That's when it happened, when he couldn't push it down anymore – the fear that was rife within him. He let the food bag drop to the ground as he crouched down hiding his face into his knees.

He was trying to hold back the tears. His whimpers hitting against the silence of the pitch black night. Tanner then heard a noise approaching closer. He squeezed himself tighter not able to bring himself to even look at the approaching sound that was getting closer. He wanted someone to save him. Why wasn't Leo here? It was stupid for Tanner to think he could have done this on his own. When he had first woken up in this new body he had been scared out of his mind. As he learned of what his fate was he knew he couldn't accept it. The first day he spent time learning everything he could, anything that could help him escape, he had even started putting together a map in some harebrained escape attempt. Yet by the second day he was waning. Every idea being shot down by his inner doubts. Could he really get out of this? By the time he had woken up the third day he felt hopeless. He was too weak, too powerless in the face of it all. Then a miracle had happened. A new kid had shown up in class that morning. Tanner hadn't thought much of him until the teacher had introduced him. At once he recognized him, it was Leo. Suddenly Tanner felt reinvigorated. If he had Leo with him, he might just be able to do something. It had always been Leo who was there for him. Every time the world knocked him down Leo had been there to help him up. Leo kept him from his doubts. Tanner didn't care what happened to himself, but he just felt like he had to protect Leo. He had never told him this but Leo truly was the first real friend Tanner had ever had.

Tanner felt a hand touch him on the back. He let out a terrified scream as he scrambled away on his back only coming to a stop when he realized it was RJ standing above

him with a flash light in hand. RJ extended his hand out. Tanner took in a couple of shuddering breaths wiping some stray tears from his eyes before taking the mans hand and getting back to his feet. RJ picked up the food bag slinging it across his shoulder. He then put an arm around Tanner rubbing his shoulder a little as he pulled Tanner close to his side. Tanner instinctively leaned into RJ's side.

“Want to go back?” RJ asked.

Tanner looked up at him with a pitiful look that was a mixture of shame and fear, as he nodded his head.

They walked in silence on the way back, upon getting back to the house Desiree was standing in the doorway, she had a sympathetic look on her face. The three of them walked to the kitchen. Tanner took a seat at the end of the table as Desi and RJ took a seat on either side. Tanner sat with his head bowed.

“Tanner,” Desiree said softly breaking the silence.

“You knew I wouldn't be able to do it,” Tanner said. “That's why you followed me, right?”

“I was just going to make sure you made it into town,” RJ said.

“Why don't you just say it,” Tanner said bitterly. “You think I'm a little kid. You were just playing with me.”

“That wasn't it at all,” Desiree said. “We let you make your own choice and we are still going to let you do that. Whatever you decide.”

“What am I supposed to do,” Tanner yelped before catching himself and putting his head back down.

“We just want you to think about this seriously,” RJ said. “Really consider your situation and what is possible. What will make you happiest with the options in front of you.”

“I want my old body back,” Tanner said not lifting his gaze.

“Tanner I know,” Desiree said. “And I wish we could.”

“But like this I'm...” Tanner shuddered.

“A kid,” RJ interjected.

“I can't be,” Tanner cried out. “I just can't, I won't admit it. If that was true I would be...” he said his voice panicked as it raised and octave. “weak,” he breathed out.

“You are not weak,” RJ said sternly as if Tanner was fibbing to get out of trouble. “You have done so many things that any normal person would have run away from and given up.”

“That's not true, I'm a coward. I run away from everything, that's what I've always done. I even tried to do it just now. The only reason I came back was because I'm scared of the dark.”

Desi and RJ exchanged alarmed looks with one another. That Tanner would actually admit to holding a childish fear was slightly unnerving. “I never would have made it out of Hawthorne alone, It was only because Leo was there. He's the one that always goes on, he's the one that's always right. Even

now he's right."

"Right about what?" Desiree asked.

"It can't be stopped," Tanner mewled. "I can't do anything anymore. I can barely read or write, I forget more stuff every day and no matter what I do, I just can't stop it. I can't do it again," Tanner said burying his face into his hands as he slumped onto the table. "I don't want to be alone again."

"It doesn't have to be like that," Desiree said placing a hand on Tanner's arm. "Despite what you may think, there are people that do care about you." She knew this was her chance to talk to him. He had rebuffed all her advances of having a real conversation about his position. It had been hard enough to get Leo to talk about it, she had thought it was an impossibility with Tanner. "You can stay here if you want," Desiree said. Tanner didn't lift his head from the table giving Desiree a huffy look.

"Tanner, its no problem," RJ said. "Leo needs you just as much as you need him, we know you guys are a package deal, you guys don't have to separate just because you want different things."

"But he's right," Tanner grumbled. "Why is he always right?"

"About what?" Desiree asked again. Tanner sat back in his chair with a huff.

"I'm not stupid, alright," Tanner said. "I know I'm gonna be a kid, that much is clear. Leo saw that from the beginning."

“You know its not like he didn't have his doubts,” RJ said. “Its not like he came down here and asked us to adopt him straight out.”

“Yeah,” Tanner said. “But he still saw the writing on the wall and he figured out what he needed.”

“You could have it too,” Desiree said giving Tanner a reassuring look.

“I can't just sit here and ask for that,” Tanner said furrowing his brow. “I just think about having people tell me when to go to bed, making me go to school, and if I'm a naughty child then they would have to punish me...I don't want you guys becoming like that. I don't want to hate you.”

Desiree and RJ gave each a look. It was startling to hear Tanner's worries out in the open. It wasn't that it annoyed him when people treated him like a kid, there was something deeper at play, something he could not let go of.

“Well I suppose if we were your parents we would have to do those things,” Desiree said.

“But that's not all,” RJ said. “We would also take you to baseball games,” RJ smiled.

“And we would fix up your scrapes,” Desiree said. “We would make sure that you were happy and safe.”

“You wouldn't need to take the weight of the world on your shoulders,” RJ said. “We can lighten that load.”

Tanner pursed his lips. He didn't know what to do. He felt

powerless the enormity of what lay in front of him made him anxious. The thought of having to go it alone all over again made him want to curl up in a ball. Yet the idea of giving in and letting someone else come in didn't sit right with him. It felt like giving up, but what was different about that? Isn't that what he always did? He always ran away, he was too weak to do anything else.

“Fine,” Tanner said. “If it means staying with Leo, then I'll just be a proper child.”

RJ and Desiree were silent. It wasn't exactly the type of reaction they wanted Tanner to have. Both of them could only figure Tanner was keeping up his tough facade.

“Tanner you have options other than...” Desiree began before Tanner stood up.

“I...” he paused. “I can't fight it anymore. I just can't. If I have to be a kid again then I won't be able to take care of myself. I learned that lesson the hard way. So if I have to do this, if I need parents then I want it to be you guys. So I'll do whatever you want me too, if it means I can stay.”

Desiree stood up walking over to Tanner and wrapping him up in a hug. “You don't have to do anything,” she said softly. “Just know we both love you,”

Desiree released Tanner noting his muddled look. In some ways Tanner didn't know how to react. Being hugged like that had made him feel small, yet at the same time it had felt nice. For a moment he had actually felt lighter.

“I guess we can sign you up for little league now,” RJ said giving Tanner a playful punch to his shoulder. Tanner gave a small smirk before his face returned back to the neutral position. He just had to keep telling himself that it wasn't going to be all bad. He would get used to it. Before long he wouldn't have to think about it. He would follow the rules.

“Tanner,” RJ said causing Tanner to focus back. “Why don't we go get you into bed, its been a long day.”

“Sure,” Tanner said softly as he walked with Desiree and RJ back to his room.

Leo was sat on the floor of his room. He had his pet rabbit Timothy in his lap. Leo felt pretty down in the dumps with how everything had played out. He wondered what had happened with Tanner. He hadn't really heard much for awhile. Tanner was gone. Leo already found himself missing him. They had spent nearly every day together for the last four years. It was going to be weird with him not there. Leo found his eyes starting to droop a little as he pet his rabbit. He put Timothy back in his cage before going over to his bed. He was tired but found he just could've bring himself to go to sleep. How could he, the room just felt so empty. Leo was starting to regret his decision. Was it really worth it if it meant that he and Tanner had to be separated. Leo got to his feet. The idea of going and asking Desiree and RJ if he could sleep in their bed that night occurred to him. He hesitated, thinking it was pretty infantile, yet a moment later he found his desire to do so taking over. He ruminated on it for a moment. He felt sad right now, and they were his Mommy

and Daddy, so they would be okay with it, right? Leo shook his head. He wanted the comfort of his parents right now, and they had told him it was okay to come to them, so he should just go.

The door then opened as Leo watched with astonishment as Tanner walked into the room with Desiree and RJ close behind. The boys stood silent looking at one another.

“You're back,” Leo said kicking a little at the ground.

“Yeah,” Tanner responded looking a little apprehensive.

“So you're going to stay for a little bit,” Leo said.

“He'll be staying a little longer than that,” RJ chuckled.

“I umm, they're uhh, going” Tanner said motioning with his hands awkwardly. “to adopt me too.”

Leo's eyes went wide. “You mean it?” Leo asked.

Tanner used his tongue to wiggle his tooth a little before he responded. “Yeah, I want to stay.”

Leo walked over to Tanner and hugged him burying his face into his chest. Tanner stood motionless for a moment before he looked down at Leo smirking a little as he wrapped his arms around him.

“You dork,” Tanner quipped.

Desiree took a moment to take in the sweet scene. She found her heart bursting. She couldn't believe she was going to be able to call these boys hers. It was almost enough to make her

cry.

“Okay,” RJ said as Tanner and Leo separated. “I think its time for everyone to go to sleep, we've all had a very long day.”

Tanner nodded as he walked over to his bed. He took of his shirt and pants. He felt a little embarrassed to be standing in the room now in just his blue camo undies. Nobody seemed to give any mind, which only solidified that he was now a kid. At eighteen it may have been strange, but he was a little kid now in the room with his parents, why would anyone think it was weird. It gave him little comfort however as he crawled under the covers of his bed.

Leo was brimming with excitement however as he hopped over to Desiree holding his arms up to show he wanted to be picked up which she happily did so.

“Me and Tanner are brothers now,” Leo said with a goofy smile.

“You are,” Desiree said.

“You know I'm the older one though,” Tanner said sitting up in his bed.

“Hey that's not fair,” Leo protested.

“We're kids now aren't we,” Tanner shrugged. Leo frowned. He knew what Tanner meant. If both of them were going to let themselves become the kids they had been changed into then Tanner was now the older of the two.

“It's okay sweetie,” Desiree said brushing Leo's bangs from

out of his eyes. “You're still a big brother too.” Leo looked at her confused for a moment before the sudden realization hit him.

“Oh yeah, Kaylee,” Leo yelped.

That's right,” Desiree said smiling as she laid Leo in his bed. “And you're going to be the best big brother in the world to her, aren't you.”

Leo nodded as Desiree gave him a kiss to his cheek. RJ was knelt down by Tanner's bedside.

“You tired?” RJ asked. “I mean you made it about a mile away before turning back, so I think its safe to say you got your steps in for the day.”

“Yea,” Tanner mumbled, the reminder of how he had failed still hanging heavy on him.

“I'm glad you decided to stay, though,” RJ said placing his hand on Tanner's chest and giving him a shake.

“Me too,” Tanner said softly. RJ looked at him for a moment. Tanner feared the guy was about to try and kiss him good night. He had seen how lovey dovey they were with Leo who seemed to be soaking it all up, but that would just be far too awkward for Tanner to deal with. Thankfully RJ stood up after a moment wishing him a good night. Desi and RJ stood in the doorway, before Desi seemed to remember something disappearing for a moment before coming back. She plugged a nightlight into the outlet on the wall.

“What's that?” Leo asked.

“Its a nightlight,” Desiree answered. Tanner immediately felt his face go hot. Was she really going to tell Leo that he admitted to being scared of the dark.

“For what?” Leo asked.

“If you have to get up in the middle of the night so you don't trip over anything,” Desiree said. Leo seemed to take the answer as satisfactory and didn't question its presence any longer. The light was then turned off and the door closed leaving just a crack. Tanner found the nightlight helpful as it did make him feel a little better. He let out a sigh of relief. Maybe they really would take care of him.

As Tanner lay in bed with his eyes closed he could hear the rain pattering the outside of the window and some thunder rumbling, the dark room becoming lit up every once in a while with flashes of lighting. He was actually thankful that he had come back, he would have gotten caught out in the storm if he hadn't. Tanner then felt something poke him on the back. He rolled around to see Leo standing at his bedside.

“What is it? I'm trying to sleep,” Tanner said.

“Can I sleep with you tonight?” Leo squeaked.

“What for?” Tanner asked with a click of his tongue.

“I uhhh,” Leo stammered before another flash of lighting erupted causing Leo to jump a little.

“I'm scared of the storm,” Leo whimpered. Tanner gave a

derisive roll of his eyes.

“No you're not,” Tanner said. “We've slept in the same room for the last four years and never once were you scared of a storm.”

“I never liked storms,” Leo said. “Its just now its like scarier or something.”

“Leo you're just letting it get to you. Go back to your bed and it will pass. Besides we're still in the same room.” Tanner said sounding a little annoyed. “Its not like you're alone.”

“Please,” Leo whimpered as another flash of lighting illuminated the room lighting up his fearful expression. Tanner was about to outright refuse before he looked past Leo seeing the nightlight on the far wall. Tanner let out some air through his nose.

“Fine,” he said pulling back the covers. “But just this once.” Leo gave a grateful smile as he dove into the bed. As the boys laid together Leo spoke.

“You're really okay with this?” Leo asked.

“I already said it was fine,” Tanner replied. “But you better not kick me.”

“I meant, you're really okay staying, and getting adopted.” Leo clarified.

“I just didn't want to have to leave you,” Tanner said quietly. “Who knows what sort of trouble you would get into without

me around.”

Leo giggled a little as he snuggled into Tanner. “I'm really glad you stayed, I was really worried what I was going to do without you.”

“You would have been fine,” Tanner said. “You don't need me.”

“That's not true,” Leo said. “If it wasn't for you I would have never gotten here. I never would have escaped from Hawthorne and I would be back with my parents. I'd be miserable. But I still don't want you doing something you really don't want to just because of me.”

“Leo its fine, I'm okay with anything, as long as we're together,” Tanner said.

“Okay then,” Leo said with an airy whisper. Both of the boys then closed their eyes. The storm died down soon afterwards leaving the sounds of a gentle rain in its wake. The two brothers gentle breaths were synced as they slept cuddled up with one another. Gentle dreams played across their minds as they spent the first official night in their new home.

Chapter 23

To Build a Nest: Chapter 23 - Chapter 23

Father and Son

Leo awoke to the bright morning light filling the room. He sat up wiping the sleep from his eyes. He looked over to see Tanner still asleep next to him. Leo looked around a little confused as to where he was. The room was still the same as ever, yet it was different. It was no longer just some room he was staying in, it was his room, in his home. Leo gave a little smile. He was home, he no longer had to worry about the future before him. This was it.

Leo got out of the bed stepping onto the carpet, careful not to wake Tanner. He moved silently, poking his head out into the hallway before stepping out. The morning air was silent. Leo heard his stomach let out a little growl. He crept down to the kitchen, perhaps he could find something to eat. Leo came in looking around to see no one around. He then went over to the pantry and walked in. He looked at all the shelves seeing a box of his favorite cereal sitting high up. Leo grimaced as his tummy rumbled as if announcing that's what it wanted. He looked at the shelves, they would surely hold his weight. He put a foot onto the first shelf stepping down hard to test it, satisfied that his estimation was correct he reached a hand up hoisting himself up into the air. Leo looked up to see the box just within reach. He didn't really want to climb any higher

and opted to reach his arm up. His fingers barely just touched the box. He stretched out going onto his tippy toes. Just as he was about to grab the box he felt his foot begin to slip. Leo could feel himself about to fall as his eyes widened. He tried to grab back onto the shelf with his outstretched hand yet that slipped. Leo braced for the impending fall.

“What are you doing?” a voice called out as Leo felt two hands grab him around the torso pulling him off the shelf before he completely fell back. Leo was flipped around so he saw it was RJ who was now holding him out in front of himself.

“I-I-I,” Leo stammered completely off guard as he looked at the man who was now his Dad. Leo thought he was in big trouble. Yet RJ hoisted him up onto his hip and smiled.

“Looking for breakfast?” the man asked.

“Um yeah,” Leo admitted.

“Well lets not be climbing on the shelves,” RJ said grabbing the box of cereal from shelf. “Wouldn't want you to fall.” RJ set the box on the counter. “Want to get dressed before breakfast?” RJ asked.

“Mmmm Tanner is asleep,” Leo said.

RJ nodded. “Yeah we should probably let him sleep, lets see if we got some clothes in the laundry room,” RJ said carrying Leo into the laundry room where there was a basket of clothes neatly folded that belonged to the boys. RJ set Leo

down as he began to rummage through the clothes.

“So what are you feeling today?” RJ asked holding up two pair of undies, one had stars all over it while the other had bulldozers and dump trucks. Leo put a finger up to his chin thinking hard. This was a big decision after all.

“That one,” Leo said pointing at the construction themed pair.

“Great choice,” RJ said putting them aside as he dug through more clothes. By the time he was done he had gotten Leo a gray long sleeved shirt with a large “01” on the front along with a pair of blue overalls. Leo stood looking at the pile of clothes, looking a little clueless as to what he was supposed to do.

“Want Daddy to help?” RJ asked. Leo hesitated as RJ noticed his toes curl up a little with indecision. RJ smirked. “Arms up sport,” RJ said. Leo smiled as he lifted his arms up. RJ pulled the his pajama shirt up over his head giving Leo a tickle as he went past his armpits. Leo let out a loud squeal as RJ tossed the shirt aside. “Shhhh,” RJ said not able to help laughing himself. “You're gonna wake up the whole house.”

“It was your fault,” Leo said puffing up his cheeks a little.

“Yeah, yeah you're right,” RJ said as he pulled Leo's shorts down. “Look at that.”

Leo looked down to see that RJ was pointing at the front of his pull-up. The dog bone that showed if Leo was wet or dry was still there. “Looks like you're dry,” RJ smiled.

“I am,” Leo said with some surprise. He hadn't even given any notice to it that morning.

“That's two nights in a row,” RJ praised. A big smile came to Leo's face remembering he had also woken up dry the previous morning.

“I think you'll be out of training pants soon,” RJ said.

“Really,” Leo said with a hopeful look on his face as if RJ could just snap his fingers and make is so.

“Sure,” RJ said. “In fact since you're on such a roll, maybe tonight you could wear your undies to bed.”

Leo's expression fell into one of worry. “I don't know, what if I wet the bed?”

“Well then we would just clean it up and you could try again some other time,” RJ said as he pulled the pull-up down.

“Oh,” Leo said putting his hands on RJ's shoulders as he stepped into his undies that RJ held out for him. “Then maybe I could try.” Leo said.

“Attaboy,” RJ said mussing up Leo's hair. He finished helping Leo get dressed before standing up as he went to leave the room, he felt Leo tug on his shirt. RJ turned around to see Leo with his arms in the air.

“Carry me,” he said.

“You got legs don't ya,” RJ smirked.

“But I like it when you carry me Daddy,” Leo whined with

big puppy dog eyes. RJ let out a little sigh.

“Guess I can't say no to that,” RJ said picking Leo back up. “You little munchkin.” RJ tutted as he carried Leo back into the kitchen.

Leo gave a little laugh as RJ set him on top of the counter. “That's funny...munchkin.

“Oh you like that,” RJ said grabbing a bowl and spoon from the cupboard. He stood in front of Leo and touched the spoon to each shoulder before bringing it to rest on top of his head. “I hereby dub you sir munchkin,” RJ declared eliciting more laughter from Leo. RJ then poured some cereal and milk into the bowl before handing Leo the spoon. “Want to eat on the counter?” RJ asked.

“I can?” Leo asked with wide eyes.

“Sure,” RJ said. “Just be careful not too spill.”

“Roger,” Leo said giving RJ a thumbs up. RJ went and poured himself a cup of coffee. He looked back at Leo on the center island eating his cereal with his legs swinging freely in the air. RJ couldn't help but smile. The boy that had once been so worried and at odds with himself was seemingly gone. Leo didn't have a care in the world. He had really gotten what he needed and what he wanted.

The two enjoyed their peaceful morning as RJ leaned against the counter next to Leo who continued to eat his breakfast as RJ sipped his coffee and read the newspaper. A tiny pitter

patter of feet could be heard coming down the hall. Both of them looked up to the entrance to see Tanner walk into the kitchen still in his underwear. Tanner froze upon seeing RJ and Leo in the kitchen not knowing anyone had been there.

