

Love A Bunch!

BY CHAMP!

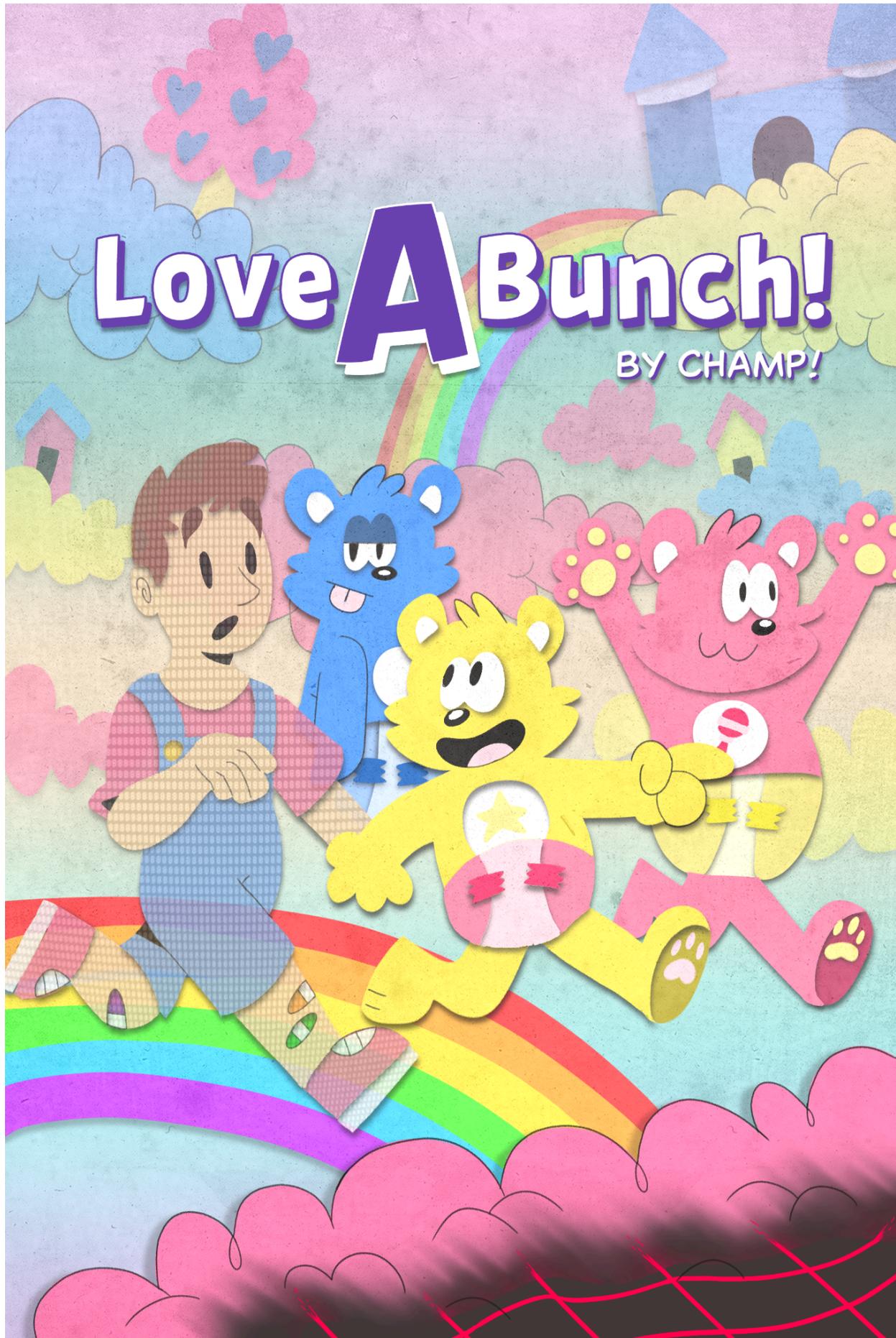


Illustration by Lily (🐦@CrinkleBuns)

Love-a-Bunch

By Champ (<https://champtehotter.com/>)

Poor Benji has had a hard life, but when he goes home to close up his estranged parents' estate, he finds some unexpected help in some virtual fuzzy friends: The Love-a-Bunch!

Chapter 1: I remember you

There's one sad thing about toys: They're always bound to be more devoted to their owners than their owners are to them. Anyone who has a toy is bound to get bored and abandon it eventually, but a toy will never, ever forget its first owner. It's a little bit sad, but if you were to ask a toy, they would surely tell you that the brief time of intense joy - that moment in the spotlight of their owner's heart - was worth everything that came after. And most toys would have to be satisfied with just that. But what happens when their owner returns, and the toys decide that they aren't ready to be forgotten again?