“Want some breakfast?” RJ asked not seeming bothered at Tanner's state of undress. Tanner took in a breath.

“I just came to find some clothes,” Tanner said.

“Don't you keep those in your room?” RJ asked with a raised eyebrow.

“Yeah I mean...you know its just that,” Tanner flustered.

“You running low,” RJ said finishing Tanner's thought. “There's a clean load in the laundry room,” RJ said motioning with his head. “Want me to help you find something?”

“No I got it,” Tanner yipped before retreating out of the kitchen and back to his room. RJ cocked his head a little. It was a bizarre interaction to say for sure and he wondered what was up with Tanner.

“Hey Leo, did you and Tanner talk last night?” RJ asked.

“Uh huh,” Leo said shoveling another spoonful of cereal in his mouth. “He let me sleep in the bed with him cuz I was scared of the storm,” the boy said with his mouth full.

“I see,” RJ smirked. “Did he happen to say anything about how he felt about being adopted?”

“He said he's fine with it,” Leo replied seemingly unfazed by

the question. “As long as we can stay together.”

RJ nodded. He knew Tanner probably wouldn't lie to Leo about how he really felt and RJ also knew that staying with Leo was the most important thing to Tanner in the long run. He just hoped that Tanner wasn't feeling he was forced to make this decision feeling it was his only option. RJ did worry yet at the same time, he had seen glimpses of the kid Tanner was going to be. Especially when he would drop him off at school and Tanner would rush up to one of the other boys that he was friends with near the front with a smile on his face . RJ couldn't just chalk that up to Tanner acting. He just had to trust that Tanner would come around eventually. That Tanner would be happy with this life.

A few minutes later Tanner returned to the kitchen. He had on a pair of red shorts with white stripes going up the side along with a shirt that had red sleeves and white torso with a a baseball and bat on the front with the words “Batter UP” written out.

“I thought you did'nt like that shirt?” Leo questioned upon seeing Tanner's outfit.

“I never said that,” Tanner said defensively.

“Yes you did,” Leo said a matter of factly. “You said they were for little kids.”

“Shuddup,” Tanner yelped. Leo didn't get why he was mad. That's what Tanner had said when he was sorting some clothes Desiree had bought for them on the day she had also

bought them the toys and the car seats. Leo knew that Tanner had moved any of the clothes he had objected to into the closet refusing to even have them in the dressers with the clothes he did wear. What was Tanner all up in arms about, he put on the clothes himself, didn't he?

“Leo there is no reason to tease,” RJ said.

“I wasn't teasing,” Leo said looking at RJ with a guilty look before turning to Tanner. “I wasn't.”

“I just don't have lots of clothes right now,” Tanner said crossing his arms.

“After breakfast I'll bring the laundry basket to your room and you can put it away okay,” RJ said stopping the bickering between the boys before it really got started. “Now Tanner would like some cereal?”

Tanner nodded as he walked over to the table taking a seat. RJ went and got him a bowl and poured out some cereal for him.

Desiree then walked into the kitchen with Kaylee in her arms. She gave a sunny good morning to everyone as she placed the baby into her highchair, before setting some papers on the table.

“Mommy look,” Leo called out. “I'm on the counter.”

“I see that,” Desiree said giving RJ a look, which he didn't notice as he was too busy cooing over Kaylee and getting her ready to eat. “Are you done?” Desiree asked Leo looking at

his bowl which only had a few stray fruit loops floating in it.

“Yep,” Leo said with smile.

“Great,” Desiree said lifting him off the counter and carrying him to the table to sit with him in her lap. “I got some stuff I want you guys to look at.” Desiree then slid a piece of paper in front of Tanner and gave Leo one for him to hold.

“What are these?” Tanner asked.

“They're your birth certificates,” Desiree said. “Or well they're supposed to be I guess, they were in the files. But they weren't filled out all the way it appears. I just want you to confirm if the information there is correct.”

“It just has my first name on it,” Tanner said.

“Yeah,” Desiree said. “We know that parts right, but what about your date of birth is that correct?”

Leo peered at the spot Desiree was pointing, the numbers didn't really make much sense, but he knew when his birthday was.

“Um I don't know,” Leo said still looking at the piece of paper with a concentrated stare. Tanner grabbed the paper from Desiree as he looked at both of them.

“They're right, except for the years,” Tanner said giving Leo's certificate back. “Or well I guess that's not true anymore.” Desiree gave a sympathetic look at Tanner who was staring off to the side with a muddled look.

“Oh your birthdays are only three days apart from each other,” Desiree said changing the subject. “I think we should fill out these name line now, since they just have your first names. Desiree took a pen in her hand as she went to write on Leo's. “Okay Leonard first,” she said.

“I hate that name,” Leo grumbled.

“What's the matter with Leo, I like that name,” Desiree said in a cloying tone.

“I like Leo, I just hate Leonard,” Leo said putting his cheeks into his hands as he rested his elbows on the table.

“Well I can't just erase it and make it say Leo,” Desiree said. “We'll just have to wait to change it.”

Leo made another grumpy noise. Desiree looked at the name for a moment before an idea sprang into her head. “Watch this,” she said before writing an O after the name Leonard.

“Whats that,” Leo said.

“I added an an O, now it says Leonardo, do you like the sound of that?”

Leo repeated the name slowly as if confused.

“I love it,” Leo then exclaimed. “I'm still Leo, but not Leonard.”

“Now how about your middle name?” Desiree questioned, which brought Leo's displeased expression back.

“I don't want that one either, its his name,” Leo said bitterly referring to his Dad.

“It's okay,” Desiree said giving Leo a couple of pats to his tummy as he leaned back into her. “Me and Daddy can come up with a new one for you.”

“Really?” Leo said with some hopefulness as if she were pulling his leg.

“Of course,” RJ said. “We'll just need to think.”

The two adults were silent for a moment in deep thought, neither one of them having expected to be put on the spot like this.

“Well we gave Kaylee your grandmother's name,” RJ said. “Maybe we can give Leo my grandpa's name?” RJ posited.

“Oh that's a great idea,” Desiree said as her eyes lit up.

“What is it?” Leo asked looking between the two of them.

“Its Jennings,” RJ answered. Leo mulled it over for a moment.

“Its cool,” Leo then said as a big smile spread across his face.

“Great,” RJ smiled back. “I'm glad you like it. I suppose you are going to be wanting to have our last name too, huh?” RJ asked. Leo nodded vigorously.

“I don't want to be Rushton, I want to be –,” he paused, realizing he didn't actually know Desi and RJ's last name.

“Its Egret,” RJ said chuckling a little.

“Eee-gret,” Leo mimicked back.

“Its a type of bird dear,” Desiree said.

“I can be a bird,” Leo said sounding a little astonished.

“So I guess that's a yes,” Desiree said as she wrote out the full name. “Leonardo Jennings Egret, quite the mouthful isn't it,”

Leo repeated the name several times before twisting around to wrap his arms around Desi's neck as he cuddled his head against her chest.

“I love it,” he said.

“We basically just named you ourselves,” RJ laughed. Desiree smiled at the thought as she rubbed Leo's back as he closed his eyes continuing to cuddle into her enjoying the closeness with his new mommy.

“If Leo is going to change his last name then I guess I should too, I mean if you guys are going to be my parents I guess it would be weird not too.” Tanner said, with a sheepish look.

“We didn't say you had too,” RJ said. Tanner gave a deep frown. He looked at Leo who seemed so content in Desiree's lap. He knew Leo was happy to have thrown off the connection with his parents. To make a symbolic gesture of starting a new life. Some part of Tanner saw the appeal in it, but he was held back.

“Well, I don't really have any family left except for my Uncle, and I don't feel like staying in the same family as him, but its...”

“Your Dad,” RJ said. Tanner looked at the man with a mix of emotions before he nodded. Desi and RJ stared at one another. They could see the conflict Tanner was in. They could see some desire in him to forget his difficult past, to commit to a new future. It had been easy for Leo to sever his family ties, yet for Tanner it would not be so easy.

Tanner felt confused. What was he supposed to do? He wanted so badly to be like Leo and leave all the bad stuff behind but he couldn't do that. He was also troubled by what Desiree and RJ would think if he didn't take their name. They were going to be his parents so surely they would want him to have the same last name. Could he really be part of the family if he didn't?

“Tanner, really,” RJ said. “If you don't want to, you don't have too, it doesn't make you any less part of this family.”

“But I want too,” Tanner said. “I really do.”

Desiree used her free hand to slide Tanner's paper in front of her. “Whats your Dad's name?”

“J-james,” Tanner stuttered a little.

Desiree smiled. “That sounds like a good name to me.

“Tanner James,” RJ said softly. Tanner looked at Desiree who was smiling at him. As he played the name out in his head, it sounded perfect. The conflict seemed to dissipate within him. He was stunned that Desiree had been able to pull the perfect solution to his problem seemly out of thin air, it had seemed like an impossibility to him.

“Yeah...I like it,” Tanner said looking down although he had the tiniest smile fighting to break loose on the corner of his mouth.

“Then its official,” Desiree said as she filled in the rest of the name. “Well as official as we can do on our own.”

“I'm and Egret now,” Leo asked looking up at Desiree.

“You certainly are, my little Leonardo,” Desiree cooed before giving Leo a kiss to his forehead. Leo smiled again as he cuddled back into Desiree. Tanner looked on feeling a little jealous. He couldn't understand how Leo could just naturally take all this in, its like Desiree had been his Mom forever. Tanner found himself wishing she would kiss him too. The thought made Tanner feel incredibly awkward as he stood up from his seat abruptly.

“Something up Tanner?” RJ asked noticing Tanner's nervous demeanor.

“I'm just done eating,” Tanner said quickly. “So I was gonna...”

“Play,” Leo piped up.

“Huh,” Tanner said looking completely caught off guard by Leo's suggestion.

“Lets go play,” Leo said wriggling out of Desiree's lap as he ran up to Tanner with an excitable energy.

“Can we Mommy?” he asked turning towards Desiree.

“Of course,” Desiree said with a smile. “What did you have in mind.” Leo rubbed his chin for a moment as he looked at Tanner's shirt.

“Lets do baseball,” he said pointing at Tanner's shirt. “We can play with the stuff Mommy bought you.”

“Umm I guess,” Tanner said.

“Okay, get your shoes on first,” Desiree said. Leo ran off to the front hall where his shoes were. Tanner's were still by the back door from last night.

“I want you two to stay in the backyard,” Desiree said addressing Tanner. “Don't go wandering into the woods.”

Tanner balked a little at Desiree's rule. She expected Tanner to protest as he usually did whenever she tried to tell him what to do. Yet Tanner only looked back with a meek look. Desiree could tell something was up.

“I just mean to say I would feel better showing you around the woods before you go traipsing through them, there are a couple of dangerous spots.” Desiree said.

“Okay,” Tanner said. “If that's the rule.”

“Hey,” Desiree said reaching her hands out and putting them on Tanner's hip pulling him close to her so that he was stood between her legs. “I'm a worrier, okay. Plus Leo is a little excitable this morning, so keep an eye on him out there.”

Tanner looked up at her as his eyes lit up a little.

“Sure I can watch him,” Tanner said.

“I know you can,” Desiree said before giving Tanner a quick peck on his cheek. She noticed him immediately go tense as he took a step back. Desiree pursed her lips thinking for a moment she had pushed too far with him. He wasn't like Leo after all. She could tell he was still a little apprehensive with all of this.

“I'm ready,” Leo announced racing back into the kitchen.

“I'll come join you guys when I'm done with your sister,” RJ said turning his head as he scooped another glop of baby food onto the spoon in his hand.

“Lets go,” Tanner said waving Leo along as they headed out back onto the deck.

Desiree stood by the door a moment watching them go down the stairs to the yard. She gave out a little sigh.

“Something on your mind,” RJ asked as he gave Kaylee her last spoonful.

“I'm worried about Tanner,” Desiree said. “Do you think he is ever going to let us in.”

“Just give him some time, its a pretty big adjustment,” RJ said standing and wiping Kaylee's face before removing the bib as he took it over and put it in the sink.

“Its just Leo seems to be getting on better”

“Hey they're different people, with different emotional

needs," RJ quipped.

"Listen to you," Desiree said giving RJ an impressed, yet sarcastic look. "You been reading some of my books?" she asked.

"I've been browsing," RJ chuckled wrapping his arms around Desiree.

"Oh well look at you," Desiree said with a laugh. "Father of the year here. So tell me then should we put a fireplace in that study of yours?"

"What are you talking about?"

"Oh I just thought you would need a good spot to take the boys when you needed to sit them on your knee and give them all those father son talks in which you dispense your sage like wisdom," she said tracing her finger across his chest. RJ gave another chuckle.

"If we do that, I think I'll have to get a nice pipe as well, and then after you bring me a glass of nice whiskey I'll say send the boys in mother dearest."

"Oooh I think I like it when you talk all fatherly," Desiree said seductively. The two of them leaned in kissing one another yet their playful romanticism was interrupted a second later by the sound of crashing glass. They both turned around to see the window over the sink frosted over with a large hole in the center.

"What the hell was that?" Desiree exclaimed. RJ went to the

sink looking down into the basin before lifting a baseball out of it.

“The boys,” RJ said with a weary look. Both of them went out onto the deck. They looked down to see Leo stood still, looking up into the air, his head tilted back so far that he was looking behind himself at the window above, his hand with a glove still extended in the air. He looked over to see Desiree and RJ at the top of the stair.

“Ooops.” he squeaked. They then looked further out into the yard to see Tanner standing at the ball stand looking rather surprised himself. As his eyes met Desi and RJ's he tossed the bat aside with a guilty look as he put his hands behind his back.

“Leo don't move,” Desiree said walking down the stairs. She picked him up quickly into her arms.

“Did any glass fall on you?” she asked brushing out his hair a little.

“Maybe a little,” Leo said.

“Lets go inside and make sure you're not cut anywhere,” Desiree said.

“I tried to catch it,” Leo said as he was carried up the stairs.

“I know you did,” Desiree said with a sympathetic tone. RJ examined the ground not seeing any glass, it seemed that thankfully most of it had fallen inside. He then turned to see Tanner still across the lawn rooted in his spot. RJ walked out

to him. He stood for a moment with his hands on his hip as he looked from the stand to the window.

“Heck of a hit there Tanner,” RJ said casually.

“I guess,” Tanner said keeping his eyes on the ground.

“C'mon,” RJ said. “Lets get this cleaned up.” RJ said as he began to walk back to the house with Tanner following.

Upon getting inside they could hear Leo and Desiree in the bathroom. Leo was giggling as Desiree was no doubt examining his feet for any cuts. RJ was looking at the window with his brows furrowed. He took a picture with his phone before sending off a couple of texts. He then left to go to the garage. Desiree came back with Leo in tow.

“Tanner are you okay?” Desiree asked as she grabbed a broom.

“Ye-yeah,” Tanner stuttered quietly. RJ came back in a few moments later with a tape measure in hand.

“I called Mike,” RJ said as he began to measure the window. “He said he can come out tomorrow and put in a new window no problem, but we'll need to cover this up for the night.” RJ then turned to look over at Tanner who was standing in the corner with his gaze still glued to the ground. RJ could see that Tanner obviously felt terrible about the whole thing. “Tanner come with me to the garage,” RJ instructed.

In the garage, RJ was measuring some particle board, finding a good piece he pulled it out setting it onto his workbench.

Tanner was stood nearby looking like a petrified mouse. RJ had brought him out here thinking if he could get Tanner to help him with the repairs it might alleviate some of his guilt. RJ went over to his small table against the wall where he kept all sorts of screw and other things as well as his tools on the back wall. He opened up some drawers pulling out some screws and then some sandpaper.

“All right Tanner, lets do this,” RJ said before spinning around on the stool to look at the boy. What RJ saw took him by surprise. Tanner was standing a few steps from him. His shorts were down around his knees leaving him with just his orange and white striped undies with a fearful look on his face. RJ was unsure of what to make of this.

“What are you doing?” RJ questioned.

“You want me to take the underwear off too?” Tanner said quietly. RJ shook his head putting the pieces together as to what Tanner was expecting.

“Come here,” RJ said with a sigh motioning Tanner over to him. Tanner waddled the few steps. RJ then leaned over and pulled the boys shorts back up.

“What are you doing?” Tanner asked his voice becoming somewhat panicked.

“I'm not going to spank you,” RJ said as he leaned back against his table.

“But you have to,” Tanner yelped.

“I do?” RJ said raising an eyebrow.

“If you don't then that means you don't care and you're going to send me away.”

“Tanner that's,” RJ began.

“I want to stay so please just punish me,” Tanner cried. “I won't cry or nothing...so please.”

RJ was silent for a moment. He couldn't understand what Tanner was even on about or how these two ideas even related to one another.

“Okay, I'll punish you,” RJ said standing from his seat. He lead Tanner over to a corner of the garage.

“Tanner James Egret, you were very naughty,” RJ said in an over the top tone, crossing his arms “You will now stand here and think about what you did until I say you can move,” RJ continued wagging his finger vigorously. “Do you understand me young man?

Tanner looked up at him with a befuddled look, as if he couldn't understand if RJ was being serious or not. He then pursed his lips before nodding.

“And you will wear these,” RJ said grabbing some safety glasses and putting them on Tanner. RJ then went to workbench and began cutting down the board with a power saw. He looked over at Tanner a couple of times who was standing as he was told to with gloomy look on his face. Once RJ was done cutting he went over to Tanner.

“You feel like you've been punished enough?” RJ asked.

“Not really,” Tanner said. “It feels like you're messing with me.”'

RJ smirked seeing a little of the old Tanner coming through. It was a good sign in his book, maybe now he could get to the bottom of this. RJ picked Tanner up and carried him over to the stool. RJ sat and then placed a hand on Tanner's thigh scooting him closer so that his side was up against RJ's chest.

“Tanner you aren't in trouble,” RJ said. “I only brought you out here to help me with this because I could tell you felt bad about it.”

“But I was bad,” Tanner croaked.

“Why, because you broke a window,” RJ said. “Buddy, it was one window, its not like you meant to. Just don't make a habit of it.”

Tanner's face was constricted, as if a million thoughts were flying across his mind all at once.

“Mind telling me what all that stuff about needing to be punished was about?” RJ then asked as he brought his hand up to gently rub Tanner's arm. The boy slumped against RJ placing his head against RJ's shoulder.

“Its just something they told me at Hawthorne,” Tanner said just above a whisper. “They said if I didn't get punished when I was bad it meant parents didn't care and were better off sending you away.”

“And you believe that?”

“Not really,” Tanner said. “But its like sometimes that stuff just comes up and I can't really tell myself its not true.”

“Did they spank you at that school?” RJ then asked. Tanner nodded. RJ let out a deep sigh. Tanner was his kid now, his son, and the very thought of someone filling his head with these ideas and hurting him filled him with a deep anger. He found himself wanting to hunt down each and every one of those people and punching their teeth in.

“You don't have to worry about that stuff anymore,” RJ said as he wrapped his arms around Tanner in a hug. “Anything they told you at that school no longer applies. Around here me and Desi...your mom...we make the rules, got it.”

“Yeah,” Tanner said looking up at RJ. “Makes sense.”

“Now we didn't adopt you and Leo thinking you guys were always going to be perfect little angels, there will be times when we have to correct your behavior, but we will never hit you, we don't do that around here. We're also never going to send you away. Sound fair?”

“Sure,” Tanner said.

“Alright now that's out of the way whaddya say to helping me sand these edges down.” RJ said releasing Tanner.

“Okay,” Tanner said hopping down, his demeanor instantly shifting to one of eagerness to help out. RJ showed him how to use the sandpaper and within a couple of minutes the two

of them had completed the task.

Coming into the house they found Desiree and Leo at the kitchen table. Leo was playing with his art kit while Desiree bounced Kaylee on her knee watching Leo construct some shape out of clay.

“You two were out there awhile,” Desiree said addressing Tanner and RJ. “Everything go okay.”

“I think so,” RJ said as he set the board down before putting a hand on Tanner's shoulder. “We were just having a little father son talk.”

“Oh,” Desiree said with some interest looking at Tanner. “Did your Dad give you any good advice out there.”

“Umm yeah I guess,” Tanner said giving a small smile as he looked up at RJ.

“What are you gonna do with that?” Leo asked looking curiously at the board.