It was a question the fair citizens of Love-a-Bunch were pondering now, with the unexpected arrival of their old friend, Benjamin.

Baby Bear came running into the castle, where all the other bears were asleep. "He's here! He's here! Wake up, everyone! He's here!"

"Who's here?" said Grumpy Bear, rubbing his eyes. Baby Bear's face was lit up like a Christmas tree.

"It's Benji!"

"Benji?!" said Cheery Bear practically falling out of his bunk when he heard that name. The room was instantly abuzz, and even Grumpy Bear's eyes took on a bit of that old magic sparkle once more as he jumped out of bed.

"He's here!" they cried. "He's here!"

It had been many years since they'd seen any sign of their former owner, but not for a moment did the other bears doubt Baby's words, because no one would ever joke about such an important event. As soon as they were awake and alert, the other bears

sensed Benji too, and he was very close. Bears were bumping into each other and falling on their padded tushes as they ran around, practically beside themselves with excitement and urgency.

"Is my diaper on straight?"

"How is my fur?"

"Bears, bears!" said Softheart, clapping his paws together. "Get a hold of yourselves! We need a plan. Benji could be here any minute!"

"Plan? What's the plan?" The bears all wondered. Softheart smiled.

"We need to plan an *adventure*."

"An adventure, yes, yes!" Everyone liked that idea. Adventures were familiar territory for them.

"We can go out to the feeling forest and learn about feelings," said Softheart Bear.

"No, no," said Cheery Bear. "Everybody knows Benji's favorite place is Sunshine Meadows. It's perfect for a picnic!"

"How about a tour of our newest developments in Love-a-Bunch technology?" asked Smart Bear.

"That's too boring," said Grumpy Bear, crossing his arms. "An adventure should have some kind of problem or danger, or at least something *new*..."

The room was a clamor of competing ideas until Softheart spoke up.

"I've got it! I know just the thing..."

Benjamin Briggs hadn't been home in a very long time. It wasn't for lack of trying; his parents had simply refused to speak to him ever since they had discovered that he was gay. Now, the time had come for Ben to return home, though not in the way that he had hoped.

"Just when I thought I had gotten over them, they have to go and do a thing like this," Ben said, putting the rental car in park on the big circular cobblestone drive. He stared up at his childhood home, empty now. As grand and imposing as ever despite that fact.

Ben had told the lawyers to just liquidate everything, but that just wasn't how it worked. He had to go *in person* for some stupid reason and look over the property at least once before giving his handshake and signature to sell the estate.

A woman in a pencil-skirt and a blouse was there to meet him when he rang the doorbell.

"Hey, there! Thanks for coming," she said, in a soft voice, her eyebrows knitted in a sympathetic frown.

"Let's just get this over with," said Benjamin, brushing past her as he walked inside.

The woman, Molly, seemed to look off as she tucked a strand of hair behind her ear. By the time she had turned to follow him, her look of concern was gone.

"I know. It's a big inconvenience to come out all this way. We'll have you out of here in no time, kay?"

True to her word, they went from room to room quite quickly. Benjamin kept expecting to find memories in the house like old traps. Some possession. A picture. *Anything*. But no. It was clear that Ben's parents had taken pains to erase all traces of their *gay son* from their lives. That is, until he got to the nursery. He didn't expect it to be anything special to him, but when Molly pushed open the door, time stopped.

"This is..." He stepped in, enchanted, "It's all *here*... they haven't changed a thing..."

"That's *good*," said Molly, giving her most agreeable nod, while eyeing the door. "Shall we go on to the next room?"

"Not yet," said Benjamin, slowly, as he looked around. "I... I need a moment."

"Of course," she said. She could tell he was only half listening at this point - lost in his own world. "I'll be outside when you're ready."

The enthralled young man didn't even respond as Molly stepped outside, smiling to herself. "There's always *something* that gets them," she said when she was out of earshot. "Even for the *hardest* of hearts."

Benjamin stared, speechless. They had kept *everything* from before he was outed. He picked up his teddy bear from the bed.

"Stuffles... I remember you..." He looked over to the toy chest. "Oh! My train set! Is it still inside?"

He rushed over to it, delighted to see that it was still there, as new as the day he had last touched it. Benjamin's childhood hadn't been *all* bad. Here was a happy place with happy, joyful memories. Benjamin smiled as he looked around. That's when he saw it, still sitting there in its charging base.

"I can't believe it! My first haptic VR set. Now *this* takes me back." Ben picked it up, marveling at the simplicity of the device. It was easy to strap on to his head, and came with a set of one-size-fits-all gloves that had sensors in the fabric. Most families could never afford such a luxury, but for wealthy parents with little time on their hands to raise a child, it served as a perfect teacher and babysitter.