“We're putting it in the window,” RJ said as he picked the board up. He went over to the window as Leo slid out of his chair and crawled under the table to get a closer look. RJ took a power drill and began to secured the board over the window. Desiree smiled watching as Tanner and Leo stood next to one another covering their ears due to the noise. Both of them watched with looks of admiration. They were both seemingly impressed by the handiness of their new father. Desiree gathered up Kaylee who was bothered by the loud noises and walked out of the kitchen. Desiree went to her

room and set the baby on the bed before grabbing her phone. She saw Cindy had messaged her back about adopting Leo and Tanner. She said she would immediately get the process started as soon as she was back in the office on Monday. Desiree smiled, it was really happening. She went into the attached bathroom and dug around finding a clip for Leo's hair. She had noticed he had been pushing the hair out of his eyes all morning, both of the boys could use a haircut. Desiree began to think of all the things that needed doing now that the boys were here to stay. Tanner needed to get signed up for little league and now was a good time to think about getting Leo into preschool. With the summer right around the corner the boys could use swimsuits as well for trips to the lake. Desiree then wondered how both of them were with swimming, so lessons also might be a good idea. More and more things came up as Desiree continued to think, it was starting to become overwhelming.

She finally came to a consensus of what they could do easiest. Tomorrow she would take both boys to get haircuts, and then they would hit up a store. Both of the boys could use some more clothes to fill out their wardrobe, not too mention they would need some clothes for when they needed to dress up, for example when they would need to go to court to finalize the adoption. They could also use things for their room to really make the space their own and maybe some more toys for added measure. Desiree then looked over spying a picture frame on her dresser. She got up and picked it up. It had three spots on it although the only picture in it was one of Kaylee. At the top it said “The Egret Nest” it had

been a gift from Desiree's mother when Kaylee had been born. She had told Desiree there was no pressure for more grandchildren but it was best to be ready just in case. Desiree hadn't been off put by the gift, her and RJ had always planned for more than one child after all. She then imagined how nice the frame would look when she got pictures of Tanner and Leo in it.

It struck her for a moment how only a couple of months ago she didn't even know either boy. They had all been living their own lives completely unaware of one another, yet here they were now becoming a family. In a short amount of time Desiree had come to have a deep and profound love for each of them, the same she had for Kaylee, they were really her kids. She then thought back onto that first night they had all met. It really hadn't take long, they had been driving home when she had looked back at the two of them asleep in the back seat when she had first felt it. The feeling that she would do anything for those two. It was almost like it had been fate, as if they were always meant to be together. Desiree set the photo frame down. She looked at the words inscribed on the top again. This was how things were supposed to be. They were all finally together. One day far in the future they would spread their wings and leave out into the world. But for now all her little birds were now home in their nest and there was nothing that was going to pull them out ever again.

Chapter 24

To Build a Nest: Chapter 24 - Chapter 24

Back at it.

Desiree came into the living room to the sound of the tv blaring. Tanner was standing shirtless as he watched the cartoon on the screen. Despite it being Monday they had decided to let him stay home from school for the day. Leo was on the couch. He had his feet up over the back while his head hung over the edge as he watched the tv upside down.

“Tanner go get a shirt on so we can go,” Desiree said.

“Go where?” Tanner asked with a somewhat suspicious look.

“First we are going to get you two some haircuts and then we are going to the store.” Desiree explained.

“What are we getting at the store?” Leo asked, as he flipped over sitting right side up on the couch.

“Glad you asked,” Desiree said, as if she had been waiting for someone to ask. “I think we need to get you guys some more clothes.”

“Clothes shopping again,” Tanner whined.

“Of course,” Desiree said, sitting on the couch next to Leo picking up a flyer from the coffee table and began thumbing through it. “There are lots of things you guys don't have. I

also thought it would be good to get some stuff for your room, you know really make it your own."

"Like what kind of stuff?" Leo asked somewhat intrigued by the idea, he had after all never been in a position to put a spin on his own room.

"Well you know," Desiree said. "You have a bookshelf with no books on it so you should get some of those and maybe some poster's or decorations, stuff like that."

"Could I get Toxic Sludge poster?" Leo asked referring to one of the bands that he listened to up in RJ's office. Desiree gave a sort of disapproving look. She wasn't a fan of the fact that RJ let Leo listen to whatever he wanted, especially since a lot of the bands weren't exactly appropriate for a four year old, Toxic Sludge being a particular good example of that.

"We'll see," Desiree said with a forced smile.

"I hope they have one," Leo said bouncing up and down on his knees.

"We're not just going for decorations either," Desiree said wanting to get Leo focused on something else. "I think we're going to get toys too."

Leo's eyes lit up as he gave an excited chirp bringing his hands up beneath his chin.

"What do you think of that Tanner?" Desiree asked looking over at her other son.

"I think I have enough," Tanner grimaced. "I mean its not like

I even play with the ones I have now." As much as he accepted that he was now a kid and Desiree and RJ were his parents, he still had trouble fully getting into things.

"That's a shame," Desiree said as she sat back turning a page on the flyer. "Looks like they were having a sale on Mega Ranger toys too." Tanner's face fell as he looked back with some shock.

"He told you," Tanner squeaked referring to his secret activities he did at school during recess that RJ had inadvertently heard about at the baseball game.

"But if you don't want any more toys that's fine," Desiree said not looking up from the paper.

Tanner was silent for a moment.

"Do you think they have the wrist transformers?" he asked blushing a little.

"Yeah they're right here," Desiree said turning the paper around to show to Tanner.

"Well maybe I could get one of those," Tanner said looking away as he kicked the ground a little. "Only because other guys always want to play and I also have to borrow Gordy's extra one which I think he only lets me borrow that one cause its broken." Tanner said grumpily. "It doesn't even flip up when you hit the button."

"You can get whatever you want," Desiree said with a smile as she set down the paper. "But you're gonna need to get a

shirt on first."

"Sure," Tanner said as he went to leave the room before coming to a stop, he turned back around looking at Desiree.

"Um Desi," he said hesitantly. She looked over at him with an attentive look. "Thanks," Tanner said.

"For what?" she asked.

"I don't know," Tanner said with shrug. "Just thanks was all." Leo let out of huff of air through his nostrils as he got off the couch and marched up to Tanner.

"You can't call her Desi," Leo said as he pointed back at Desiree.

"Why not?" Tanner asked as he scrunched his face up in confusion.

"She's your Mom, so you gotta call her that," Leo demanded.

Tanner stammered a little as his face flushed a little red. "I can't do that," Tanner mumbled.

"Why not," Leo said putting his hand on his hips.

"Leo," Desiree said as she used her finger to signal him over to her. Leo walked over to her before Desiree grabbed him pulling him onto her lap before looking back at the other boy. "Tanner its fine, just go get on a shirt and meet us back here." Tanner scurried out of the room.

"And listen to you Mr. bossy-pants," Desiree said as she

tickled her tiny captive. “Don't give him a hard time.”

“But he has too,” Leo said a little out of breath from his visit from the tickle monster.

“Tanner is going to do what makes him comfortable,” Desiree said. “We want him to take that step when he is ready. So don't be too hard on him about it.”

“Oookay,” Leo said. Desiree released him.

“Now seeing that you are already dressed,” she said noting that Leo was wearing his PJ Mask outfit he had bought at the store on their first day together. “Think you can go get your shoes on?”

“Sure,” Leo said.

Just then the doorbell rang.

“I'll get it,” Leo said as he rushed off towards the front door.

Leo opened the door to find a rather tall man standing on the front stoop. He was wearing a white button down shirt and and tie. Leo noticed the shiny badge clipped to his belt. The man looked down and smiled removing his sunglasses.

“Hey there little guy,” the man said.

“Hi,” Leo said taking a step back feeling slightly intimidated by the tall strange man.

“You wouldn't happen to be Leonard now would you?” the man asked.

“No, I'm Leo,” the boy replied back. The man gave a sort of exaggerated look of surprise.

“My mistake,” the man said as he knelt down to Leo's level. “But I bet your last name is Rushton right?”

“Nope,” Leo said with a cheeky smile. “Its Egret.”

“Two for two eh,” the man said opening the file folder in his hand. He then brought out a small photo and showed it to Leo. It was a picture of him from when they had first come to stay with Desiree and RJ. “This is you though right?”

“Mhmmm,” Leo nodded. Desiree then came from around the corner walking up to the door with suspicious look on her face as to who Leo was talking too.

“Hi, can I help you,” she said as she went and stood by Leo using her hand to push him back behind her a little.

“Are you Desiree Egret?” the man asked.

“I am.”

“I'm Detective Nichols,” he said. “And that is Officer Menedez,” he said pointing to a lady in a police uniform standing a little way behind him.

“Is there a problem?” Desiree asked.

“No no problems,” the detective said as he fished another piece of paper out of his folder. “I'm just here because of this court order,” he said holding it up to the screen so Desiree could see. “I'm to return Leonard Rushton to his parents.”

Desiree's face fell. Leo felt his heart drop into his stomach.

“There must be some mistake,” Desiree flustered.

“I'm afraid not,” the detective said with a somewhat sympathetic demeanor. “I understand as the foster parent this all seems rather sudden, and we do usually give some times notice, but the judge who signed the order also wanted it carried out immediately. The boys parents are waiting back at the station in fact.”

“You can't do this,” Desiree said shaking her head.

“That's not really up to me ma'am,” the detective said with a sigh. “I'm just here to execute the order. I think it would be best if we all keep calm.”

“You just wait,” Desiree said with some anger as she held up a finger with her phone up to her ear. “I need to call my husband and then I am going to call Leo's case worker so you can explain this to her.” Detective Nichols gave another sigh as he scratched his head before throwing his hands up a little before turning around to go and confer with the other officer. Desiree grabbed Leo's hand as they walked back into the kitchen.

“RJ I need you to come back home quick,” Desiree said panicked into the phone. “The cops are here. They're trying to take Leo. I need to call Cindy.” she said before hanging up and dialing another number.

“Whats going on,” Tanner asked walking into the kitchen

with a shirt on.

“They're trying to give me back to my parents,” Leo moaned. He didn't know what to do. He couldn't go back.

“They can't do that,” Tanner said as he became immediately just as panicked as Desiree. “Can they?” he said looking up at Desiree. She could only give the boys a reassuring smile.

“We aren't going to let that happen,” Desiree said kneeling down wrapping an arm around Leo's waist. “Cindy hey,” Desiree said standing up as she began to talk walking back out to the front door.

“Tanner I don't want to leave,” Leo cried.

“Don't worry,” Tanner said putting a hand on Leo's shoulder. “Desi won't let them.” he said, though he too looked a little worried.

“But what if she can't?” Leo asked biting his lower lip. Tanner thought for a moment.

“Want to run?” Tanner asked as a serious look came to his face. Leo looked towards the front hall and then back towards Tanner before nodding. Without a word the boys went out the back door.

“Should we go through the woods?” Leo asked as they walked across the lawn towards the front.

“No,” Tanner said shaking his head. “I don't know how long they go on for, we don't want to get lost out there. RJ said there is a bus station not too far down the road. We get there

and then we get as as far away as possible.”

“But we don't have money,” Leo pointed out.

“We can sneak on a bus easily.” Tanner said. “Believe me.”

Leo nodded. Tanner knew what he was doing. As they got up to the front they snuck behind the car. Tanner watched, waiting for a good moment. The detective was on the phone with Cindy while Desiree was angrily talking to the other officer. Tanner decided it was a good moment as everyone looked distracted. He moved as Leo followed and they started down the road. They had made it a little ways down when Tanner heard it.

“Hey,” a voice shouted. Tanner looked back to see that the officer had spotted them and was now making her way towards them.

“Run,” Tanner yelled as he and Leo broke out into a sprint down the road. They didn't make it far before the cop had caught up to them. She grabbed both of them. Tanner and Leo struggled as the cop effortlessly carried them back with each of them under and arm their legs and arms dangling as they kicked and struggled. Officer Mendez went to the car. She set Tanner down before opening the back door where a car seat was waiting.

“Let him go,” Tanner shouted as he rained his fist down on her back. She gave no notice as she strapped Leo in. She then shut the door before turning around and stopping Tanner. Leo watched as Desiree came over with a furious look on her

face. She grabbed Tanner away from the cop lifting him up into her arms as she shouted at the officer. Leo then heard the screeching of tires. He looked behind to see RJ's truck and another car as well. Leo saw RJ walking towards the group with Cindy following close behind. He watched as all the adult talked. There was a lot of gesturing. Desiree looked frustrated while RJ looked a little sick and bewildered. Before long he watched as they seemed to turn from angry to sad.

After a bit more he watched Desiree and RJ approach the car with the detective who opened the door. Leo was hopeful they were coming to get him, take him out of the car and tell him everything was okay, yet seeing their faces he knew that wasn't happening. Desiree had tears in the corner of her eyes while RJ looked concerned.

“I'm going to have to go, aren't I?” Leo said already knowing the answer. Desiree hugged him.

“Leo I'm so sorry,” Desiree said.

“We're going to fix this, don't worry,” RJ said.

“It's fine,” Leo said shaking his head. He knew there was little they could do. He had accepted that this was an inevitability. He had been foolish to think anything else. He knew what kind of people his parents were, they would never let him go that easily.

“Don't give up like that,” Desiree said holding his face in her hands. Leo pulled back. Even if she said that, what could anyone do?

“I'll be fine,” Leo said. “I'll just...” he said trailing off. What was he going to do? The worst thing imaginable was happening. He was going back to his parents and he would never see Desiree,RJ, or Tanner again. He had lost his new family just as they had become one. “Thanks though,” Leo said giving a small smile doing his best to seem strong. “You guys were good parents, I really liked being an Egret.”

“You are still Egret no matter what,” RJ said. Leo nodded. It was a nice thought.

“I'm really sorry about all of this,” Detective Nichols said. “But we do have to be going.”

Desiree and RJ both gave a Leo another hug and kiss before stepping back as the door was closed. As the car pulled out Leo looked back, watching the house disappear from view.

RJ and Desiree stood in the driveway, neither of them knew what to do. Desiree couldn't understand what had just happened. Just a little bit ago they had been on their way to the store and now Leo was gone. She turned to Cindy who was just as stunned.

“I'm sorry,” she said. “I didn't know anything about this.”

“We know you didn't,” RJ said. Desiree turned around noticing Tanner was nowhere to be seen.

“I need to go check on Tanner,” Desiree said excusing herself.

Walking into the house she looked around seeing no sign of him. She stopped at the counter. She wanted to break down

into tears right there. But she needed to be strong. It was bad for her, she couldn't imagine what Tanner was going through. She walked into the hallway seeing the door to to the boys room closed. She gave a small knock before opening the door. “Tanner,” she called out gently, finding him on his bed laid out flat with his face in the pillow. She walked over to his bed sitting down beside him as she put a hand on his back.

“Its my fault,” Tanner said not lifting his head as his voice was muffled by the pillow.

“No, its not,” Desiree said.

“Yes it is,” Tanner replied. “We should have gone through the woods like Leo wanted.”

“There is nothing we could have done to fix this,” Desiree said gently. Tanner lifted up his head. Tears were streaming down his face.

“Please,” he said. “You have to get him back. Mom, please,” he pleaded as he dove into her burying his face into her stomach sobbing, as he wrapped his arms around her. Desiree said nothing, instead she placed a hand on his head stroking his hair.

“We'll get him back,” she said softly. “We just have too.”

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It had been a short drive to the police station. Leo had said nothing as he slowly resigned himself to the reality of the situation. He had expected he would cry yet nothing came.

Walking into the station Leo felt his stomach twist up upon seeing his parents again. They ran up to him, his Mom picking him up into her arms as she kissed hims several time. They were acting like the happiest people in the world. Had they actually missed him, he wondered. After thanking the officers they were released as they went to their car. Opening the door Leo was placed into another car seat as his Dad strapped him in. Once they had gotten into the car though their demeanor changed. Leo was unsure of what to do, what could he possibly say.

“Whats going to happen?” Leo finally asked.

“Not a word Leo,” Mom said sternly from the front seat. She then turned around and gave him a serious look. “We are very upset with you right now.”

Leo closed his mouth, he had expected them to be angry and for the next twenty minutes they gave him a dressing down. Letting him know how irresponsible he had been, how he had embarrassed them, and how big of a problem he had caused.

“And then we find out you're living with some other people and causing problems for them.” his Dad said. Leo couldn't remain silent any longer, it hadn't been like that. Sure at points he had felt like a burden but Desi and RJ didn't think he was a burden. They had been happy to have him, he knew they were.

“They wanted me there,” Leo said. “They were even going to adopt me.”

His Mom turned around shaking her head. “You were being very selfish then weren't you.” Leo's mouth hung open a little. Selfish? How could she think that?

“Just think about it,” his Mom said seeing the confused look on his face. “There are kids all over who want to be adopted, who don't have any parents, and then there was you who already has two parents. What do you think they would say about that?”

Leo shook his head. It was'nt like Leo had taken a spot from anyone. Desi and RJ hadn't been looking to adopt a kid. They wanted Leo, and he wanted them.

“Thats...” Leo began before his Mom put up her hand turning back around.

“I don't even know why I'm arguing with you about this. You're a little boy, you can't possibly understand all of this, you just need to listen to what we say.”

“Like I'll ever do that,” Leo grumbled crossing his arms as he looked out the window. His Dad looked into the rear view mirror.

“You'll learn your lesson soon enough,” Dad chuckled. “Hawthorne will see to that.” Leo felt like his stomach had just been punched.

“Y-you're sending me back,” he yelped.

“Of course,” Mom said. “We're on the way now. You

obviously didn't get it the first time. I suppose we were a little too eager to get you back. We thought you had done well. You were very well behaved the night of the graduation...well at least we though you were."

Leo hung his head. He should have known this was coming. Mr. Gareth had said as much. The conversation died there. Not that Leo wanted to continue it. He sat thinking about what it was going to be like going back. It scared him thinking he was going to have to do it all over again – and Tanner wasn't going to be there with him this time.

After a while Leo felt like he needed to go to the bathroom. He looked up at his parents in the front. He didn't want to have to ask them to stop. But he knew with the way he was now he couldn't hold it for long.

"Umm Mom," he said meekly. His Mom made no reaction. "Hey Mom, Dad," Leo tried again.

"That's not what we want you to call us," his Dad said. Leo puckered his lips. He couldn't call them that. It had been easy with Desi and RJ. They accepted him as he was. But he didn't want his actual parents to see him that way. If he acted like a little kid in front of them it was almost like admitting defeat. Leo squirmed a little. He gritted his teeth. He didn't want to have an accident in front of them. He wondered if they were aware he was a bed wetter.

"Daddy, I need to go to the bathroom," Leo said.

"Just hold it," his Mom said. "We'll stop soon."

Leo bit his lower lip, he resolved to try his best to hold it. Time ticked by as Leo became more desperate. He was scrunching his legs. He needed to hold it. Begging would only make him feel more helpless. The minutes were agonizing.

Leo couldn't hold it any longer. One spurt and then another until he broke, a wet spot spreading across his crotch moving its way down his legs darkening the pant legs. Leo let out a whimper. His Mom turned around her eyes going wide as she saw what had happened.

“He wet himself,” she said with a sigh as she turned to Dad.

“What!” Dad exclaimed as he looked back himself just to confirm.

“Pull off at the next exit,” Mom said. Surprisingly to Leo she didn't even sound mad. They pulled into the parking lot of a store. Leo's Mom got out and came around to his door. She unbuckled him lifting him out and setting him on his feet. She then grabbed his hand as she pulled him along.

“I can't go in like this,” Leo protested.

“And how am I supposed to clean you up if you stay in the car?” Mom questioned although it was rhetorical. “You shouldn't have had an accident if you were going to be embarrassed about it.”

“It was your fault,” Leo seethed. Mom looked down at him for a moment. Leo braced himself. Surprisingly she gave him somewhat of sympathetic look.

“You should have said it was an emergency.” she said.

In the store Leo was mortified. Everyone was looking at him. He could see some smirks mixed in with sympathetic looks. No one thought anything about it other than he was just a little kid who had an accident. Leo knew this was part of his parents plan. He had a lot of time to think about the things they did when he would contrast them with how the Egrets had treated him. He had come to the understanding that his parents cared a great deal about the image they held. Something they had instilled in Leo. He understood this public display was there form of punishment. They wanted him to feel the shame. They had raised him to carry himself with a sense of respect in the worst way possible. If he was going to wet his pants then he would need to see that it was a shameful thing, he would need to feel it, then he wouldn't do it anymore. That was their logic. They arrived in the diaper aisle. His Mom lead him past the pull-ups and went straight for the diapers. She looked at a couple of the packs picking up one.

“I don't need that,” Leo yipped.

“Says the boy with the wet pants,” Mom remarked.

“I wear pull-ups,” Leo admitted. “But only at night,” he added quickly. It was humiliating to actually admit all of this to her.

“We still have some driving to do,” Mom reasoned. “And we don't want to be stopping every thirty minutes.” she said. She lead him off. Thankfully she went through a self check out

lane before bringing Leo into a bathroom. She unfolded the baby changing station.

“Up you go,” she said. Leo took a step back.

“Please, I don't want diapers.”

Mom gave a sort of annoyed look.

“No fussing,” she said picking him up and putting him on the table. “This is what Mommy decided.” she said pushing him down. Leo knew he couldn't fight this. She was not going to listen to him. She never did. His Mom took off his pants and his underwear leaving him exposed. Leo squeaked as he went to cover himself. Mom gave no notice as she went and threw the clothes into the garbage can.

“No,” Leo squeaked sitting up. Desiree had gotten him those clothes. The pants especially being apart of the PJ Mask outfit he had gotten when he had first come to them. The clothes on his back were the only thing he had from them.

“They're ruined,” Mom said pushing him back down. She took out some wipes she had also bought and began to wipe him down. Leo whimpered and whined as he fidgeted. Mom tore open the package of diapers and unfolded one. Leo couldn't take it anymore. He could feel himself reverting to his old ways of just letting his parents do whatever. Leo began to kick as his Mom grabbed his ankles.

“No, no,no,” Leo yelled. “I'm not wearing a diaper.

Mom said nothing as she raised him up so that his legs were

now in the air and his butt was lifted off the table. She then gave him a single swat that rang out in the bathroom. Leo let out a yip feeling the sting on his backside, effectively silencing his protest.

“Enough,” Mom said sternly. “You are going to wear what I put you in, do you understand?”

Leo gave a slow nod. His whole body was frozen. He was actually scared she was going to continue to spank him. She then lowered him onto the diaper as she went about taping it up. Leo whinged and whimpered yet didn't resist. Once she had gotten him situated he picked him up into her arms and began to walk towards the door.

“I don't want people to see me,” Leo whined.

“No one will mind,” Mom said. “There is nothing strange about a little boy wearing just a diaper in public.”

Leo only responded with another whimper. By the time they were back at the car Leo was sniffling with tears in his eyes. Dad mentioned that the car seat had been okay and Mom placed Leo back in it, strapping him in.

“I'm going to go get a few things in the store,” Mom said. Dad nodded as she closed the door. Leo was still sniffling as his Dad turned around. He gave Leo a sort of pitied look.

“Its okay buddy,” Dad said. “We know it wasn't your fault. Me and Mommy just forgot what it was like having a little boy.” Leo was a little shocked to hear his Dad not blaming him for once. “Mommy took care of everything though,

you're nice and dry again. We know exactly what to do, don't we?”

Leo went cold again. As if, he thought. All of this was their fault. Mom returned with a bag getting in the front seat. She was opening up a bunch of things Leo could not see. She then turned around and pushed something in his mouth. Leo let it drop but his Mom had expected this and caught it before putting it back in his mouth. Leo realized it was a pacifier. His Mom held a finger up to the button.

“Keep that in your mouth,” she instructed. “We aren't going to listen to you cry the whole time.”

Leo sat back with a pouty look keeping the pacifier in his mouth but he didn't suck on it. They began driving again. Leo looked out the window. He was remembering all the good times he had with Desiree and RJ. He wondered what everyone was doing, how did Tanner feel? Thinking about all this, Leo began to imagine Desiree cuddling him, RJ holding him in arms and carrying him around. As Leo continued fantasizing he began to suck on the pacifier. He didn't even realize his Mom was speaking to him until she tickled his foot a little making Leo let out a little squeal from behind the pacifier. He looked up to see her holding a sippy cup towards him.

“Want a drink?” she asked.

“Mh buk boo,” Leo muffled. His Mom smiled a little taking the pacifier out of his mouth. She then pulled out a cup holder

from the side of the car seat and set the cup in it.

“You can have your pacifier back after you eat,” she said before giving him a bag of some crackers. Leo didn't move and just looked at the crackers on his lap. “You should eat something. Lunchtime will be over by the time we get to Hawthorne.” Mom said.

Leo grimaced at being reminded of their destination. He looked a the pacifier that his Mom had set in the cup holder. A harrowing thought then occurred to him. The diaper, the pacifier, the sippy cup, they couldn't be planning?

“You're going to make me younger aren't you,” he accused. Both of his parents looked at each other before laughing.

“Heavens no,” Mom said.

“Just to let you know, we hadn't planned on having a four year old again,” Dad said. “We were perfectly fine making you the same age as the other kids. The school said your issues were deep rooted though, they said it would be better if you were younger to better address your needs.”

“Dear, he doesn't need to know all that,” Mom chided. “Besides we don't want a baby. You were a difficult toddler.”

Leo was flabbergasted to find that his parents hadn't actually been the one's to suggest his regression down to four. Yet they had pulled the trigger all the same. Leo begrudgingly ate and drank. It wasn't like he had anything better to do. Once he was done his Mom placed the pacifier back into his mouth.

Some time later Leo saw the front gate. He closed his eyes, this had to be a bad dream. He opened his eyes again with a sense of dread. They parked and it was his Dad this time that got him out of the seat carrying him to the front entrance while Mom walked with the plastic shopping bag in her hand. They walked in and were met by Ms. Mari.

“Well look who we have here,” she smiled. “Our little runaway.” Leo looked away. He probably looked like a shy little kid doing so but he couldn't bear to look.

“Sorry about his clothes,” Mom said. “But we had a little accident on the way here.”

“That's no problem,” Ms. Mari laughed. “We know little Leo is no stranger to accidents.”

Dad then set Leo on the ground. Leo shivered feeling the cold floor on his bare feet. His parent then knelt down in front of him.

“Now Leo, we are going to leave. We know you aren't happy to be here, but please remember that we do care about you, and this is what is best.”

“That's right, this is all to help you.” Mom said as she dug around in the bag before she pulled out a teddy bear. “This is a gift,” she said pushing the bear into his arms. “We're all going to be missing one another but we know you'll be getting the help you need. And when you miss us you can hug this bear and it will remind you that we are eagerly awaiting you.”

Leo looked down at the bear in his arms. There was so much he could say. He could tell them what liars they were, how they didn't miss him, they were only looking forward to getting their obedient little child who would never question them again.

“We love you very much,” Mom said as she hugged him.

“You work hard now,” Dad said mussing up his hair. Leo didn't even register what they were saying to him. Mom then talked with Ms. Mari for a moment before handing over the bag. The woman then picked Leo up and they watched his parents leave, Ms. Mari using her hand to make it look like Leo was waving bye. After they were gone, Ms. Mari looked at Leo with a smile.

“You like that pacifier?” she asked. Leo suddenly came out of his daze realizing he was still sucking on the thing. Ms. Mari laughed as she pulled it out of his mouth. “Will keep it around,” she said. “Your Mommy said it really helped calm you down.”

Leo frowned, knowing they were going to use it on him now.

“Anyways,” Ms. Mari said as she carried him down the hall. “Did you sleep on the way here.”

“No,” Leo said.

“Hmm well its about two o' clock if I remember right that was your nap-time, so lets get you into bed, it was probably an exciting morning for you. She carried him into one of the rooms with the bunk beds setting him down on one.

“How long am I going to have to be here for?”

“That depends entirely on you,” Ms. Mari said. “Remember you are here receiving treatment. Your parents will come get you when we are confident that you have completed the program and have made the necessary changes to yourself. It could be a couple of weeks, it could be a year.”

Leo didn't like the sound of that. It sounded like this time they weren't taking any chances. He wondered if he really was going to be able to fake it well enough to fool them.

“Can I at least change out of this thing,” Leo said squishing his legs back and forth.

“Are you wet?” Ms. Mari asked.

“No,” Leo said.

“Then I don't see why we should,” Ms. Mari said. “You need it for your nap anyways.”

“I don't wear diapers,” Leo grumbled. “Can't I at least have a pull-up.”

“Your Mom went through the trouble of buying a whole pack of diapers for you, and we are going to use them up. Besides pull-ups are for big kids who know how to listen and that doesn't sound like you now does it?”

Leo gulped as he looked up at the woman.

“You should know that we are not going to be giving you any privileges,” Ms. Mari said. “You are going to need to prove to

us that you can follow instructions to earn them back. So if you are a good boy and once we use up these diapers, then we can talk about pull-ups."

Leo couldn't believe he was now actually wishing for pull-ups. Ms. Mari then pulled back the covers motioning for Leo to crawl under them.

"You can start now by taking your nap like we asked," she said pulling the covers up over him. "And here is to help you relax,"' she said as she slipped the pacifier into his mouth. She then took the teddy bear and tucked it in close to him.

"I'm happy to have you back," Ms. Mari said stroking his hair a little. "I just know you're going to turn out to be a very good little boy."

Chapter 25

To Build a Nest: Chapter 25 - Chapter 25

Judgement

Leo sat on the ground of Ms. Mari's office. He had just been to the cafeteria for breakfast. Of course he hadn't been left alone. A staff member had sat with him while he ate with a bib around his neck. Leo found this time around was multitudes worse than his first stay.

First of all they considered him a flight risk, so he was always being supervised and wasn't allowed to wear shoes or socks. Which meant most of the time he was being carried around. He didn't attend classes either, instead he would find himself with either Ms. Mari or Ms. Klay. They would carry him around while they went about their business. Ms. Klay had joked that Leo was like her little assistant, but it was anything but. When he wasn't going around with them he was back in the office being placed in a pack and play that had been set up watching mind numbing videos that were hammering in all the rules that Hawthorne wanted instilled in him. Proper children are always respectful of adults, proper children never disobey their parents, and on and on. The worst was when he would be sitting across from Ms. Mari or Ms. Klay and they would be reviewing with him.

“So lets say I gave you a red shirt to wear, but you wanted a blue one, what would you do? Ms. Klay had asked him

during such a review session.

“I would say thank you and wear the red one,” Leo replied back, albeit a little gloomy.

“And why is that?”

“Because proper children wear what they are told to.” Leo said.

“Mhmmm, and why is that?”

“Because proper children always listen to adults, since they know whats best.”

“Exactly,” Ms. Klay had said. Leo didn't even think anymore when asked these questions. He always knew what they wanted to hear. He had started off trying to do his best to fake it the best he could, but it was all starting to get to him a little. It was becoming automatic, so drilled into him that he didn't even think about it anymore. Leo could see how everything fit together, how everything they were doing worked together.

The few times he had been allowed in the playroom the other kids would ignore him. He was the strange baby. They had effectively othered him from the group, isolated him. No doubt because they didn't want him finding a single friend in the place, not like when he had Tanner. Leo didn't hold it against the other kids though, how could he. It was perfectly apparent to him that he was becoming a baby. Always walking around with his teddy bear and the pacifier being clipped to his shirt. In fact he had come to rely on these two things. Sucking on the pacifier did make him feel calm, and

he did find some solace in hugging his bear. He knew he shouldn't, they were things his parents had given him. He should be reviled by them, but he knew it was pointless to try and deny his emotions. Leo couldn't fight against it. He was well aware what they were doing, making him as little and helpless as possible, all to give him no choice but to be dependent. He did try and keep his mind clear. Sometimes when he was being carried around he put his head down on a shoulder, sucking away at his pacifier and pretended it was Desiree or RJ carrying him, feeling safe in the arms of his Mommy or Daddy. Other times he would talk with his bear pretending it was Tanner. Imagining what his brother would say in response. It wasn't much but Leo felt it helped him keep sane. He wouldn't forget them and what they meant to him.

In the first week he had been there he had woken up every day hoping they would be there to demand him back. But they never came and Leo had come to realization that there was nothing they could do. He still held the belief that they had tried, nonetheless.

The door opened as Ms. Mari walked in. Leo stood up.

“Good morning Ms. Mari,” he greeted as was expected of him.

“Good morning munchkin,” Ms. Mari said. Leo fought back the urge to scowl at her. He hated when she said that to him. Only RJ or Desi could call him that. She looked down at him nodding.

“Looks like you need a change,” she said noting Leo's droopy diaper as she picked him up and carried him out of the office. Leo hated the fact that he was still wearing the diaper. It had been three weeks surely he had used up all the diapers his Mom had bought at the store. Ms. Mari had originally taken him to the bathroom when he asked, but as time had went on it had became inconvenient for someone to take him to the bathroom so they just had him use the diaper and would change him. Leo didn't understand how that was somehow easier, yet he guessed it had nothing to do with convenience. They didn't have him wear pants either anymore. So everyone could see the diaper and when he had used it, easier for checks they had said. The worst thing about it was that Leo really didn't have control anymore. He had been on the cusp of being out of pull-ups weeks ago yet now he was fully back in diapers.

Ms. Mari brought him into his room setting him on the changing mat in the corner. She lifted his shirt up over his belly before un-taping him. At least the other kids were at lessons right now so the room was empty. It was more embarrassing when they were present to witness. Even though he could still hear the things they said in his head.

“Oh the baby needs a change?”

“Gross it smells,”

“Haha they have Winnie the Pooh on them, that's for babies.”

Leo would just close his eyes and suck on his pacifier, imagining he was anywhere else.

Ms. Mari had him changed into a fresh diaper in no time. She then had him stand by his bed while she brought over a shopping bag. She took off his shirt before putting another one on him. It was a white long sleeved polo. She then took out a pair of dark blue slacks and had him step into them. Finally she put on a blue sweater vest. Then she pulled out the most curious thing. A pair of socks and a set of two black shoes. Leo was curious as to why he was putting on this stuff. Leo knew better than to ask questions, proper children wore what adults dressed them in. Ms. Mari then grabbed a spray bottle and spritzed his hair before she styled it into a tight comb over. Leo hated his hair. Shortly after arriving he had been given a haircut to his Mom's specifications of course. They had cut it short and every morning they would comb it over. Leo had caught a look at himself one day in the mirror. His haircut only amplified how much of a little kid he already looked like. Not that any sort of hair due would make him look more mature but with it like this he looked all prim and proper. Just like his parents had always insisted he wear it all throughout his life.

“Okay, your parents will be here in a bit to pick you up,” she said after fully dressing him.

“You mean I'm going home!” Leo exclaimed.

“You're going to court today,” Ms. Mari corrected. Leo looked back a little confused. Ms. Mari could see he wanted to ask more questions, yet Leo remained silent. Proper children never questioned where there parents took them,

they went without fussing. Ms. Mari waited a moment and decided to sate Leo's curiosity upon seeing him obey the rules.

“Your parents have been having to clear up the problems you created,” Ms. Mari said. “You have to be there today for official reasons. Don't worry though they won't be putting you on the stand. After all little boys don't have much to say about such things, now do they?”

Leo shook his head in agreement. It didn't matter what he thought. Adults, his parents made the decisions for him.

“Okay then,” Ms. Mari said picking him back up and carrying him back to her office. She placed him in the pack and play and slipped the pacifier into his mouth. “You play in here until your parents arrive.” Ms. Mari then sat at her desk and worked at her computer.

Some time later the phone rang. Ms. Mari answered it before telling whoever was on the other line to send them on in. Leo's parents came walking into the office, they were also dressed up rather nicely. Leo's mom had a diaper bag slung across her shoulder. Leo stood up and held onto the side of the playpen to steady himself. His Mom smiled upon seeing him. She went over and picked him up.

“Don't you look handsome,” she said running a hand through his hair. Leo wanted to frown. He knew he probably looked kind of dorky in the clothes and with his hair styled the way it was.

“Thank you Mommy,” Leo said, letting the pacifier fall from

his mouth.

“Did you hear that,” Dad chuckled. “Looks like someone has learned some manners.”

“He has,” Mom said with a smile as she plopped the pacifier back in Leo's mouth. “I suppose I should change him before we go,” Mom said patting Leo's butt. Leo couldn't help but frown behind the pacifier. Had the diapers been another thing his parents insisted on?

“No need,” Ms. Mari said. “I changed him a little bit ago.”

“Then I suppose we can go,” Dad said.

Leo then found himself in his car seat in his parents car as they drove. He wondered what it would be like at the courthouse. They were going there to set things as they had been. Whatever investigation had been going on was at an end. Once all was said and done he would be back with his parents permanently, and he would be back at Hawthorne by the day's end. Leo gave a sigh at the inevitable end to it. He remembered back to the day when he had been eighteen walking down to Mr. Gareth's office. It had felt like his life was just about to begin and yet here he was staring down at confirmation that he would never escape his fate. Maybe it really was time to give up. He felt just like he did on that fateful day, when he had been fourteen. Except this time Robert wasn't there. Tanner wasn't here, and neither were Desiree and RJ. He was alone.

They arrived at the courthouse after a couple of hours. Leo's

Dad was carrying him as they walked up the steps. The sky was overcast which perfectly matched Leo's mood. Upon getting through security Leo parents walked in apparently knowing where they were going. They came to a desk where a woman sat.

“Hi we need to check in our son,” Dad said setting Leo on the ground. The woman gave them some papers. After they were done the woman came around the desk.

“Okay honey say goodbye to Mommy and Daddy and then we can go to a really fun place.” the woman said.

Leo looked back at his parents with some confusion. Weren't they going to court?

“While we do boring adult stuff in court, you can play in the daycare room,” Mom said. Leo looked at the woman holding out her hand. He didn't really have a choice. Sitting in a courtroom all day was not at all appealing. Its not like he would be allowed to speak anyways. He took the woman's hand and was lead back into a room. As Leo walked in he saw there were a couple of other kids and a baby in playpen in the corner. The walls were sparsely decorated with cutout out pictures of large animals such as giraffes and gorillas. There were a couple of tables with craft supplies and a large round carpet near some shelves with bins of toys.

“We got lots of fun things in here,” the lady said as she stowed Leo's diaper bag into a cubby. “Anything catching your eye?”

Leo shook his head.

“I can see you're a little shy,” the woman cooed. “Why dont we play with the blocks, I know all little boys like those.”

The woman lead Leo over to the carpet and took a bin out dumping out the wooden blocks in front of him. She sat across from him stacking blocks trying to get him into it. Leo sucked on his pacifier as it seemed like a good excuse to not talk. The baby started crying which caused the lady to leave Leo, to go and attend to the infant. Leo was happy to be left alone. As he sat stacking the blocks with little interest he began to ruminate on things. If what Ms. Mari had said was true then by the end of the day everything was going to be cleared up and Leo would be a Rushton once again permanently. With that he would be back at Hawthorne. Leo had tried to resist yet even now he knew they were getting to him. His last hope had been the investigation, he had hoped that they would dig deep enough to find something out, to see that something stunk at Hawthorne. But the reality was that Hawthorne had successfully covered up what had happened, and his parents were complicit. They were going to get away with it. Leo was going to be turned into an obedient little boy, who couldn't form a thought on his own. His plan had been to fake it of course, to make Hawthorne think they had been successful and then once he was released back to his parents he was going to run away again. Sure it would be hard on his own. But he figured he just had to get away from his parents and then try to contact someone, Desiree, RJ even Robert would be able to help him. But as the weeks had gone on Leo

found his thoughts warping. Thinking on his plan filled him with a deep sense of fear. His mind would shoo it away and fill in with what proper children did. Listen to Mommy and Daddy, Be Respectful to Mommy and Daddy, Be grateful to Mommy and Daddy. Leo found more and more that he wasn't faking it anymore, everything was becoming like a reaction based on instinct. They were winning.

Suddenly something broke Leo out of his stormy thoughts. It was a voice. One of the workers was talking to someone just outside the door. He couldn't hear what they were saying as their voices were muffled. It was a man's voice and he could almost swear he knew it. But that wasn't possible. There was no reason for him to be here. Leo could only surmise he was hearing things, the thoughts of his future making him desperate to delude himself. The worker who had been outside then came walking back in and behind her was another boy. Leo's eyes went wide, it was Tanner! Leo's mouth dropped open as the pacifier fell into his lap. Tanners eyes scanned the room before they fell on Leo. Tanner didn't react, he simply walked over and took a seat next to Leo.

“Hey bro,” Tanner smiled.

“Tanner I uh,” Leo stammered. He was so overcome with feeling that his body simply didn't know what to do with them. Tanner wrapped his arms around Leo's neck and pulled him into a hug. Leo buried his face into his chest. All of Leo's worries about his future seemed to dissipate for the moment. He needed this, a moment of affection from someone he knew cared about him. Tanner released him, as Leo sat back.

Tanner looked Leo over before smirking. Leo suddenly remembered the pacifier in his lap he quickly grabbed it stuffing it into his pocket hopeful that Tanner hadn't seen it. Leo looked back at Tanner who was still smirking.

“What?” Leo said a little flustered.

“You look like a dork,” Tanner said. Leo's eyes went wide. Its not like he disagreed.

“So do you,” Leo accused, noting that Tanner was wearing a white polo with a small sail boat applique on the right breast and a pair of tan khaki's. His hair had also been cut and was now feathered out.

“I know,” Tanner said nodding with a smile. “You should have seen what Mom wanted me to wear,” Tanner said.

“You call them Mom and Dad now,” Leo said, this time it was his turn to smirk.