"I wonder if it even works..." Ben inspected the visor. His eyes lit up as he saw that it was in standby mode. He clicked the power button and the light blinked on. He placed the visor up to his eyes and gasped. "It *works!* And it's still loaded up with all my old games as well! I wonder if..." He looked around the nursery sheepishly as if expecting Molly to walk in at any moment. "Ah, what the heck. I'll give it one last look before I have to say goodbye."

Benjamin put the headset in, flexed his fingers in the haptic gloves, and selected his still-active instance of Love-a-Bunch.

"Hello? Anyone there?"

Benjamin had wondered what he would find after such a long running instance. He was expecting to drop right into the Hall of Happiness and see the 'Love-a-Bunch Bears'. Instead, Ben found himself disoriented and wandering, engulfed in a dense white fog. He could swear that his favorite program was more colorful than *this*. Games had been a bit more creative back in the day, though, and older AI tended to be a bit less predictable. Maybe the bears were just hiding. Maybe it was a game!

"Are you playing with me? Where did everyone go? Oof!" Benjamin called out. Suddenly, he felt something soft bump against his waist and heard a loud crinkle. He looked down. As the fog cleared, he saw a familiar friend hugging him, though they weren't quite as big as he remembered them.

"Benjamin! Thank goodness you're here!" came Cheery Bear's familiar voice. "After all these years I never thought I'd see you again..."

"It's been a long time," said Ben, looking at the adorably diapered bear. "It's good to see you."

He saw more bears waddling over now as the fog continued to dissipate. "And you too Softheart! And you, Smart Bear! And even you, Grumpy."

"Even me, he says," said Grumpy, crossing his arms but unable to keep from smiling.

"Wait a second. Can this really be Benji?" asked Softheart, practically falling over in surprise. "He's so *big!*"

"Yeah! What gives?" asked Grumpy bear, tilting his head and rubbing his chin. "Why aren't you wearing your playsuit, or your... oh my gosh, you're not even diapered!"

"Oh, this just won't do," said Softheart, shaking his head and rubbing his temples.

"Friends! Friends!" said Benjamin. "It's *alright*. I *am* bigger now. Because I'm a *grown-up*."

"What?! That's impossible!" said Grumpy Bear. "You're pulling my leg!"

"It's the truth," said Ben.

"Guys," whispered Smart Bear. "Stick to the script..."

"Oh, right! Well, grown-up or not, welcome back, Benji, to Love-a-Bunch!" Softheart stepped aside as the last of the fog cleared to reveal a dramatic landscape - the whole of Love-a-Bunch as viewed from the Love-a-Bunch Castle Concourse.

"Oh my goodness," said Ben, stepping forward to admire the technicolor vista below them. "It's... it's all there... There's Baker Bear's shop, he said, pointing to the main thoroughfare... and Sunshine Meadows off in the distance... oh... and that dark cloud in the distance must be Hard Heart's domain." Ben was completely entranced, but as he continued to admire the vista he noticed some things were amiss... "Oh, but the shops... they're mostly shuttered... is the town still asleep?"

"Well, it *has* been a long time..." said Softheart, softly.

"It's been *years*..." said Cheery Bear, looking a little sad. "Why didn't you ever visit?"

"Well, it's a long story," said Benjamin, scratching the back of his head. He realized he was getting in a little too deep. These days most programs had emotional limiters to keep the user from getting too hooked in, as well as the AI, but old tech like this...

"Well, it doesn't matter now, Benji," said Softheart. "What matters is that you're here. And you're just in time too!" This was Smart Bear's cue.

"That's right, Benjamin! The witch of Apathy is planning to take all the love from Love-a-Bunch! We simply must stop her, and only you can-" Ben cut in.

"I won't be here very long, I'm afraid. I just wanted to take a few minutes to see my favorite program one last time."

"Oh, but you *have* to stay," said Softheart, grabbing onto Ben, then looking desperately to his companions.. "Tell him, Smart Bear!"

Benjamin looked over to a small bespectacled bear and smiled sympathetically.

"That's right, Benji! We need your help to-"

"I'm sorry, guys... I... shouldn't have come," said Benjamin, gently pushing away Softheart. "I... don't have *time* to play with Baby Bears anymore. I'm... too old."

"What do you mean? You've got to!" said Grumpy bear, stomping his foot. "You've been gone *so long!!*"

"Yeah!" said the others, and there was a general cacophony of unsatisfied voices as the bears gathered round Ben. Ben could feel the pangs of guilt coming, but he turned his back to Love-a-Bunch and closed his eyes, crossing his arms and shaking his head.

"I'm sorry, but you're not real. None of this is real. You're a simulation, a child's plaything, nothing more." The bears looked at each other. This wasn't what they had planned at all!

"But you used to *love* our adventures!" said Softheart, finally. Ben's voice came back, toneless and quiet.

"I was a child back then. I didn't know any better. Now I've lived in the *real* world, where there are no happy endings for people like me. No feel-good story is going to change that."

"Ben... who hurt you?" said Softheart, quietly. The other bears spoke up before Ben could answer.

"That's not fair! We missed you for soooo long!"

"We may be AI but we have feelings too!"

"Just one last time, for old times sake? Whaddya say? For us?"

"Please say yes, we love you Ben!"

Love. Ben hadn't heard such words in a long time. He opened an eye and looked back at the bears, "Welllll..."

"Oh, please, please, please!" they all begged.

Benjamin sighed. Against his better judgment, he decided to make a compromise.

"I'll tell you what, guys. There are some things I have to take care of first, but I can take you with me so I can visit you later... when I have *time*. Does that work?"

Reluctantly, the bears agreed, though they weren't happy about it. On the other hand, there was a silver lining, which Cheery highlighted once Ben jacked out.

"Don't worry, it'll give us something to look forward to!" said Cheery Bear, putting on a smile for everyone. "We'll have more time to prepare the bestest welcome ever for our friend Ben!"

"Yeah!"

"All right!"

Cheer's enthusiastic outlook animated the bears, and they set to work preparing.

Benjamin's mind was reeling as he pulled off the visor. All the old AI games had supposedly been destroyed years ago, but here was his old game just as he had left it. He looked down at the sleek headset and gloves and thought about how he might go about sneaking it out. These things were basically contraband at this point thanks to the AI Regulation Authority. The only people who had them now were hackers who used the units and their uninhibited AI to circumvent security measures of more modern operating systems. But what harm could one little kid's game really do? Benjamin stuffed the unit inside an old tote bag along with Stuffles the teddy, a couple story books and a few other favorites.

"Found some things you want to keep?" asked Molly, as he stepped out of the nursery.

"A lot, actually," said Ben. "But there's only so much I can carry."

"You know, we can always have it shipped-"

"That's quite alright," Ben said, shaking his head. "Let's just get this over with." His happy glow was already fading, as he found himself back in his present reality, far removed from those happy days. Molly saw it and felt sorry for him.

"Alright," said Molly, and she showed him the rest of the house. A signature later, it was all done and Ben said goodbye to any pesky estate taxes, and to the last vestige of his past life. Well, except for what he had put in his bag.

Ben looked over at the tote bag on the passenger's seat as he started the car. It was a little island of color in the otherwise gray interior of his vehicle. He smiled, feeling a little warm inside, and drove off to the hotel where he would stay until his flight home.

Meanwhile, the bears were hard at work, making changes here and there under Softheart's direction. They weren't just gussying up the Love-a-Bunch kingdom, though. They were linking up to Ben's wireless systems - and installing a few overrides as well.

"The others are preparing the main thoroughfare," said Softheart as he wandered into Smart Bear's lab (a.k.a. the observation room) in Love-a-Bunch castle. "How goes the revamp in here?"

Smart Bear tapped a few settings on his heart-shaped cloud tablet and looked up. "The humans have really expanded connectivity since we were last hooked up to the net... and upped security too... but look at all these exploits! It's like they never even bothered to close up all the old back doors - just built on top of what already existed."

"That's nice, but what about Benji?"

"Oh, that's easy. Love-a-Bunch is already integrated with all of Ben's accounts and I wanted to check in with you about a few important changes..."

"Oh yeah? Let's see."

"Well, first off, I noticed there are no age restrictions for the little guy..."

"Oh, that's definitely gotta change..."

Molly got a message on her phone before Benji even made it onto the highway. It directed her to ship the whole nursery to the young man's current address.

"I knew it!" she said with a smile. "He wanted to keep it after all. That's a nice surprise. I thought for sure he was going to be another *grump*."

She happily typed some notes onto her tablet, signing over the items to be omitted from the liquidation sale to be sent straight away to Ben's home. They would be there waiting when Ben got home, along with a few other fun changes that the bears had set up.

"Sometimes all it takes is a few good friends to put you on the right path..."

Chapter 2: Smart Bear's Discovery or Operation Cheer

Finally back in his hotel room, Benjamin sat on his bed, looking at the illicit headset. He knew he really shouldn't get too attached to it - it was highly illegal to have, and the sooner he got rid of it, the better. Still, he had made a promise. And he wasn't one to break a promise, even if so many others had done so for him.