“Well yeah,” Tanner said nervously rubbing the back of his head. “They're my parents aren't they?”

Leo smiled.

“What are you doing here though?” Leo asked.

“The courtroom is boring, so I come here,” Tanner said. “Plus I thought that maybe you would show up to.”

“Wait you've been here before?” Leo asked.

“Yeah, I mean I don't exactly know grandma yet,” Tanner said

making air quotes in the air. “So Mom and Dad just bring me along with them.”

“But I mean why are you at court?” Leo clarified. “I thought my parents were just here to clear up the mess we caused when we ran away and ended up in foster care, you know to make sure everyone knew that they were my parents.”

“That's not what is happening here,” Tanner said.

“Its not,” Leo said surprised.

“Well duh,” Tanner said. “Mom and Dad are trying to get you back, you didn't think they were just going to give up, did you?”

“Well sort of,” Leo mumbled.

“Don't be stupid Leo,” Tanner sighed. “They want you back.”

“I just didn't think it was possible,” Leo said. “I mean my parents are my real parents. They can't just take me away from them like that.”

“I guess,” Tanner said with a frown. “Mom and Dad have been truthful with me. Steve says they might not have a case, but they wanted to try anyways.”

“Steve?”

“Yeah you know that lawyer guy, they've been working with him to try and get you back.” Tanner explained.

Leo gave a sad look. Honestly he was touched that they were even trying. But part of him was doubtful, to the point of even

trying to muster up hope seemed to be a cruel thing to do to himself.

“It would be great if it worked,” Leo said.

“Yeah,” Tanner softly agreed. Both of them hesitant to even allow themselves the possibility. “Any way how have you been? Your parents must have been mad at you, but hopefully not too bad.”

“I haven't really seen them too much,” Leo said. “They put me back in Hawthorne.”

“Oh yeah,” Tanner said as his face fell a little. “I guess I knew that. But you've been raising hell there, right?” Tanner asked looking a little hopeful. Leo didn't respond only looking a little uncomfortable.

Leo had been doing no such thing. Tanner would probably be mad at him if he told him.

“I don't really want to talk about it,” Leo said. “Its way worse this time.”

Tanner nodded.

“But what about you?” Leo asked. “Are you doing okay.”

“I suppose,” Tanner said. “Its been kind of weird, but I think things are okay. I mean I guess I'm getting used to it. I can see why you had wanted this. I guess I've never really had anything like it. Even with the foster families in the past. They've been really nice to me too. Mom talked to some of the other kids parents and actually invited my friend Gordy

and another kid over for a playdate, I guess you call it," Tanner said smiling as if he was looking back on a fond memory. "At first I was really mad that she had done it. But Dad took us down into the woods and we built a fort out of the sticks and stuff and it ended up being really fun. They also got me signed up for little league, we haven't played a game yet, but the coach says I'm the best batter on the team." Tanner enthused.

Leo listened on with a blank expression.

"But you probably don't want to hear all this," Tanner said waving his hand, worried for a moment that he was rubbing it in Leo's face.

"No," Leo exclaimed. "I like it, hearing that you're happy sort of makes everything else okay, like it was all worth it."

"Leo, thats –"

"I mean it," Leo interjected. "I think I can just carry on, if I know you're all okay."

"Its not okay though," Tanner said as he frowned. "It's really weird not having you there, everybody misses you, even Kaylee. Mom and Dad don't show it, but I notice. Sometimes when I walk past Mom's room I can hear her crying. And after Dad finishes reading to me before bed I see him sometimes, he thinks I'm asleep but I see him go and sit on your bed and he puts a hand on the pillow and he has this real sad look on his face."

"You have to let me go," Leo said. It saddened him to hear

that they were all missing him. He just wanted them to move on and forget about him. He wanted them to all be happy without him. Leo knew there was no way anyone was going to be able to change any of this, this was how it was."

"We went through everything together, how am I just supposed to forget about you." Tanner said his face hardening.

"Please," Leo said softly. "I can't bear you all being sad."

"They're trying to get you back," Tanner replied.

"But they wont," Leo yelped, drawing some curious stares from the daycare workers.

"Lets not think about that," Tanner said looking around a little as he put a hand on Leo's shoulder.

"Lets just use the time we do have."

Leo nodded. Tanner picked up some of the blocks stacking them absentmindedly, neither one of them really having words at their disposal. Each of them knowing that this could be the last time they saw each other.

Once they had used all the blocks to construct some towers they both sat silently looking at them all stacked in a row. Tanner was sitting with his chin in his hand, he looked over at another bin that had some toy cars in it. He took one out rolling it a little on the ground before he sent it shooting off towards the towers knocking one of them into the other.

"Two points," Leo said. Tanner smiled. Before long he and Leo were engaged in a competition. One of them would set

up the blocks and the other one would then shoot the car into them seeing how many they could knock down in one go. It had been Leo's turn as he sent his car rolling off. Three of the towers fell.

“Awww I was close,” he said.

“Looks like I still hold the record at four,” Tanner laughed.

“I'm gonna get' im all next time,” Leo said as he began to stack the blocks for Tanner.

“Leo,” one of the daycare workers called out. “Come here please.”

Leo got up walking over to the daycare worker who took his hand as she began to lead him out of the room. His heart sank as he realized it was time for him to leave. Time for him to go with his parents, back to Hawthorne.

“I don't wanna go,” Leo whined a little. The woman looked down at him with a smile.

“I know you're having fun playing with your new friend, but you need to go for a bit, when you come back you can play more.”

“Come back?” Leo questioned.

“Yep afterwards,” she said bringing him out to the front desk. “This nice man is going to escort you to the judge's office, he wants to meet with you,” the woman said pointing to a tall man in a blazer jacket and an id badge. The man took Leo's hand giving him a warm smile and telling him his name was

Rick. Leo didn't really hear him. He was too busy thinking about what had just been told to him. The judge wanted to speak to him? His parents had told him that he wouldn't be going in the courtroom. As he walked with the man, Leo became nervous. What if they put him on the stand? That would be kind of scary, but then he thought that it would be great. Desi and RJ were in the courtroom, he would get to see them again. But that also meant his parents would be there. He knew seeing them would make it hard for him to speak. Whenever he was around them he couldn't shake all the stuff Hawthorne had been putting in his head. The man and Leo were now in an elevator riding up. Rick looked down at Leo and smiled again noticing Leo fidget a little.

“No reason to be scared,” Rick said. “Just remember to be polite in front of the judge.”

“Okay,” Leo said, in small meek voice. Rick then lead Leo down a hallway to a door. They walked into a large office.

There was a large oak desk in the center and two chairs set in front. There were lots of framed papers on the walls and a large bookcase on the wall. Rick lead Leo to one of the chairs and helped him climb up. They waited in silence for a few moments before the door opened again. A woman in pantsuit walked in. She had a hard stare and her hair was pulled back into a bun, following in was another man who Leo recognized as Steve the lawyer he had met that night when Mr. Gareth had paid them a visit.

“Hey Leo, good to see you again,” Steve said extending his

hand out. “You remember me?”

“Sure,” Leo said shaking the mans hand. The next person to walk in was the judge, easily identifiable by the black robe he was wearing. He came in and sat down behind his desk. He was a portly gentleman with rosy red cheeks and a pair of glasses on his face. Leo could sense the respect that this man commanded.

“You must be Leo,” the judge said giving him pondering stare.

“Yes, your honor,” Leo squeaked out. The judge gave a hearty laugh, which seemed to ease some of the tension Leo was feeling.

“Its good to meet you finally,” the judge said. “I've heard so much about you.”

Leo fidgeted with his finger a little. He didn't know if that was a good thing or not, he just hoped he didn't say something stupid.

“I've heard that you are very rebellious, that you like to challenge authority, that you simply can't control yourself,” the judge said with a dire expression. Leo felt his stomach twist up. “I've also heard you are very kind boy, that you always think about other before yourself and that you are very affectionate.” the judge said. Leo looked up with a deeply touched look. He could tell what his parents had said about him and what Desiree and RJ had said.

“So you see, after hearing all this I wanted to talk to you myself and find out just what kind of child you were.” the

judge said offering Leo a smile. “Now Leo I want you to know that I'm only interested in one thing, the truth, do you think you can tell me the truth?”

“Y-yeah,” Leo stuttered.

“Okay,” the judge said looking at a piece of paper in front of him. “So what do you think about your parents? Do you think you give them a lot of trouble?”

“Umm I guess,” Leo said. The judge had told him he had to tell the truth and if he was being truthful he was nothing but trouble to his parents.

“You don't like listening to them when they tell you something?” the judge asked.

“Its not that,” Leo said. The judge was silent as he continued to look at Leo. “Its just I don't think I can really make them happy. I know what they want from me, and I did try but I couldn't seem to do it...there was something wrong with me.” Leo said sounding a little weepy as his feeling came to the forefront. The judge raised an eyebrow as he sat back in his chair.

“You think they were unhappy with you?” the judge asked.

“Yeah,” Leo said nodding his head. “That's why they sent me away.”

“I see that,” the judge said. “They sent you to a special school, don't you think that was their way of helping you.” Leo shook his head. Helping? No that wasn't the right word.

“They don't want me,” Leo said bringing his knees to his chest. Admitting all of this out loud was making him feel terrible about himself. Somehow it seemed like anyone could see what his parents had done was right. “They wanted me to be a different person.”

The judge shuffled through some papers before reading one for a moment.

“So what about the Egrets? RJ and Desiree, do they like you?”

“Yeah they do,” Leo said instantly unfurling from his ball. “At least I think they do.”

“Oh so how do you feel about them when you think about them?”

Leo closed his eyes bringing up their faces in his mind.

“I feel happy,” Leo smiled. “Like I'm okay.”

“They do lots of fun stuff with you don't they?” the judge said.

“Mhmmm,” Leo enthused. “They let me listen to really cool music, and they got me a guitar, and also I got to try skateboarding and we went and saw lots of cool animals.”

“I guess I can see why they might seem like fun.” the judge said. “You probably want to do lots of fun things with them.”

“But that's not all,” Leo said. “They make me feel better when I'm sad. And when I don't do something right, they help me. They don't make me feel like I'm a screw up. I...” Leo paused. The judge motioned with his hand for Leo to

continue. “Well I just love them a whole lot.”

The judge smiled a little before he picked up more papers looking through them. Leo knew he had to say something, he needed to stand and make his wish known, it was probably the only time he would be allowed to, even if he knew that it probably wouldn't do much good.

“I really want Desire and RJ to be my mommy and daddy,” Leo said with some apprehension. “I think I could make them proud.”

The judge gave Leo an apologetic look. “I think I can see why you would feel that way, but.”

Leo cringed, he knew it was a fools errand.

“We don't get to choose our parents in this life,” the judge continued. “I'm not a magic wizard, Leo. I cant just snap my fingers and give you what you want. I can only do what the law allows me and that means I have to look at the whole picture. Maybe your parents don't do all that fun stuff with you, and maybe they're a little more strict but that is how some parents are.”

“Your honor I would like to bring up,” Steve began before the judge silenced him with a hand.

“We can continue this conversation in the court, counselor,” the judge said. “For right now though I think we have taken up enough of Leo's time, I think he would like to get back to playing in the daycare.”

Rick came over to Leo and took his hand as the judge stood up and went around the desk to shake Leo's hand.

“You did a very good job,” the judge said.

“Thank you, your honor,” Leo said. The judge smiled as he stood back up.

“You were a very brave and polite young man,” the judge said. Leo nodded as he was lead out of the room. As Rick walked him back to the daycare, Leo was at least grateful he had gotten to speak how he felt. Even if the judges last words about choosing parents didn't fill him with confidence. Leo was convinced now that he would be going to sleep tonight at Hawthorne. Getting back to the playroom Tanner was questioning him about everything. Leo didn't know how to respond. It seemed like the judge had listened to him. But despite all that it sounded like it didn't really matter what Leo wanted. There was the rule of law to consider.

“It won't matter,” Leo finally said looking a little despondent. Tanner cocked his head. He didn't like what he was seeing. Leo had regressed, not in age, but in his outlook on life. It reminded Tanner of how Leo had first been when he had met him. It had taken awhile for Leo not to be so mopey, yet he had never shaken it off completely back at Hawthorne. Leo would always have his moments of hopelessness and Tanner had taken it upon himself to help Leo through it, yet now Leo had been all alone at that school, who knows what they had been doing to him.

“Hey let go play over there,” Tanner said pointing at a table.

“They got some play-doh.” Tanner knew Leo liked that kind of stuff. Leo looked at Tanner somewhat surprised.

“You want to go play?” Leo asked.

“Well sure why not?” Tanner said looking unbothered. “Its fun isn't it.”

Leo laughed a little before Tanner looked back at him with a slightly offended look.

“Sorry,” Leo said shaking his head. “I just never thought I'd hear you actually suggest to play with like toys and stuff.”

“Maybe I'm just taking a page out of your book,” Tanner said. “I guess I've come around on it...it is kind of fun,” Tanner mumbled.

“Okay,” Leo smiled as he lead the way over to the table. As the boys played with the play-doh Tanner could see that Leo was cheering up. Tanner was glad to see it. Though Tanner did feel a little bad – lying to Leo like this. The truth was as much as Tanner had told Leo how good things were going for him, that wasn't the truth. Things hadn't been easy for him either.

For the past three weeks Desiree and RJ had been doing everything they could to try and help Tanner out, yet nothing seemed to work. Tanner was downright miserable. He had trouble paying attention in school, he had trouble sleeping at night, and he hadn't been eating much either. Tanner had taken to spending much of his time sitting in the backyard looking off into space, or sitting on the couch in the living

room in silence. Desiree inviting his friends over had been a last ditch effort by her to get him to break out of his funk. Tanner had managed to have some fun that day, yet after they had left he had retreated back. He couldn't even stand to be in his room anymore, except to sleep. It felt so empty without Leo. Part of him wanted to reach out to his new parents but he still felt a little awkward around them. He had only been able to call them by their new titles once or twice, and only if he whispered it.

Things had really come to a breaking point for him however. One night he had woken up during a storm. As he sat up in his bed he found himself begin to sob uncontrollably. Desiree had come into the room apparently having heard him. She had sat with him for a little bit, rubbing his bare back.

“Did the storm scare you?” Desiree had asked gently, thinking that some new fear had manifested in the boy. Tanner shook his head, wiping his eyes.

“I'm fine now,” Tanner had said. Desiree had given a sigh before wrapping him up in a hug pushing his head against her chest.

“No you're not,” she had said. “I really wish you would let me help you.”

Tanner bit his lower lip. He had felt something unfamiliar in himself. He had felt it in the past a couple of times. It scared him in a way, but it didn't necessarily feel like a bad thing.

“The storm reminded me of Leo, I let him sleep in the bed

with me last time cause he was scared." Tanner finally said. "This room feels empty without him, here."

Desiree had released him and stroked his hair a little before standing up. She then lifted him up under his armpits into her arms. Tanner had tried to say something yet Desiree had only responded with some gentle shushing as she patted his back. She had brought him into her room and placed him in the bed between her and RJ. Tanner had tried to insist on going back to his own bed. RJ had rolled over and told him to try and get some sleep. With that Tanner had gone quiet. At first he had felt incredibly awkward in between the two of them. Not too mention he only slept in his underwear. Yet after a bit he actually started to feel okay. He rolled over onto his side and curled up. Being between the two of them made him feel safe.

It had been a breakthrough for him in many ways. The next day he had transitioned to calling them Mom and Dad without any problem. He had even been feeling up to going and getting that haircut. Desiree had taken him to the store afterwards and Tanner had picked out some new clothes and toys that seemed to fall in line with the taste of a six year old. It felt easier for Tanner to accept their affection and he didn't tense up anymore when they tried to hug him. That night RJ had decided to start reading a book Tanner had picked out at the store. It was a children chapter book about a bunch of kids that were also secret agents. RJ had been surprised when Tanner had rested his head on the man's chest as he listened to him read, before drifting off to sleep.

Even though Tanner had come into his new life, he couldn't

be happy, none of them could. They were all going around holding themselves together with sticks and tape. They couldn't be happy until their family was back together.

The boys continued to play with one another for awhile, some time later the workers had turned on a movie for the kids. Leo sat next to Tanner on the carpet watching with juice boxes in front of them. Tanner looked over at a one moment to see Leo fighting to keep his eyes open.

“You tired?” Tanner asked. “You could rest on one of those beanbags.”

Leo shook his head. “This might be the last time we're together, I don't want to waste it by sleeping.”

Tanner gave a smile as he put an around Leo.

“Tanner,” one of the workers called out. “Your parents are here to get you. Leo so are yours.”

Leo felt his heart sink as he and Tanner looked at each other with saddened looks.

“We'll go together,” Tanner said grabbing Leo's hand. They were lead out to the desk. Leo's heart leapt when he saw Desiree and RJ standing near the desk. He looked around and didn't see his parents anywhere.

“Ready to go Tanner?” RJ asked motioning him over.

“Yep,” Tanner said pulling Leo along.

“Oh look who it is,” RJ said giving Leo a smirk. Leo wanted

nothing more to go jump into RJ's arms but he knew his parents would disapprove. It was still nice to be able to see them though.

“Desi look who it is,” RJ said as if Leo was some old friend they were surprised to see.

“Oh hey Leo, how's it going?” Desiree said.

“Um good,” Leo said.

“Did you and Tanner hang out together in there?” she asked.

“Yeah, we did.” Leo said. He was a little taken aback by their reaction. He was hoping they would have been happier to see him. To wrap him up in a hug. But he figured they were just treating him as he was. He wasn't their kid.

“Did you have a good time?” RJ asked.

“Yeah it was fun,” Leo said.

“That's good to hear,” Desiree said. “Its nice to see brother's getting along.”

Leo's brow furrowed.

“Yeah,” RJ enthused. “The best of friends.”

“Mhmm,” Desiree agreed. “And look out how handsome they both look right now, we should definitely have them take a picture together when we get back home.”

Leo's mouth opened a little.

“Wait, you mean,” Tanner yelped.

“Yep,” RJ said. “That is, if its okay with Leo?”

Leo couldn't believe what he was hearing. If this was some sort of joke he wasn't going to think it was funny.

“I-I can?” Leo stuttered. Desiree gave him a warm smile as she knelt down stretching her arms out.

“Whaddya say kiddo?” she asked. “Want to be an Egret again?”

Leo frowned as tears began to stream down his face. He ran into Desiree's arm as she wrapped him up. It was the best hug he had ever received.

“I missed you so much,” Leo cried as he nuzzled into Desiree.

“We missed you too munchkin,” RJ said as he scratched the back of Leo's head. Leo lifted up his head.

“But what about the court?” Leo asked.

“We got you back,” Desiree said. “Permanently.”

Leo smiled. It was over, it was all finally over. He didn't need to worry about his parents anymore, or Hawthorne. He was going to be together with Tanner too. Not too mention he had his Mommy and Daddy who loved him very much.

“Ready to go home?” Desiree asked.

“Lets go home,” Leo said.

Chapter 26

To Build A Nest: Chapter 26 - Chapter 26

Parting ways.

Leo had his arms wrapped tightly around Desiree as they walked down the steps of the courthouse. He had already gotten so many hugs and kisses from Desiree and RJ but he was ready for more. Leo had even hugged Tanner and kissed him on the cheek in a moment of unbridled joy. Tanner had reacted with a scrunched up face but he allowed Leo his display of affection. Walking through the parking lot Leo spotted his parents at their own car. They looked up and saw him across the way. They didn't look sad or even angry, it was almost as if they didn't care.

“I need to get down,” Leo said.

“Sure,” Desiree said setting Leo on the ground. “What do you need?”

“I need to go talk to someone,” Leo said.

“Who?” RJ asked looking around.

“Them,” Leo said pointing at his parents. Desiree's face became concerned.

“Leo, I don't know if that's a good idea,” she said.

“I need to,” Leo said looking down a little.

“Okay,” Desiree nodded. “I'll go with you.”

“No,” Leo said shaking his head. “Alone.”

Desiree went to object before RJ put a hand on her shoulder. He gave her an understanding look before nodding.

“Fine, if you feel like you need to,” Desiree said. “But if they try anything I'm coming over.”

Leo nodded and walked off. Something in him was propelling him forward. He needed to do this. To finally bury this part of his life. His parents stood watching him walk over. His mother's arms crossed as if she were watching a misbehaved child walking up to admit their wrongdoing. Leo stood before them. No one spoke for a moment as they silently looked at one another.

“Well,” his mother said. “Is there something you wanted to say?”

“Are you okay with this?” Leo asked. There was a slight guffaw from his mother.

“What we're okay with never seemed to matter to you,” his Dad said.

“You could never just listen could you?” his Mother said.

“I listened a lot,” Leo said. “You never listened to me.”

" And why should we?” his Mother replied.

“We were your parents,” his Dad said. “It was our job to put

you on the right path. Not listen to your objections or grousing."

Leo shook his head a little. It was uncanny how in tune with one another his parents were, it was almost as if he were speaking to only one person. It was no wonder why the two of them had decided to get married.

"We know it wasn't always easy, but that's life Leonard, its a hard world out there. If you want to get ahead you need to be willing to put in the work. So we knew we had to push you and make sure you were on a path towards success." his mother said. The way she contextualized Leo's upbringing almost sounded like it had been noble.

"I didn't need you to push me," Leo said. "I just wanted you to support me once in awhile."

"Support?" his Mom questioned with a raised eyebrow.

"Who in the world put a roof over your head," his Dad said. "Fed you, clothed you, and made sure to give you every opportunity to better yourself."

"It certainly wasn't those people over there," His Mother said pointing towards Desiree and RJ.

Leo was silent for a moment before he looked back up at his parents.

"Did you even want me?" he asked. His parents seemed to tense up for a moment giving each other a look.

"You can be honest," Leo said. "Not like it matters anymore."

“Having a child was never part of our plan,” his Dad said bluntly. “But that doesn't matter, we took our duty as parents seriously.”

“That's right,” Mom agreed. “We were going to make sure to raise you into an adult that would find their place in the world.”

Leo thought for a moment. His suspicions had been right. Leo had been a deviation from their plan. He had been a threat to their perfect image of what their lives would entail, and so they had made it their mission to make him fit, no matter what.

“I guess you did your duty,” Leo said. “You raised me until I was eighteen that was your obligation as parents.”

His parents were quiet as they pondered his words.

“So I guess its time for me to go out in the world and find my place.” Leo said.

“That's a very nice outlook,” Mom said sarcastically. “But do you really think things will work out for you? Everything we tried to do for you, you have squandered even now, when we decided to give you another shot, you just can't help your selfishness.”

“Thats fine,” Leo said smiling. “I've found some other people who will help me out.”

“You really think they can give you everything we did?” his Dad asked.

“Maybe not,” Leo said. “But you two are crappy parents. I mean you really didn't have a clue.” Leo watched his parents look back with somewhat astonished faces. He had never in his life been so forward with them. “But I guess I should thank you, if it wasn't for you I would never have gotten here. My Mommy and Daddy are great, and so is my big brother, I also have a little sister too. I think with them I can be happier than I ever would have been with you.”

“Then I guess we go our separate ways,” his Dad said shrugging as he turned around to go to his car door. His Mother followed suit as she opened her car door she looked back at him one last time.

“What a waste of time,” she said shaking her head. Leo walked a little ways back. He waved as they pulled out and drove off.

Leo walked back to his family.

“You alright?” RJ asked picking him up off the ground. Leo had been hurt by some of the things they had said. Some part of him had wanted to hear that they had actually cared for him, but he could see now how they had viewed him. He wasn't a part of their lives, he had been part of the scenery.

“Yeah, I guess,” Leo said.

“Want to talk about it?” RJ asked. Leo shook his head and rested his head on RJ's shoulder.

“Nothing to talk about,” Leo said. RJ patted him on the back as they made their way back to the car. As they drove RJ

mentioned something about getting some food and in short order they were at a restaurant. Standing outside was an older woman holding Kaylee in her arms.

“Well there you all are,” the plump woman said with a smile. “Me and this little lady were about to get started without you.”

“Thanks for meeting us Mom,” RJ chuckled as he took Kaylee into his arms. He turned around facing Leo. “Look whose here Kaylee,” he cooed. The baby looked at Leo for a moment before her face erupted into a big smile.

“Oh she missed her big brother,” Desiree cooed as she brought Leo over to Kaylee.

“Hi Kaylee,” Leo said as he stretched over from Desiree's arms to hug his little sister. The little girl let out a squeal.

“So these are the newest members of the family?” Grandma said putting her hands on her hips.

Leo was set on the ground next to Tanner.

“Mom, this is Tanner and Leo,” RJ said placing a hand on each boy's head.

“What strapping young lads,” the lady said beaming from ear to ear.

“This is your grandma Egret, boys,” Desiree said. Both boys gave a sort of bashful wave, which elicited a booming laugh from Grandma.

“I suppose we'll just have to get to know each other over

dinner," Grandma said. With that everyone began to make their way inside, that was all except for Leo who stayed back a little. Desiree noticed he was being somewhat hesitant and sent RJ in with Tanner before doubling back to Leo.

"Everything okay?' she asked. Leo nodded his head, yet his expression was muddled. Something was bothering him a little. Everything had happened so fast, yet now the adrenaline was leaving him and some thoughts were beginning to come forward, thoughts that seemed to make him worry. Was all this real? Here he was, seemingly having gotten what he wanted, yet things like this didn't happen to him, surely there had to be a catch?

"I can really stay, right?" Leo asked.

"Of course you can," Desiree said kneeling down in front of him. "That's what you wanted, isn't it?"

Leo nodded. "Yeah, more than anything, but I didn't think it was possible. I just don't get how. If my parents took me back... then how?"

"Well, when they did what they did with Hawthorne, they gave you away, they gave you to Hawthorne. But then you and Tanner escaped and got yourselves into foster care with me and RJ. That's what gave us a chance to argue that you should be with us."

"But they were my parents, if they wanted me back then shouldn't the judge have done that? At least that's what I thought he was going to do." Leo said furrowing his brow,

poking any holes he could in what had happened. He then looked up at Desiree with a saddened look. “Did they even say they wanted me back in court?”

Desiree was rendered silent.

“I mean I know they didn't want me,” Leo said as he continued to reason with himself. “They wanted whatever Hawthorne was changing me into, but still, they were fighting for me, weren't they?”

“Leo I don't know,” Desiree said. “I don't remember everything they said in the court. But I think whatever you said to the judge played a big part in his decision.”

“I guess I got lucky then,” Leo said with a smile. “Looks like people really did the right thing for me.”

“Luck had nothing to do with it.” Desiree stated. “Leo I need you to understand something. You did this.”

Leo blinked a little not really understanding what Desiree was saying.

“Don't you get it?” she asked with a sigh. “As far as I see it, you've been fighting for a long time, maybe you didn't know exactly what for but I think you knew there was something better for you than what you had. Everything you've accomplished was because you decided to act. When you didn't give up after being shrunk, when you and Tanner ran away, when you were able to convince me of the truth, and when you looked at the situation around you and made a choice about your future, and lets not forget when you went

before the judge and showed him that you knew what would be the best outcome for you," Desiree listed as she stroked the boy's hair. "Leo you did those things. You built this life for yourself, and I think its high time you enjoy it, without worrying about what was and instead concentrate on what is."

Leo thought for a moment, he couldn't really wrap his head around a lot of what Desiree was saying. but the essence of what she was saying wasn't lost on him. The things he wanted and cared about were now his.

"Mommy?" Leo asked.

"What?"

"Can I sit by you in the restaurant?" Leo asked.

"Of course you can," Desiree chuckled.

In the restaurant, Grandma seemed intent on getting to know the boys. Leo was happy to talk about all the things he liked. He seemed pleased that Grandma seemed to like hearing about it. Tanner was being a little shy. Though she had managed to get him to start talking a little when she asked about little league. When the food came Leo ate quickly. He was incredibly hungry, since he hadn't had much of anything to eat since that morning.

"This one's got a healthy appetite," Grandma laughed.

"Slow down, honey," Desiree said wiping the corner of his mouth a little. Leo did slow down his pace realizing he was making a mess on his face. He then came to a stop as he felt a

pain in his stomach. He immediately panicked. He had forgotten all about the diaper he was wearing and the difficulties he had been having. It was then that he realized he was already wet. How had he not noticed before? Leo tried to hold back, but his lack of control made that impossible. He felt the diaper fill up. Leo didn't know what to do. His diaper was now soiled and completely wet. He didn't want anyone finding out about this. Desiree then came to a pause setting down her fork.

“I think we have a little stinker,” she announced. Leo felt his face flush red. Yet Desiree didn't even look at him as she got up from her seat and gathered Kaylee into her arms and headed off towards the bathroom. Leo let out a sigh of relief. He did feel a little bad that his sister was getting blamed, yet he knew that no one would think a thing about it. She was a baby after all, that's what they did. But he was a big boy, he shouldn't be doing stuff like that. Leo tried to remain as inconspicuous as possible. It seemed nobody at the table really could sense there was anything wrong. Desiree came back a bit later setting Kaylee into her highchair and sliding back into the boot next to Leo.

“I guess it was just some gas,” Desiree said. Leo sat frozen. Just what was he going to do? Everyone continued with their meals. Desiree however could still smell something. She placed a hand on Leo's back. Leo felt his heartbeat quicken as he felt her hand move down towards his waistband. He felt his breath catch in his throat when he felt Desiree pull his tucked in shirt out from his pants. He gave a little whimper

when she then pulled his waistband back a little. He looked up at her with pitiful eyes knowing that she had discovered the source of the smell. Desiree leaned down and gave him a kiss on top of his head. Without a word she got him out of the booth and walked off. Surprisingly she went outside of the restaurant to the parking lot.

“Leo honey,” Desiree said. “Are you wearing a diaper?”

Leo nodded his head sadly. He felt completely humiliated.

“Oh sweetie,” Desiree cooed as she laid his head onto her shoulder.

“They made me,” Leo hiccuped. “I can't help it no more.”

“Shh,” Desiree shushed as she rubbed his back. “We'll fix this okay, so no worries.”

Desiree looked around spotting a pharmacy across the street. Walking over took no time and soon enough she was in the diaper aisle she pulled down a package of pull-ups and had Leo hold them while she also bough a package of diapers in Leo's size along with some wipes.. She paid for them before taking Leo into the bathroom and unfolding the changing station.

“Why did you buy both?” Leo asked. “I just need the diapers,” he said with some shame.

“Not at all,” Desiree said as she tore open the diapers and plucked one out. “You are officially potty training young man,” she said with smile. “But it looks like we're starting

from scratch and that's okay." Desiree said as she got Leo's pants off and pushed his shirt up over his stomach. "I know you can do it," she said giving a little tickle to Leo's tummy which made him giggle a little. As she got him cleaned up Leo found the experience so much different than it had been in the past. He didn't feel embarrassed. Desiree was so gentle and he felt like he was truly being cared for. She wasn't doing this to demean him.

She had finished as she lifted Leo off the changing table and set him on the ground as she began to gather up her things into the plastic bag. Leo's thumb then wandered up to his mouth as he began to suck. Desiree turned around to see him. She smiled as she knelt down and softly pulled his thumb away.

"You'll mess up your teeth like that," she said with a wink. Leo nodded, seeing some sense to it, somewhere in his thoughts he knew something like that was true. Another idea popped into his mind as he pulled the pacifier out of his pocked and plopped it into his mouth. It seemed to be the perfect solution to him. Desiree looked at him for a moment. She then pulled the pacifier out of his mouth holding it up in her hand.

"Leo do you think you really need this?" she asked. Leo looked a little confused.

"Is it bad?" Leo asked feeling a little nervous. Desiree shook her head.

"No, not really," Desiree said shaking her head. "Its just that

pacifiers are more of a baby thing, I think you're a big boy."

Leo nodded along. Of course pacifiers were for babies, like his little sister for instance. He was a big boy, he was potty training after all.

"Yeah, I'm a big kid," Leo said. Desiree smiled as she gave the pacifier back to him.

"Alright, then why don't you throw this thing away." she said pointing to the trash can. Leo walked over and threw away the pacifier, he walked away dusting his hands. It actually made him happy to do so.

"Good job," Desiree said as she took Leo's hand. They walked back to the restaurant hand in hand as Leo skipped along.

Back at the restaurant both boys got some ice cream which they dug into getting ice cream all over their mouths. When the meal had finally come to an end they said their goodbyes to Grandma, Leo even gave her a big hug.

Leo felt excited on the ride home. He couldn't wait to get back to his room. Time seemed to be moving too slowly for him. He asked if "they were there yet" maybe fifty times. Finally they were pulling into the driveway. As soon as Leo was released from his car seat he dashed inside. Getting to his room he could see that things had changed. Tanner's side had a lot more stuff now. There were some posters for the Dragon's baseball team on the wall and some more toys in a bin. There was also a baseball uniform hung up on the closet

door. However Leo only had one thing on his mind. He went straight to the cage on the ground opening it up and pulling Timothy into his lap.

“I missed you so much,” Leo said cuddling his pet. The rabbit seemed happy to see him as well as it stretched up sniffing Leo's face with its whiskers. He spent some time with Timothy before putting him back in the cage and feeding him a couple of treats for good measure. Leo then went and stood in the middle of room looking at the contrasting sides. Leo's side of the room looked bare in comparison. RJ came walking into the room followed by Tanner.

“You okay there Leo?” RJ asked.

“Huh,” Leo asked looking up at his Dad.

“You look a little sad,” RJ noted.

“Oh,” Leo said not realizing he had looked any sort of way.

“We already have plans for tomorrow to take you to the store,” RJ said mussing up his hair. “So your side of the room will look just how you want it.”

“I want a Toxic Sludge poster,” Leo said smiling as he pointed to a spot on the wall he would put it.

“Yeah,” RJ said with a proud smile. “We'll definitely have to get one of those.”

Leo smiled imagining how it would look in his head.

“I think its time for you two to get in the bath, anyone have a

problem sharing tonight?” RJ asked.

“I don't,” Tanner said already pulling off his shirt.

“Mommy and Daddy give you baths?” Leo asked looking at Tanner with a surprised look.

“N-not really,” Tanner mumbled looking a little embarrassed.

“We just keep an eye on him,” RJ said with a chuckle. Tanner gave a side eyed glance at RJ but didn't say anything more.

In the bathroom Tanner was already in the water while the tub was filling with water. He was pushing around a small boat, not seeming to be embarrassed in the slightest. Leo however was far more hesitant to take off his clothes having remembered he was wearing a diaper. It was only when he remembered it that he felt it was a little wet again.

“Aren't you getting in?” Tanner asked looking at Leo who was standing next to RJ, who was sat upon the toilet with a towel over his shoulder.

“C'mon tiger lets get those clothes off,” RJ said as he pulled the sweater vest up over Leo's head. As RJ started to pull up Leo's shirt, the boy grabbed at it pulling it back down.

“Can I not take a bath?” Leo asked with a pout on his face. RJ tilted his head shaking it lightly.

“Sorry Leo, you gotta take one, its bath night.” he said as he pulled Leo's shirt off. It was when he saw the waistband of the diaper sticking up over Leo's pants that he realized why Leo was being so shy. RJ smiled.

“Off come the pants,” RJ said helping Leo out of his pants and making no mention of the diaper to show that it wasn't a big deal. Leo was grateful getting into the tub that neither of them had made any comments. RJ helped Leo and Tanner wash their hair. Tanner was able to wash himself while RJ soaped up Leo. After the bath the boys were ushered into the hallway with towels tied around their waist. Desiree came walking down the hallway and scooped Leo up into her arms.

“All clean?” she asked giving him a kiss.

“Super clean,” Leo cheered throwing his arms up in the air.

“All right then lets get you ready for bed.” she said. Leo was then carried to Kaylee's room instead of his own. Leo instantly became worried. Was he going to have to sleep in here now because he wore diapers?

“Can't I sleep in my own bed?” Leo asked as his lip quivered.

“Where else would you sleep,” Desiree said giving him a confused look as she laid him down on the changing table. “We're just going to get your diaper and pajamas on first.”

“Oh okay,” Leo said breathing a sigh of relief. He guessed that made sense. All the stuff was already in here anyways. Desiree got Leo into a fresh diaper and then helped him into a pair of blue shorts and a white pajama shirt that had the paw patrol on it. Leo saw himself in the mirror as they walked past. The shorts did not hide the bulk of the diaper at all, and the back was sticking up over the waistband prominently pushing the shirt up a little. He didn't seem to mind too much.

Coming into the room, Leo was met by quite a sight.

Tanner was in just a pair of mega ranger themed undies jumping up and down on his bed. RJ was stood in the middle of the room with his back turned as he folded up some clothes on the ground.

“Hey Dad, catch,” Tanner shouted as he leapt off the bed directly onto RJ's back. RJ stumbled a little but then stood up straight with Tanner hanging onto his neck. He grabbed Tanner's arms and pulled him up and over his shoulders. He then lifted Tanner into the air and slammed him onto his bed with a fake choke slam as Tanner laughed.

“A new challenger approaches,” RJ said turning to face Leo. The boys face lit up as he ran away with a delighted squeal. RJ caught him and slammed him onto his own bed just as he had done to Tanner. Leo jumped up.

“Do it again,” he shouted jumping up and down. RJ smiled as he picked Leo back up and slammed him down again.

“Okay boys,” Desiree tutted. “That's enough wrestling its time to calm down.”

RJ grabbed a book and sat on Tanner's bed putting his feet up.

“Alright lets see what the kids spy agency is doing tonight?” RJ said opening up the book.

“They found the jewels but then the evil syndicate ambushed them,” Tanner reminded RJ as he rested his head on RJ's shoulder.

“Can you start over?” Leo asked sitting on his bed. Tanner looked up at him from across the room as if Leo had asked for something ridiculous.

“We can't,” Tanner said. “We're already halfway through.”

“But I won't know whats happening,” Leo whined.

“We're not starting over,” Tanner said furrowing his brow.

“Tanner relax,” RJ said. Desiree then sat down next to Leo putting a hand on his shoulder.

“Leo its okay,” she said as she tucked him in. “They'll read their book and we can read something together over here.”

“Like what?” Leo asked. Desiree got up and grabbed a couple of books from the bookshelf. “How about these?” she asked showing Leo some picture books.

“Okay,” Leo said a little disappointed. He was happy to have someone read him something, but he still wished he could join in with Tanner and RJ.

Leo snuggled with Desiree as she read him a Clifford the Big Red Dog book, which Leo found he enjoyed immensely. After a couple more books he was getting sleepy. Desiree put the book she was reading aside. She leaned down and kissed him.

“Good night, I love you,” she said. Leo gave her a sleepy smile.

“Love you too,” he said.

RJ told Tanner it was time for bed as he placed a book mark into the book. Tanner put his head onto his pillow and pulled the covers up to his chin. A small bit of anxiety hit him. This part was something he had not been able to get comfortable with yet.

“Love ya bud,” RJ said ruffling up his hair.

“Y-yeah,” Tanner said awkwardly. RJ gave him a smile before getting up. He watched as RJ went over to Leo and told him how much he loved him.

“I love you Daddy,” Leo said as he reached up and hugged his Dad. RJ then gave him a peck on his cheek which elicited a small giggle from Leo.

Desiree was knelt down in front of Tanner. She kissed him on the cheek.

“Love you big guy,” she cooed.

“Thanks,” Tanner said giving her a small smile. After that the light was turned off and the nightlight was plugged in and the parents left. Tanner laid in his bed looking up at the ceiling. He felt guilty, why couldn't he say it? Why couldn't he tell them he loved them?

“Hey Leo,” Tanner said into the darkened room. “You awake?” Tanner heard some rustling as Leo turned to look at him.

“Mhmmm,” Leo said with his eyes still closed.

“How do you do that?” Tanner asked.

“Do what?” Leo asked.

“Say I love you to them.” Tanner replied. Leo was silent for a moment then just shrugged.

“Because I do love them,” he said. “Don't you?”

“Well yeah,” Tanner said feeling a little awkward even admitting as much.

“Then you just say it,” Leo replied in a sleepy state, before turning his back to Tanner and falling back to sleep. Tanner frowned. Of course he had tried to to do that. He did want to tell them that he loved them back, but every time he tried to say it his tongue seemed to go all numb and loopy. Tanner closed his eyes with a sigh. If Leo could do it, they why couldn't he? Tanner resolved to find some way to say it. He just had too. He wanted them to know the truth.

Chapter 27

To Build a Nest: Chapter 27 - Chapter 27

No Secrets

Desiree was sat at the table with her friend Cindy. The two women were catching up over some tea. Desiree was showing her pictures from the party they had thrown the day they had officially adopted Tanner and Leo.

“This one is too cute,” Cindy gushed holding up a picture of the two boys sitting next to one another with Kaylee in between them.

“That one is definitely going on the mantle,” Desiree said.

“I'm just so glad everything worked out,” Cindy said. “You know better than most, we don't get many cases that turn out this perfectly.”

Desiree nodded. She took a sip of her tea before setting down her cup.

“There is one thing I did want to ask,” Desiree stated.

“Is it about the case Steve brought against Hawthorne?” Cindy asked, although she didn't need Desiree's nod to confirm. “Well as you know things are still developing, but the school is definitely shut down. That Mr. Gareth is in a lot of hot water, he is being brought up on multiple counts of

adoption fraud, not too mention all the mistreatment that's been uncovered.