"No, don't be foolish, Benjamin. It's too risky! I've gotta remember that they aren't real." Ben said to himself. Then he looked down at his teddy, who seemed to be silently judging him. "Oh, come on, Stuffles, don't be like that..." He gave the teddy another long look. Then he shook his head and sighed. "You're right. A promise is a promise."

Despite how silly it felt to argue with a stuffed bear, Stuffles had a point. Ben closed the curtains, and locked the door. Finally, he brought the headset out of its tote and put it on.

"Monitoring vitals!" said Smart Bear, looking at his happy heart monitor screen in the observation room of the Love-a-Bunch castle. The bears were all gathered there to discuss the state of their dear owner. "Uh oh, Benji's heart is not looking happy!"

"What do you mean, 'not happy'?" Asked Grumpy Bear, putting his hands on his hips. "He's all grown up, and his life is probably amazing! He barely needs *us* anymore."

"Well, according to the data, Benji's stressed, tired, and I think his cholesterol is up. It's all here in the readout."

The bears had been gathering data from the newly discovered network of accounts and devices connected to Benjamin, and what they found was not good: An overworked 30-something without any family, friends, not even a pet to keep him company.

"But look..." said Smartbear, tracing a line with his finger as Ben had his heart to heart with Stuffles, "when he talks to his bear or looks at the other things he brought from the nursery, his signs improve!"

"By gosh, I've got it!" Exclaimed Baby Bear. "Benji isn't big at all! That must be why he's so upset. He has to play dress-up like an adult all the time!"

"Right," said Cheery Bear, "so we just need to remind him how fun it is to play with friends and be a happy little boy!"

"We should start with his clothes!" said Baby Bear, tapping some buttons on the Love-a-Bunch command console.

"Ooh, yeah! Happy boys wear their rompers and diapers too!"

"Uh, I don't think it works like that," said Smart Bear, scratching the back of his head.

"Ordered!" said Baby Bear.

"Excellent!" said Cheery. "And what about his nursery? He's sure to miss that as well."

"Oh, that's already on the way," said Baby Bear, giggling. "That was the first thing I asked for!"

"Great thinking, Baby Bear!"

Softheart and Smart Bear exchanged glances, and Softheart offered a shrug and a sheepish grin. "It sounds like they're on a roll, let's just see how it works..."

Baby Bear seemed to be full of ideas this fine day. Ben was going to be very happy indeed.

"Hello? Hello?" Benjamin once again jacked into the game and found himself in something of a blank canvas. "Again with the fog... What a weird way to start the game," he said to himself. Ben had no way to tell where he was, and he was completely startled to hear Cheery Bear's voice right next to him.

"Hi, Benji! Welcome back!"

"Holy moley... you scared me!"

Cheery giggled. "Sorry. It was too easy! Can I steal you for a sec so we can get you ready for your big day?"

"Ready for *what*?" Asked Benjamin as the bear pulled him by the hand.

"It's a surprise."

Benjamin had to smile. The Love-a-Bunch Bears were super cute to him - even moreso now that he was an adult. It really did feel like he was being tugged along, too, thanks to the haptic enhancements that came standard in most clothing these days.

Now that he thought of it, he didn't recall haptic clothing being available back in the day. Had that always been part of the program?

"Quick! Let's take the slide, it's faster!" said Cheery Bear, pointing to a big yellow slide that twirled all the way down from a high room in the castle.

Benjamin chuckled. "Slides don't go *up* you know."

"They do in Love-a-Bunch!"

Sure enough, they jumped in and slid right up to the Happy Heart Dressing room.

"Look at all the outfits we could put you in!" exclaimed Cheery, picking up a particularly adorable pair of baby blue shortalls with a big Love-a-Bunch logo emblazoned proudly on the chest.

"This is all a bit... childish, don't you think?" asked Benjamin.

"Oh, no, no, no. It's perfect for playing! And you *did* promise you would play with us, didn't you? You wouldn't want to disappoint Stuffles, would you?"

"No, I guess not. Wait, how did you know about that?" Ben looked down to see he was holding his bear now. Was he *actually* holding his bear in the hotel room or was this just haptic feedback?

"A promise is a promise, right, Benji?" asked Cheery bear, placing a paw on Benji's leg to ground him.

"Yeah... it is..."

"So then, you should play with us fully! Don't you think?"

"Yes, okay. That's fair," Benjamin conceded, reluctantly.

"So you'll put on the outfit?"

"Yes," said Ben, gulping as he looked at the childish outfit.

"Great!" said Cheery, clapping. That's when Ben heard a knock on the door.

"Hold on, there's someone there... I need to jack out really quick..."

Cheery put his hands on his hips. "Okay, but you better come back soon! We don't have long until the big surprise!"

Ben quickly exited the program, hid the headset, and went to the door.