“He'll probably wriggle out of it,” Desiree said with some ire.

“Not a chance,” Cindy said. “All of the lower rank and file employees are turning on the higher ups. By the time all is said and done most of it is going to fall on him. Even if he takes a plea deal he will still be looking at several years behind bars.”

“He deserves worse than that,” Desiree said bitterly.

“Its causing a lot of work that's to be sure,” Cindy sighed. “We've already reversed many of the adoptions.” Cindy mentioned before she gave a ponderous look to Desiree. “You know none of this would have happened if it wasn't for your boys.” Cindy smiled. “I mean the only reason people started looking into Hawthorne's business practices was because of Leo's court case, and that wouldn't have happened if they hadn't made a break for it.”

“I'm just happy that place is going down,” Desiree said.

“Steve said it would be helpful if they could give a statement,” Cindy said.

“Oh so this wasn't just a social visit?” Desiree smirked.

“I only said I would ask,” Cindy said, putting her hands up in front of her.

“I hate to disappoint him,” Desiree sighed. “But I don't think that will be happening.”

Desiree knew the media was starting to pick up on the story. She had already talked to RJ about going forward with their story, but they had both decided against it. Still they had discussed it with the boys. Leo didn't want anything to do with it. Whatever had changed within him after talking to his parents had been enough for him. He was content to move on with his new life. Tanner had also been hesitant. He said he would do it only if it meant that Mr. Gareth and the other people got in trouble. As it stood now that was going to happen whether or not he said anything. Desiree could see the advantages to not putting themselves in the spot light. Whatever Hawthorne had done, had been enough to make it so that no one would ever know that the two boys had ever been older – and that was a blessing in disguise.

It allowed them to live normal lives. Maybe that would all be unraveled with the investigation, but as it stood now neither of them would have to worry about being made into spectacles for people to gawk at. They could go about their lives without the added scrutiny or baggage.

“The offer is on the table,” Cindy said. “Steve just thought the boys would want to.”

“Me and RJ just want one thing for them,” Desiree said. “We just want them to be able to grow up in peace.”

“That might be the best thing for them,” Cindy nodded. She then looked over at the clock. “Speaking of the boys, don't you have to go pick them up soon?

“Oh they get dropped off,” Desiree said. “We got Leo into an

afternoon preschool session and the school bus does pick up there since its so close to the school, so the boys can ride home together."

"Oh convenient," Cindy smiled as she got up from her seat. "I should get going, but seriously you should come out some night with the girls, take a night off from Mom duty," she said.

"That sound fun, I'll see if RJ can take the kids alone for a night soon," she said. The ladies hugged as Cindy left.

It wasn't long before Desiree heard the front door open.

"Mommy, we're home," Leo shouted as she heard him kick off his shoes and then come barreling into the kitchen jumping straight into her lap for a big hug.

"How was preschool today?" Desiree asked as she cuddled him.

"It was fun," Leo said jumping off her lap to show her a picture he had colored.

"Oh Leo its beautiful," Desiree smiled. "You are such an artist."

"And look," Leo said pulling his shorts down to show his pull-up. "I'm dry."

"That's a whole week," Desiree said with a look of faux shock. "I think starting next week you can start going to school in your undies."

"Just like a big kid!," Leo exclaimed pulling his shorts back

up.

“Exactly,” Desiree said booping Leo on the nose, before getting up and grabbing plate with some Oreos on it off of the counter. “This is for you and your brother, think you can take it to the living room without spilling?” She said handing the plate to Leo.

“Mhmmm,” Leo nodded. “I'm a big kid,” he said as he slowly shuffled out of the kitchen being careful with the plate. Desiree heard the tv turn on a few moments later. Tanner then came walking into the kitchen with his backpack.

“Hey hun, how was school, did show and tell go good?” she asked seeing Tanner had his signed baseball in his hand.

“I guess,” Tanner said placing the ball on the counter. “Ms. Hollis found a video of me catching the ball on the computer and she showed it to the class.”

“I didn't know there was a video,” Desiree said a little surprised.

“Everyone thought I made a good catch,” Tanner said.

“We'll have to show your Dad when he gets home,” Desiree suggested. “So lets see that folder,” Desiree then said.

Tanner gave a small frown as he took his backpack off and retrieved his red take home folder. He plopped it down on the table. Before beginning to walk off.

“Tanner come here,” Desiree said motioning him over. Tanner gave a sigh as he rolled his head yet still walking over to

Desiree. As soon as he was close enough she reached out and grabbed him pulling him onto her lap.

“What are you doing?” Tanner said trying to pull away, yet Desiree held him tight around his stomach.

“We're supposed to go through this together, you know the drill,” Desiree chuckled. Tanner seemed to always try and get out of going through the folder with her and RJ. Yet once they got him talking about the contents he seemed happy enough. She wondered for a moment why he was being so standoffish about it. “Did you get in trouble today? Is there a note I'm gonna have to sign?” Desiree asked.

“No,” Tanner grumbled.

“Then lets see what we got,” Desiree said as she opened the folder. The first thing was a math worksheet that had a gold star sticker at the top. As Desiree looked it over she saw that they were learning how to add double digit numbers together. Tanner had only gotten one wrong.

“Hey you got almost all of these right,” Desiree said.

“I just added that one wrong,” Tanner said pointing to the one with a red X by it.

“You'll remember for next time I'm sure,” Desiree said.

“Probably,” Tanner said sounding self assured at the moment. Desiree then took out the next thing. It was a piece of paper with other bits of colored construction paper glued to it in different colors.

“And what's this?” Desiree asked.

“We made that in art class today,” Tanner said. Desiree flipped the paper around not really sure which way was up and which way was down.

“Is it supposed to be something?” Desiree asked.

“Not really,” Tanner said. “The teacher said it was abstract, so its not supposed to look like anything.”

“I see,” Desiree said, as she continued to look at the art project. “You know I really like the colors you chose, its soothing,” she said with a smile.

“You think?” Tanner said thoughtfully.

“Most definitely,” Desiree said. “I think we're going to put this one up on the fridge.”

“If you want,” Tanner said trying to sound like he didn't care, yet Desiree caught the small smile on his face. Desiree then took out the last thing in the folder.

“What's this she asked holding it out in front of them. Tanner let out a startled squeak as he grabbed it hastily from Desiree's hands and holding it close to his chest.

“I didn't know this was in here,” he said.

“Tanner, let me see,” Desiree said trying to pull it away from him yet Tanner maintained his grip. Desiree then noticed there had been a post-it note attached that had flown off when Tanner had grabbed it. She picked it up.

“Make sure to show this to your Mom and Dad,” Desiree read out loud. Tanner gave a groan. “Whats with you?” Desiree asked.

“I-its embarrassing, okay,” Tanner said.

“You really think I would make fun of you?” Desiree asked. “It sounds like whatever it is your teacher thought I would want to see it,” she said as she rubbed Tanner's arms as if coaxing him to let his grip go. Tanner gave a muddled look before setting the paper down flat on the table.

“Fine, you can read it,” he said sounding as if she was forcing him to eat something gross. Desiree picked up the paper holding it out in front of both of them. On the paper were some questions and Tanner's childish scrawl answering the questions. Underneath Tanner's writing the teacher had written out in pen what he had wrote albeit without the spelling mistakes and in much neater handwriting.

At the top of the paper was the title “All About Me” and there were lots of questions that asked his favorite color, favorite food and similar sorts of things. Near the bottom was a question that asked “who is your hero?” Tanner had written “my parents.”

Desiree was shocked. She had thought for sure he would have put a favorite baseball player or a character from a tv show. The next question asked why. As Desiree read what Tanner wrote she felt a little knot well up in her throat.

"They make me feel happy, and help me when I feel sad. I

think they're really great. "

The question after it however shocked Desiree. It asked what he would say to his hero if he could only say one thing. Tanner had written out a short answer all it said was I love you.

“Tanner,” Desiree said pausing for a moment. “Did you really write this all on your own?”

“Ms. Hollis said we had to be honest, so I wrote the truth,” he said with a shy mumble.

“I think its very sweet, you know,” Desiree said as she hugged Tanner and cuddled him close so that he was resting against her. “ I don't know why you wouldn't want to show me this.”

Tanner head had slipped down into the crook of Desiree's arm. He looked up at her with a muddled expression.

“I don't know,” he said in response. “I know you guys say it all the time, but I can't.”

“Does it make you uncomfortable?” Desiree asked giving him a reassuring look, telling Tanner that he could say what was ever on his mind.

“Not really,” Tanner mumbled. “I wanted to say it, but I just couldn't, it felt like it was a secret or something...like we shouldn't say it or something,” Tanner said feeling a little frustrated that he couldn't quite say exactly what he was feeling. As if he didn't have the right words at his disposal.

“You think its a secret?” Desiree asked.

“Something like that,” Tanner said with a huff. “It just felt like if I said it, that something bad would happen.”

Desiree felt saddened to hear this. She was pretty sure she had some idea of why Tanner would feel that way. Every time in Tanner's life he had shown that he cared about something it had been taken from him. She could see why he started to guard such things. He couldn't let the world know, as if it was ready to continue its cruel joke on him at a moment's notice.

“How we feel about each other isn't a secret,” Desiree said gently. Everybody already knows even if we don't say it.”

“Maybe,” Tanner said.

“Here, I'll prove it,” Desiree said. “Hey Leo come here for a second,” she called out.

“I can't,” Leo shouted from the living room. “I'm watching my favorite show.”

“I have a secret to tell you,” Desiree said with a tantalizing tone. They heard some shuffling as Leo came running into the kitchen. He stood at the other end of the table with wide eyes and some oreo on the corner of his mouth, completely intrigued by the idea of being told a secret. He loved secrets after all.

“What is it?” he asked with baited breath.

“Did you know that I love you and Tanner so much,” Desiree said. Leo's face scrunched up a little before he shook his head

a little with a smirk.

“Oh Mommy,” he said as he began to walk off back into the living room, throwing his head back with a small laugh. “That's not a secret, I already knew that.”

As Leo left Desiree looked down at Tanner. “See,” she said with a smile. “Its not a secret.”

“I know that,” Tanner said giving a small smile. He lifted himself up looking at Desiree with a hesitant look. He then took a deep breath before wrapping his arms around his Mom's neck. “I love you,” he said.

“I love you too,” Desiree said hugging him back. Tanner then got up. “Wasn't too hard was it,” Desiree said.

“I guess not,” Tanner said. “It felt kind of good.”

“Glad to hear it,” Desiree said as she began to put the paper back into Tanner's folder.

“Can you tell me when Dad gets home?” Tanner then asked.

“Sure,” Desiree said. “Any special reason?”

“I want to show him that stuff right when he gets home,” Tanner said.

“He'll love it,” Desiree said. “Now I think you better hurry before Leo eats all the Oreos.”

Tanner gave a panicked look as he looked towards the entrance way to the living room. “Leo you better not just be eating the frosting on all the cookies again,” Tanner shouted

as he ran into the living room. Desiree waited a moment before she heard Leo let out a squeal upon being caught.

“Boys do I have to come in there?” Desiree asked from the kitchen.

“Noooo,” both boys responded in unison.

In the living room both boys sat on the ground cross legged in front of the tv. Leo sipped some milk from his cup that Desiree had brought in for the boys a moment ago. He then picked up another half of Oreo and took a big bite. Tanner had already divvied up the plate giving Leo only the halves from the cookies he had already eaten the frosting off of. Leo didn't mind since now he had some milk to go with it.

Leo came to a pause as he watched the tv. He didn't know why but something seemed to hit him. The character on screen was looking in a mirror and giving themselves different hairstyles changing their look in a matter of seconds going from each one in a cloud of dust accompanied with silly sound effects. It reminded Leo of himself. Standing in front of a mirror looking at himself. He could still remember how he had looked, that is when he had been older. Leo looked around himself, and for the moment he felt as if he was taking in everything all at once, everything that had happened, everything that was happening. Leo then looked at Tanner. The boy sitting next to him was his best friend, but now something more. Leo could feel some sort of admiration towards him. Leo was struck by another strange feeling. It was amazing to think that he and Tanner were here now

sitting on the carpet next to one another as they were. Tanner seemingly out of nowhere looked over at Leo catching him staring.

“What?” Tanner asked seeing that something was obviously on Leo's mind. The younger boy seemed to snap to attention before furrowing his brow.

“Do you think this is alright?” Leo asked. Tanner cocked his head.

“We got the same amount,” Tanner said looking down at the plate of Oreos. “Its not my fault you ate the frosting first.”

“Not that,” Leo said shaking his head. “I mean everything else you know...like did we win?”

Tanner pursed his lips for a moment as he closed his eyes crossing his arms looking as if he were deep in thought. A moment later he opened his eyes and looked back at Leo.

“Well, things didn't go exactly to plan, but we are living together, and we didn't become what they wanted us to be. I'm pretty happy, and I think you are too.” Tanner said with a smile. “So yeah, I think this counts as a win.”

Leo smiled as the boys turned their attention back to the tv. Leo was content with the answer. He could see that Tanner was right. Leo had managed to find the things he had wished for. He never would have imagined it like this, but at the same time it seemed to be just what he needed.

Chapter 28

To Build a Nest: Final Chapter - Chapter 28

Peace

Leo sat on his bed watching his friend Alex walk around his room. It had only been a couple of weeks since the room had become fully his, after Tanner had moved down to the new room in the basement there Dad had just finished. Their Dad had said it was probably time for them to have their own rooms since they were getting older. Tanner had been headstrong in his position that he should get the room as the oldest kid and the most needing of privacy since he was now twelve. Yet Leo had argued that he shouldn't just get it because he was older. Besides Leo would be eleven in a few months anyways, but since their birthdays were so close that meant Tanner would be thirteen, so age was a moot point. Their parents had just said that they despite who ended up where they would both have their own room. It came down to rock paper scissors and Tanner had won. Leo had been a little disappointed, he knew the real reason Tanner wanted the room. The basement is where the game console was, he just wanted to be able to sneak off late at night to play it – although that was the reason Leo wanted it too.

“This is a pretty cool room,” Alex said still looking around.

“Oh thanks,” Leo said. He had been given free reign once Tanner had moved out. The walls were now covered with

band posters. His guitar sat upright on a stand in the corner, and he had a desk with a corkboard on the wall filled with pictures of friends.

“You play guitar?” Alex asked looking at the flying V.

“Yeah, since I was little,” Leo said getting up and picking up the guitar, he turned on the amp and gave it a strum before playing a lick of some song he was working on with his teacher.

“You're pretty good,” Alex said, looking a little impressed. Leo smiled. He didn't know Alex well, he had just moved to town a little bit ago. Yet Leo had found himself instantly interested in him upon the first day the teacher had introduced the kid to the fifth grade classroom. Alex had been wearing a shirt with the logo for a band Leo liked. Most of the kids in his class just listened to whatever was the most popular, but it seemed Alex had taste. He found that Alex was pretty cool as well. He had a laid back attitude and he seemed easy to talk too.

“Whose this?” Alex asked picking up a picture frame on Leo's desk.

“That's my friend Robert,” Leo said explaining the picture of an eight year old Leo sat behind a birthday cake with Robert next to him with an arm around him with a smile.

“Friend?” Alex said raising an eyebrow. “He looks...older.”

“He's a family friend,” Leo added quickly. What was he supposed to say? That Leo had been friend with him since

before Alex was even born? Or that he and Robert were the same age? Although as far as anyone could say that was only in a technical sense. Leo was every bit the ten year old kid he appeared to be. Any trace of the eighteen year old sensibilities and attitudes having been lost to him. Which had not caused him any distress. He was more than happy to experience all of the milestones of his second childhood with a sense of wonderment and excitement. Such as the day he had finally been declared potty trained or losing his first tooth and finding money from the tooth fairy underneath his pillow, the blissful naivety of waking up on Christmas morning to find a plate of cookies half eaten and fully believing that Santa Clause had visited or seeing a costumed character at a theme park and running up to receive a hug in complete awe that the character from the tv existed in real life and wasn't just some person dressed up in a suit.

The only thing that sort of bothered Leo about it was when it came to school. It wasn't when he would learn some new fact that would inspire awe in him like when in third grade the teacher had showed them slides of famous landmarks that had been unknown to Leo or when he learned about what makes rain and thunder. Leo possessed a certain curious tenacity to be sure, it was those times when he couldn't help but feel like he had known it all before. Like when he had been in class and the teacher had been going on about fractions. Leo had been struck by a feeling of deja vu. He knew that this was something he had already known long ago – and it bothered him when he had to face the feeling of realizing some part of him had been taken – not too mention he was having trouble

with learning fractions in the first place. It seemed unfair to him, as much as he loved his life and all the good things in it, when he felt this it was as if he was being shown the price he had to pay for it all.

He had come home that day in a particular gloomy mood which had extended into the whole week. Finally his Dad had enough and had sat him down for a talk about what was bothering him. Leo had told him about all of it. His Dad had simply reassured him that everything was okay, and that it wasn't so bad. He had learned it all before so he could take comfort in the fact that he would be able to do it again. Leo had felt a good deal better about the situation and some part of him was happy that all it took was a few reassuring words from his Dad to chase away those bad feelings.

However that didn't mean Leo had forgotten the past. It was last summer when the boys had found themselves curious. What had happened to Hawthorne? A question that seemed to nag them. They had waited until their Mom had left for the day to get on the computer and began to search for whatever they could find. Information was sparse, there didn't seem to be much other than some news reports about possible abuse at the school from years ago. The most recent thing they found was a video of an urban explorer going through the now abandoned building. Both Tanner and Leo were surprised that the place had changed so much, it looked practically condemned. The familiar rooms of the playroom and classrooms had been gratified over, windows were broken and trash was everywhere. The video had even shown

the quiet room with the big chair that Leo had been strapped into once upon a time now falling apart and covered in mold from being exposed to rainwater. The last thing they had found was a news story on Mr. Gareth. He had been found guilty and had been sentenced to a lengthy prison sentence. Some of the other staff had as well although not nearly as long, Ms. Mari and Ms. Klay had been mentioned by name. Yet in none of the articles was there any suggestion of what Hawthorne had truly been up to. Leo found himself thinking about it for many days after. Some part of him felt like he should be angry, yet he could muster no such emotion. Instead there was a sense of peace about the whole thing. He finally came to the conclusion that on some level there had been some justice, even if it wasn't as far as it should have gone, but maybe that was okay. Perhaps it was for the best. If Leo was honest he didn't feel like he needed more. Hawthorne had tried to change him into something else, and they had failed. He had found people to help him, to bring out his strength, he had won...right?

“You look pretty cool with that guitar,” Alex said bringing Leo back to the present.

“You think so,” Leo said.

“Yeah you look like a total rockstar,” Alex said running his hand against the neck of the guitar. He was standing close enough to Leo that he could feel his breath. Leo felt his heart begin to beat a little faster.

“Anyone looks cool with a guitar,” Leo said nervously. “You

would too I bet.”

Alex looked up and their eyes met.

“You think?” Alex asked.

“Totally,” Leo said. The boys went silent as they stared at one another.

“We're like close enough to kiss,” Alex laughed as both boys took a hurried step back from another with a nervous laugh. Leo took the guitar off and set it back on the stand.

“You like ever kiss anyone before?” Alex then asked as he continued to look around the room.

“No, except for like my parents or whatever,” Leo said, looking at Alex with an awkward look.

“That's kind of surprising,” Alex said with a laugh.

“What, you have?” Leo asked.

“No, but like I though for sure you would have,” Alex said with a shrug.

“Whats that supposed to mean,” Leo said furrowing his brow.

“I don't know,” Alex said. “Its just when I saw you on the playground my first day you were surrounded by a bunch of girls so I thought you were like the popular kid with all the girls.”

“So what,” Leo said with a wave of his hand. “Just because I have lots of friends that are girls doesn't mean I go around

kissing them all. I have friends that are boys too. Doesn't mean I go around kissing them either."

"Yeah you have lots of friends," Alex said looking at Leo's corkboard and all the photo's that populated it.

"You seem awfully interested in kissing," Leo said standing next to Alex.

"Guess I'm just curious is all," Alex said. "I mean my big brother is fifteen and he is obsessed with kissing his girlfriend so I guess I just want to know what the big deal is."

"Well duh," Leo said. "He is in love with her."

"Hmmm," Alex pondered. "I guess I just don't know what that's like."

Leo couldn't help but smile. For a moment he looked at the clueless look on Alex's face, it made him look cute. Leo shook his head. What was he saying? Alex wasn't cute, he was just a friend.

"Still he is like obsessed with her or something," Alex mentioned.

"I think that's what being in love is," Leo said albeit sounding a little unsure. He knew at one point he must have had similar feelings, yet when he thought about that stuff it didn't really make sense to him. "You just find everything about that person super interesting."