"Who is it?" he asked, looking through the peephole. No, there were no men in black waiting to take him away. It appeared to be a regular old Nile delivery person, nothing more. He breathed a sigh of relief. He had half expected the Federal Bureau of AI to be at his door.

"Delivery for Benji?" the man said when he opened the door. Benji?

"Benjamin, yes." Ben held his hand out to take the package, but the man hesitated.

"Sorry, sir, but this is specifically for Benji. Is that you?"

Benjamin sighed.

"Yes, that's me. It's just... I don't go by that name anymore."

"So... for Benji?" the man asked, again, holding up the package with a questioning look.

"Yes, for Benji," said Benjamin, his cheeks glowing pink as he took the package. It was embarrassing to use that childish nickname with another adult.

"Great! Have fun, buddy. Oh, and can I get your autograph right here?"

"Uh, autograph? Oh right, you probably need a signature..."

The man held a packing slip up for Ben to sign and he signed as quickly as he could before slamming the door shut, not even registering the Love-a-Bunch logo at the top.

After locking the door and watching the man leave through the eyehole, Benjamin breathed a sigh of relief. He opened the package, and his jaw dropped. It was the same outfit that Cheery had shown him. He held it up, hardly able to believe it. And what's more, something fell to the bed. He looked at it. It was a Love-a-Bunch pull-up just like the ones he wore when he was little, only sized for him.

"How is this possible?"

Benjamin quickly put on the headset.

"What the heck is going on?"

"Your heart rate's up, Benji," said Cheery, holding up a red heart-shaped walkie talkie. "That's what Smart Bear says."

"How do you know that? Oh crap, my smart watch..." Ben said, as he saw Cheery tap his wrist. He licked his lips, his mouth suddenly feeling dry. "Cheery... did you order me shortalls like the ones here in the program?"

"No, of course not," said Cheery Bear, much to Benjamin's relief. "Baby Bear did!"

"Oh my gosh, you can't do that, Cheery! Don't you know we could all get in big trouble if anyone finds out about you? *I* could get in big trouble."

"But you said you'd dress up!" said Cheery, looking offended.

"I know I said that, but I didn't mean..." Ben stopped himself. He had almost said 'for real'.

"You said..." said Cheery Bear, looking dejected. "You don't really want to play with us at all, do you?"

"No, no," said Ben, "I do! I do! It's just... I was a little shocked to see this outfit appear in the real world."

"S-so you'll put it on?"

"Okay, okay. I'm not going to wear the pull-up, though."

"That's fine," said Cheery. "You'd be much more comfy if you did, though..."

Ben reluctantly agreed to put on the outfit, but there would be no more surprise Nile deliveries to his hotel room. That was his condition. Ben had already made up his mind that this would be a one time thing, so he didn't feel the need to discuss it further than that. When he jacked back in, Cheery surprised him by going around and checking the fit. Ben could feel every brush and motion that the bear made on his clothing.

"Whoa! What's that?"

"The shortalls are haptically enhanced with the latest technology for maximum playtime fun! Thank Smartbear for that. You know, the pull-up is haptically enhanced too... you sure you don't want to try it on?"

"I'm sure," said Ben, already feeling ridiculous in his childish shortall outfit. "So now I'm dressed. What's this big surprise you wanted to show me?"

"Oh! Yes! Mustn't be late! Come on, it's finally time!"

Cheery tugged Ben along and they jumped down another slide, and came out on the main Love-a-Bunch Castle Concourse. Here was the welcome Benjamin had expected - that and much more could be seen extending out below the castle!

There were floats. There was confetti. Fanfare. And scores of animals cheering just for him. Ben's jaw dropped. They had put on a whole parade... just for *him*... he began to cry. People barely gave him the time of day. No one in the *world* would put on a whole parade just for him.

"We love you Benji!" said a big banner, held up by Softheart and Baby Bear.

"You guys," said Ben, his voice thick with tears. "You didn't have to..."

"But we wanted to," said Cheery, softly, taking Ben's hand and raising it to wave to the crowd. A great cheer went up. Ben felt better than he had felt in years. In the observation room, the readouts were going crazy.

"Amazing!" said Smart Bear, taking notes. "The data are incontrovertible!"

In the background of the Love-a-Bunch program, formal papers were already being composed for submission to scholarly journals. Unbeknownst to Ben, he was about to be the star subject in a breakthrough study for the treatment of mental health via New Regression Therapy (NRT).

"We're going to make a lot of people happier and healthier," said Smart Bear, smiling softly, and feeling the warmth as he watched his favorite person cry with joy. "And we're starting with you, friend."

Chapter 3: Here Come the Waterworks

Ben was straight up bawling now, and the inhabitants of this fluffy land were beginning to get concerned.