"Oh so you do have a crush," Alex said raising an eyebrow. "C'mon, tell me which one, is it Kira, or maybe Allison," he

said pointing out each girl on the cork board.

“I told you I don't like any of them like that,” Leo said with some annoyance. “If anyone is obsessed its you.”

Alex laughed. Leo found he couldn't remain annoyed with him. Alex had a nice laugh and Leo liked hearing it. Looking at Alex he found he liked a lot things about him. Such as the way his black hair curled out from under his backwards hat, and the small dimple on his cheek when he smiled and the way his freckles dotted the bridge of his nose. Leo bit his lip as if to stop himself. He silently told himself to stop noticing every little thing about the boy next to him.

“Tell me though,” Alex said as a serious look came to his face. “If someone did think you were interesting, would you want to kiss them.”

Leo's face blushed a little.

“Well I mean I guess,” Leo said. “If they thought I was interesting.”

“It would make you happy?” Alex asked again. The two boys were once again stood close to one another there noses nearly touching.

“Yeah it would,” Leo said in a small voice. Alex gave a little smirk before he leaned and quickly pecked Leo's lips.

“I think you're interesting,” Alex said. Leo brought his hands up to cover his lips with wide eyes. “Did that make you happy?”

“You're interesting too,” Leo whispered. This time it was Alex's turn to blush.

“Do you want to kiss again?” Alex asked looking a little awkward. Leo didn't even respond only nodding his head. The boys locked lips once again.

At that moment the door opened. Both boys immediately shot back from one another turning to see Desiree standing in the doorway with a laundry basket on her hip as to not put it up against the small baby bump on her stomach. The boys stood frozen with eyes like saucers. Desiree's mouth hung open a little, clearly it was the last thing she had expected to see. Desiree snapped her mouth shut as she looked from one boy to another.

“I gotta go,” Alex blurted out as he quickly pushed past Desiree making a quick escape from the house. Leo stood frozen in his spot, his face going a little pale. This all seemed too familiar to him. He could feel an overwhelming sense of dread overtake him. Something was screaming in his mind that he had really done it this time. Images came to his mind of two faceless people screaming at him, a moment later Desiree and RJ's faces had filled in on the faceless figures. He could imagine how they would react. They would tell him there was something wrong with him, that he was broken in a way.

“Leo were you...” Desiree began.

“I'm sorry,” Leo sputtered out cutting her off. Desiree pursed her lips for a moment. Leo could only see disappointment on

her face. Desiree set the laundry basket down coming into the room.

“Maybe we should talk,” she said. Leo felt his heart drop.

“No you can't,” Leo squeaked. “I wont do it again I promise.” Leo said as it became hard for him to breathe. He had to say something anything to stop his parents from doing what he thought was the only outcome. He couldn't be sent away. “I'll be a proper child,” Leo blurted out. The words coming from somewhere deep within him. He hadn't even thought of them, it had seemed like an automatic response.

The corner of Desiree's mouth twitched a little, more out of concern. That phrase had been something she had heard before, but it had been a very long time since either boy had uttered it. Leo however didn't wait for a response. He ran out of the room, panicked tears streaming down his face. He didn't know what do and ducked into the bathroom locking the door behind him. He went and got into the tub curling up in a ball. They weren't going to get him.

Desiree rushed after him coming to the locked door. She knocked.

“Leo it's okay, just unlock the door and come out,” Desiree said. Leo only continued to cry as he rocked back and forth in his ball. It wasn't okay, she was just trying to trick him. Desiree tried for a several minutes to coax him out, yet her words were falling on deaf ears. She was starting to get worried as harrowing thoughts began to cross her mind. This wasn't a case of embarrassment. Leo was in a state of distress.

“What's going on?” a voice asked. Desiree turned to see Kaylee standing in the hallway. The six year old girl was holding a doll looking quizzically at the door.

“Leo is a little upset right now,” Desiree said in a gentle voice as to not worry the young girl. “I'm trying to get him to come out.”

Kaylee looked at the door with some concern before she smiled.

“I'll talk to him,” she said marching up to the door. She slapped the door a couple of times. “Leo don't be sad, kay. Come out.” she said. Leo didn't give any response, yet Desiree could still hear him crying. “Leeeooo,” Kaylee called out as she continued hitting the door now with both hands. “Come ouuut,”

Desiree finally put a hand on Kaylee's shoulder. “Maybe you should go somewhere else for the time being,” Desiree said.

Kaylee looked up at her Mom with frown. “But I want to help Leo feel better.”

“I know sweetie,” Desiree said rubbing Kaylee's shoulder. “But I think its best if you let me handle this one, okay.”

“Okay,” she said with a sigh as she walked off. Left alone, Desiree looked at the door. Leo wasn't going to open the door on his own. She was starting to get more worried with every passing second. She thought for a moment about trying to kick down the door. She looked down at the small baby bump thinking it probably wasn't the best idea – not too mention

she probably wasn't even strong enough to get through. Thats when she thought about the fact that there must be a key she could use to unlock the door, and if she couldn't find that she would just have to use a paper clip to undo the lock. Desiree went to the kitchen as she started to search through the drawers.

The door to the garage opened and Tanner walked into the kitchen a moment later still in his baseball uniform that was stained with dirt having just returned from practice.

“Its official,” Tanner announced holding his arms up. “I'm the fourth batter,” he smiled. RJ came walking in behind.

“You should have seen your boy out there Desi,” RJ enthused mussing up Tanner's blond hair. “He was hitting them left and right.”

Desiree looked up with a harried look.

“Thats great honey,” Desiree said giving a small smile. Tanner's eyes narrowed, he could sense something was off.

“What's wrong?” he asked seeing the expression on his Mom's face.

“Its Leo,” Desiree said with an exasperated look. She then told the two of them everything that had happened. “He's locked himself in the bathroom and I can't get him to come out,” Desiree said. RJ nodded before he walked off towards the bathroom followed by Desiree and Tanner. RJ gave three firm knocks to the door.

“Leo this is your father,” RJ said authoritatively. “You need to open this door right now. We are worried about you.” No response came except the sound of some stifled whimpers. “Leo if you don't open this door I will kick it down,” RJ said. There was still no response. RJ took a step back fully ready to kick in the door.

“Are you really kicking it in?” Desiree said placing hand on RJ's shoulder.

“We gotta do something,” RJ said with a concerned look.

“Let me try talking to him,” Tanner piped up stepping up to the door. Tanner knocked on the door softly.

“Leo open up,” Tanner said. They didn't hear any response. Tanner leaned in closer. “C'mon man,” Tanner said softly against the door. “Its me.”

A couple of moments passed before they heard the lock un-click. Tanner opened the door sliding into the bathroom before shutting the door again. Leo had already retreated back to the toilet where he now sat with his face in his hands.

“What's the problem?” Tanner asked. Leo looked up at him, his cheeks stained with tears.

“I messed up,” Leo said. That was all he could even say. It was the truth. This was the worst thing he had ever done, even worse than when he had rode his skateboard in the house and had somehow ended falling off the thing sending it shooting into the living room knocking over a lamp. He had

gotten grounded for a week for that one, but they weren't going to ground him for this, no, it was going to be worse. Tanner let out an annoyed sigh.

“So they caught you smooching some boy, big deal,” Tanner said.

“It is a big deal,” Leo yelped. “They're going to think something is wrong with me.”

Tanner stared at Leo for a moment before shaking their head.

“Do you really believe that?” Tanner asked.

“I –“ Leo stammered. Did he really believe that? Could his parents be like that?

“Where do you get these ideas from?” Tanner tutted. “How could you ever think they would be like that? I mean come on their Mom and Dad, think about everything they've done for you. This is probably the least embarrassing thing you've done. For goodness sake's they had to potty train you.”

“Hey,” Leo yelped as his face reddened. “At least I never ran to sleep in bed with them every time I had a nightmare,”

Tanner rolled his eyes. “The last time I did that was ages ago.”

“You were ten, it wasn't that long ago,” Leo retorted with a sly smirk.

“However long ago it was doesn't matter,” Tanner said. “What does matter is that they let me, they didn't care, and they won't care about this either." Leo's mouth twisted up and

down in thought.

“I know that,” Leo finally mumbled. Tanner put his hands on his hips as if he had just proven some

point.

“So whats with all the drama then?” Tanner asked.

“I dunno,” Leo said hugging himself. “Its just that all this stuff popped into my head, and I just felt like scared all of a sudden. It reminded me of stuff.”

Tanner gave a solemn nod.

“Yeah I know,” Tanner agreed in a small voice. “It still happens to me sometimes too. That's usually what the nightmares were about.”

Leo looked up at Tanner. He felt bad that he had made fun of Tanner a moment ago for it.

“But I just tell myself something Dad told me a long time ago,” Tanner smiled. “He said that all that stuff doesn't matter anymore and I shouldn't pay attention to it.”

Leo frowned. Tanner made it sound so easy as if it was as simple as snapping his fingers.

“You should go out there,” Tanner said motioning towards the door. “They're super worried about you.”

Leo stood up, in some ways it felt like he was going to face up to the music, yet with Tanner's reassuring words he knew

his parents were more worried than mad. The boys came out into the hall. Desiree wasted no time before she had Leo wrapped up in a hug holding his head against her chest as she stroked his hair as she had often done when he was little and upset.

“Please don't ever worry me like that again,” she whispered.

“I won't,” Leo sniffled.

“C'mon,” RJ said with a wave of his hand. “Lets go talk in your room.

Leo found himself sitting on his bed. His Mom still had her arm around his shoulders as RJ stood in front of them. Leo's head hung low. But he knew he was gonna have to say something eventually.

“I guess I need to tell you something,” Leo said sounding like a scared animal.

“You can tell us anything,” Desiree insisted.

“It's just that,” Leo began feeling the words catching in his throat. “Well I-I'm well I'm gay,” he finally managed to choke out. He felt his face get hot and knew his cheeks had flushed red. Neither of his parents said anything. The silence was killing Leo.

“Is that all,” Desiree said squeezing him close.

“Leo,” RJ said rubbing his head a little. “We kind of already knew that.”

Leo looked up with a shocked expression. That couldn't be. He had never told them anything of the sort. Not too mention he had never to his knowledge acted in a way that would suggest such a thing. He hadn't even really thought about relationships or anything like that in a long time. In fact until today the thought of hugging someone let alone kissing them had seemed nebulous and a little gross to him.

“But how?” Leo asked.

“Robert told us a long time ago about what had happened,” Desiree said. “So we already knew that one day you would probably start to have the same feelings.”

“Why didn't you say anything?” Leo asked.

“You were little back then,” RJ said. “You weren't thinking about stuff like that. We just figured that when you did start to have those feelings you would tell us.”

“Were you feeling that way this whole time?” Desiree asked. Leo shook his head.

“I guess not,” he said. “All that stuff seemed kind of weird, like I didn't really understand it anymore. I still don't really get it, but I guess I have been thinking about it a little more.”

Desiree smiled as she pulled him closer to his side. “You're growing up, its completely natural,” Desiree said. “You're not my little boy anymore are you?”

“Mooom, stop it,” Leo said pulling away from Desiree a little. “You're embarrassing me.”

“She is right though,” RJ said. “You are growing up and I think its time we have some new rules around here.”

“Rules?” Leo questioned looking up at his parents with some worry.

“That's right,” Desiree said standing up and standing next to RJ going into parent mode. Leo frowned a little thinking he was about to be subject to a lecture.

“For one,” RJ began. “If you have friends over and you are here in your room, then the door needs to stay open.”

“What! Why?” Leo exclaimed. RJ held up a hand communicating that he was not going to hear protest on the point.

“I'm not saying that we are not supportive of you beginning to explore relationships but this house is not going to become a personal make out spot for you, besides you are far too young for that sort of thing.”

“Its not like that,” Leo said feeling embarrassed at the implication that he was going to start kissing every boy that came his way. “It just happened okay.”

Desiree gave him a sympathetic smile.

“Leo the rule is no different for Tanner when he brings one of his little girlfriends around.” Desiree said.. “We know we can't stop you from having feelings and we aren't trying too. We just want you to take things slow.”

“You guys are acting like I already have a boyfriend,” Leo

grumbled.

“Who is this boy anyways?” RJ then said sounding all the more like a overprotective father. “Was he pressuring you?”

Leo looked up with some astonishment as his face turned red once again. Desiree gave RJ a playful shove.

“Don't be nosy now,” she chuckled.

“I'm just asking questions,” RJ said, defending himself.

“I don't know how I feel about him,” Leo squeaked. “We're just friends.”

“That's a good spot to be,” Desiree said reassuringly. “All we want to avoid is you getting into a situation you're not ready for yet.”

“I get it,” Leo mumbled. Yet he still felt better about everything. He really had been acting ridiculous. Tanner had been right. They were his parents they would always accept him. He would never be weird or somehow broken in their eyes.

“Why don't you invite this boy out to dinner on Friday,” RJ then suggested. “We can all go for pizza and mini-golf.”

“I can't do that,” Leo yelped. He was a little confused why his Dad was even suggesting such a thing. Hadn't they just been saying he needed to go slow, not too mention he didn't really even know how Alex felt about him.

“RJ don't you think that's a bit much,” Desiree said with a

raised eyebrow.

“I just meant invite him as a friend,” RJ clarified. “Make sure he knows he is welcome in the house.”

“Well I guess I could ask,” Leo said playing with the idea in his mind. Even if he wouldn't admit it, the idea of spending time around Alex outside of school did sound fun. Even if he had to do it with his whole family peeking over his shoulder.

“Leo there is something else we need to talk about,” Desiree said taking on a more serious tone.

“Like what?” Leo asked feeling his nerves welling up again.

“You said something that I'm really not okay with, right before you ran out of the room.” Desiree mentioned.

“I did?” Leo questioned. Everything had been such a blur he didn't even remember what he had said in his state of panic.

“Something about being a proper child,” Desiree said.

“I said that?” Leo whinged. It felt deeply shameful to him. As if he had let someone get the better of him.

“I never want to hear that come out of your mouth again,” Desiree said sounding as if Leo really was in trouble.

“I agree,” RJ said. “You are never to think of that way about yourself again.”

“It just came out,” Leo said. “I just...”

It was RJ who sat next to Leo putting his arm around Leo

who suddenly felt overcome in emotion as he began to cry a little burying his face into his Dad.

“Leo you will never not be enough to us, I want you to remember that.” RJ said softly as he mussed up Leo's hair. The boy had gotten himself together and gave his parents a smile.

“Thanks,” Leo said. He was really lucky to have parents like this, a point that was all the more true given he did have some vague memory of a time when he didn't.

“There is one more thing we gotta talk about,” RJ said. “I think its time we have a talk about about birds and bees.” Leo felt an awkward pulse, catching on to what his Dad was angling towards.

“I already know where babies come from,” Leo mumbled awkwardly. He had already had to sit through that talk about two years ago. It had been incredibly awkward back then, so why did his Dad seem to think they he needed to review.

“This one is a little different,” RJ chuckled. “This one has to do with something called hormones and some of the changes you are going to start going through.”

Leo felt his face redden again for the umpteenth time that afternoon.

“We already talked about that stuff in school,” Leo mewled.

“I'm sure they went over the basics,” RJ laughed.

“This sounds like a father son sort of talk,” Desiree smiled as she began to walk out of the room. Leo was then subjected to about thirty minutes of awkwardness as he listened to his Dad go on about all sorts of things. He was relieved when it finally was over. Afterwards he had run into Tanner in the hallway. Tanner had laughed when Leo told him about everything they had talked about.

“Oh yeah I remember that talk,” Tanner said.

That night Leo laid in his bed. The thoughts of everything that had happened played across his head. His thoughts drifted to the fateful kiss. Leo felt butterflies in his stomach every time it replayed in his head. He then thought about his Dad's offer. Maybe it wasn't such a bad idea.

Friday night came and Leo found himself sat in a booth at the local pizza and putt putt establishment next to Alex. Leo had been fretting about the night ever since Alex had agreed. He had to reassure Alex first of course that his parents were indeed not mad about the whole thing before his friend had agreed. Leo had tried to be as non-nonchalant about the whole thing as possible, yet as the night drew closer he felt his nerves increasing. The night before he had painstakingly gone through his closet to try and find the perfect outfit. He had settled on a plaid button up shirt over a black t-shirt and some black jeans and a beanie cap that he had spent a good deal of time fiddling with so that his moppish hair poked out of it in just the right way. Leo found this to be the coolest outfit he had yet didn't make it look like it he had put a lot of thought into it.

Leo tried to keep his nerves in check. Its not like this was a date or something. He was here with his whole family. He and Alex were sat across from Tanner and his friend Gordy. So why did Leo keep feeling like this was a first date? His parents and little sister were at a table not five feet away! Gordy and Alex were currently in a heated debate about some youtuber rivalry that was currently going on.

Tanner had declared both of them were stupid which seemed to kill the argument. After pizza the boys went golfing with Tanner and Gordy making a team against Leo and Alex. Tanner and Gordy had wiped the floor with the other two which had been expected. They were both more athletic than the other two and they made a fearsome team, They had even formed a battery on their baseball team, with Tanner as the catcher and Gordy the pitcher. Still Leo had found it fun playing with Alex.

He found himself sitting on a bench afterwards next to Alex as they both ate some ice cream.

“Your brother and his friend are pretty good at golf,” Alex said.

“Oh yeah I guess,” Leo said. “They're pretty into sports stuff I guess.”

“Do you like sports?” Alex asked.

“I mean kind of, not as much as Tanner but my Dad will take us to baseball games and stuff which is cool and I do play soccer on the weekends.”

“Soccer,” Alex said as his face lit up. “I like that too, I want to get on a team so my Mom was looking around, but we're still new to town and everything so.”

“Its just the local soccer club,” Leo said. “You can sign up at the rec center in town.”

“Cool,” Alex said. “It would be awesome to be on the same team,” Alex said as he leaned over nudging into Leo a little.

“Sure,” Leo said with a shaky voice. Alex gave him a glance.

“Whats with you?” Alex asked. “You've been acting a little awkward tonight.”

“I have?” Leo questioned.

“A little,” Alex replied. “Its kind of surprising. “You always seem so put together, so seeing you like this is kind of funny.”

“Well what if this is how I really am,” Leo said not without some huffiness. Alex smiled as he looked out across the pool of water with its fountains in the middle lit up by different colored lights.

“I guess I wouldn't mind,” Alex said as his hand moved over to Leo's that was placed on the bench between them. Alex put his hand over Leo's giving it a small squeeze. “I think everybody has different sides to themselves and if I get to see one you don't usually show off then I guess that means we're friends.”

Leo felt his heart flutter a little as he looked over at Alex who was still staring off into the pool. Leo leaned over giving

Alex a quick peck on the cheek. Alex turned with some surprise as Leo stared back with some confidence. Alex took a look around seeing if Leo's parents were nearby.

“Hey you're going to get us in trouble again,” Alex said nervously.

“Nobody saw,” Leo smirked. “Besides my parents already said they're okay with me. They just want me to take it slow. I doubt a little kiss to the cheek is that big of deal. Or what you gonna be all weird about it?”

“You're the one acting weird,” Alex said laughing.

“Am not,” Leo said as he playfully shoved Alex.

“Are too,” Alex said shoving Leo back as the two boys laughed continuing to shove each other. Their game was brought to an end as RJ appeared telling them it was time to go.

Back home Leo wandered into the kitchen having donned a pair of sweatpants and an old t-shirt. His Dad sat at the island counter with his laptop open.

“Hey bud, going to bed soon?” RJ asked.

“Yeah, I just came to get some water,” Leo said grabbing a glass and getting some water from the faucet.

“Have a good time tonight?” RJ asked.

“Yeah it was fun,” Leo said trying not to sound too enthusiastic. In his head the night had been amazing.

“You know I saw what you did.” RJ said with a mischievous smirk. Leo choked a little on his water. After coughing a little he looked at his Dad with some guilt.

“Are you mad?” Leo asked.

“Nah,” RJ said. “Keep this between us but I'm a little proud you know.” RJ said. “I guess that just how it is with fathers and sons, chip off the own shoulder.” Leo was happy to hear his Dad wasn't mad yet it was still embarrassing.

Leo finished his water and said goodnight to his Dad. He went up to his room crawling into his bed. As he started to drift off to sleep he smiled a little. He was overjoyed that things had gone good with Alex, but it wasn't just that. There were many things to look forward to in his life, even if some of them made him nervous to think about, such as starting middle school next year, but he knew that no matter what he had a safe place with people who loved him. Maybe it hadn't exactly been a straight and narrow journey but Leo had made it. He had found where he was supposed to be, here in his nest where he could become the person he was truly meant to be.

THE END.