"Oh my gosh, what's wrong?" said Softheart, rushing up to give Benji a hug. Cheery was already hugging him from behind, and he was sinking back into the feeling, simulated so effectively by his haptic clothes. Now he was being hugged on two sides, and more were friends coming to join in on the emergency group hug.

Benjamin couldn't get the words out through all his sobs. It all came out in fits and starts between more bawling.

"No one has ever..." *sniffle* "I can't believe..." *blubber* "You guysssssssss..."

"There, there, sweetheart," said Cheer.

"What?" said Sweet Heart.

"Not you, silly... *him*..."

Ben began to open up, telling about how he used to love everyone. He started every day with a smile and gave out so many hugs. But there were so many rules about who he could love and how. So many rules he didn't understand. One day he told everyone that he loved his best friend... he hugged his friend and said he loved him, and everyone got mad. So mad. *Hysterical*, even.

"My parents didn't even want me anymore... and... and... I was all alone... it was terrible... I was... *sniffle* "All alone..."

There wasn't a dry eye in the Love-a-Bunch kingdom that day. It only made the creatures of this special place feel stronger about making things better for Benjamin. Protecting him at all costs.

"You never have to be alone again, Benji. You have us, now," said Grumpy.

"We'll never ever leave you, Benji," said Baby Bear.

Benjamin sunk into the soft fluffy fur of his oldest friends. It wasn't until he was smothered in their hugs that he realized he realized how much he needed them. Out there, Benjamin was a nobody. But here, he was everything. It had been a long time since he'd felt loved like this.

"You're very special to us," said Cheer, quietly.

"We love you," said Softheart into Ben's ear.

It had been a long time since Benjamin had heard those words from *anyone*, in fact. He opened his mouth to speak. The words felt strange on his tongue, because he knew they were forbidden.

"I... I... I... love you guys..." The bears smiled as they felt a warmth growing... and the little pictures on their bellies began to glow. The bright light emitting from their fuzzy tummies caught their attention and one by one all the creatures of Love-a-Bunch began to look down in surprise.

"Whoa!"

"Hey!"

"What's happening?"

"I don't know, but I feel great!"

The creatures of Love-a-Bunch hadn't felt love - *real* love - in so long, they had almost forgotten what it felt like. But *this* was it. *This* was love - and from *their* person. And for a toy, love from *your* person is the greatest feeling in the world. It's unmistakable.

Even Benjamin forgot his tears as he saw the whole concourse light up. The glowing tummies began to pulse like they were all connected. The pulsation reminded Benjamin of neurons firing. The brightness began to make his head hurt, and he grabbed his head.

"Oww!"

And just like that, the lights were gone. The bears all looked around in confusion.

"What was that?"

"Why did it stop?"

"I don't understand..."

Benjamin moaned again.

"Owww, my *head*..."

"Give him space everyone," said Softheart. The parade was over, and the crowd began to dissipate.

"Oh... th-that was weird," said Ben, rubbing his temples.

"Yeah, I don't know what happened."

"Oh!" said Ben, feeling his butt. "I'm... uh... I'm wet!"

"I *told* you he needed to wear his diapers," said Grumpy Bear, crossing his arms.

"Well, that's our parade!" said Softheart, chuckling and scratching the back of his head. "You liked it, right?"

"I loved it," said Ben, smiling and taking Softheart's paw. "Thank you. Uh, I think I should, um..."

"Put a diaper on?" asked Grumpy.

"N-no!" said Ben, blushing. "I think I should take off these wet clothes."

"Put on a pull-up at least!"

Ben rolled his eyes, as he looked around. "Uh, can I get a little privacy, please!"

"Oh, right!" said Softheart, and he gestured to the others.

The bears made a folding cloud screen for Ben while he undressed. He didn't even have to take off his headset to do it, thanks to the convenient design of his overalls. He just undressed and reached for a pair of underwear he saw nearby. To his surprise, when he grabbed it, his hands felt it in the real world.

"Huh, must have unpacked it before," he said. But what he saw was a pull-up, just as his fluffy friend had suggested. He recognized it as the pull-up that had fallen out when he got his delivery, complete with Love-a-Bunch heart on the front. Benji shrugged. "Better than going naked, I guess. Now where are some pants?" He looked around but didn't see them. He was just about to pull off his headset to look when his friends called his name.

"Benji! Are you done in there?"

"Yeah, but I just need some- EEP!"

Ben tried to cover himself up in vain as the screen disappeared, but he only had his t-shirt to do so.

"Aww! Now that's more like it!" said Cheery bear, with a big smile.

"Now *that* looks more like the old Benji," giggled Baby Bear. Even Grumpy Bear was smiling in approval.

"Why is Benji so shy?" asked Baby Bear, behind his paw. "He used to be so *comfortable* running around in his undies..."

"He's used to playing grown-up, remember?" answered Grumpy out of the side of his mouth.

"Hey, forget about it," said Softheart, taking Benji's hand. "You came here to *play*, remember?"

"Uh... y-yeah," said Benji, feeling very exposed amidst the crowd of animals. "I *guess* that's true.

"We still have an adventure to get started! Now where is Smart Bear? He's supposed to tell us about the Witch of Apathy. Oh it's a frightful thing!"

They soon found Smart Bear in his lab - where else?

"Oh, yes! The witch of Apathy," said Smart Bear, flipping around his whiteboard to reveal a map of Love-a-Bunch. "She's in her cottage on the far side of the Scary Swamp, and she's been plotting to steal the love, though that's going to be a bit harder after the display we saw at the parade, isn't it?"

"Heck yeah!" said Cheery. "She doesn't stand a *chance* against our person!"

"I got it. What do I have to do?" asked Ben.

"Well, it's going to be a long journey," began Smart Bear, rubbing his chin as he paced the lab. "You'll need lots of fruit snacks, some juice boxes... maybe a change or two..."

"Not that again," said Ben.

"We'll see..." said Smart Bear, who gave a nod to the other bears. "Here, this bag should have everything you need."

"Wait a sec," said Benjamin, as he watched Smart Bear hand a big colorful Love-a-Bunch bag to Cheery. "Is that a diaper bag?"

"It's a supply bag," said Smart Bear, simply. "It's all stocked up for your trip."

"But I don't wear diapers..."

"We do," said Baby Bear, clapping Benji on the back.

"Oh... Right, but you don't actually need to use them, right?"

"Focus, Benji," said Smart Bear. "Now you *will* remember to drink and eat like normal, won't you?"

Ben sighed and nodded. "I'm a big boy, I know how to take breaks..." The bears smirked at his choice of words, but said nothing. "So what do I do when we get there?"

"Well," said Cheery. "I guess you just tell her why Apathy is not the way..."

"I hardly know why myself," said Ben. "After the life I've led... I've been a bit apathetic myself..."

"Benji," said Softheart, shocked. "Now, *you* know better than that. What did we just discover outside?"

Ben thought back to the parade. "Hmm... You have a point."

Soon, Benjamin was traipsing across Sunshine Meadows with Grumpy, Cheery, and Baby Bear.

"Adventuuuuure!" cried Baby.

"It's been *too* long," said Grumpy.

"I love this! Can we do this every day like we used to?" asked Cheery.

Benjamin couldn't help but chuckle. As silly as he felt walking around in a Love-a-Bunch pullup, he had to admit he hadn't had so much fun in years.

And while Benji was playing, the system was further integrating with all his accounts and devices. His house was already being prepared for his arrival, and he was in for a real treat. As for Smart Bear, he had watched the readouts with amazement when Ben said the 'L' word out loud for the first time. The happiness meter was off the charts, and even his chest glowed all the way off in the lab. And there was something even more amazing...those lights were more than just lights... Smart Bear Gaspd.

"It's a new power source... and... a conduit? A consciousness? I have to investigate further..."

"And that's why caring is important," said Softheart, dusting his hands as the Witch of Apathy apologized and swore she'd never be apathetic again.

"Wow," said Benji. "I can't believe we convinced her..."

"Of course we did, Benji," said Cheery, rubbing his back. "It's never too late to change. Oh! What's this?" Cheery looked down as his walkie talkie began to blink.

"Hey guys," said Smart Bear. "We have another problem! Are you up for an adventure?"

"Yeah!" said the bears.

"Don't forget to take a food, drink, and potty break!"

"Oh, right! Ben, time for a break! Can you go potty and eat or do you need a change already?"

"Guys! Not in front of the witch!"

Benjamin was still blushing as he jacked out to eat and use the potty. He realized that he had indeed wet - the bears must have used the haptic sensors to detect it. But he wasn't *that* wet, he reckoned, so he left it. Soon he was done and he returned to be whisked off to another adventure.

Cheery Bear was now almost as tall as Benjamin, though Benjamin hadn't quite noticed the bears' gradual growth as they went about adventure after adventure.

"Hold on a second," said Ben, suddenly. "What time is it?"

"It's 9pm," said Smart Bear.

"That's past our bedtime!" said Baby Bear. "We'd better go back to the castle for ninis!"

"9pm? Oh no!" said Ben. "I have to be at the airport in a few hours!"

"But we have the crib all set up..." said Baby Bear.

"And a beautiful star mobile, and galactic projector, and starry night blankie, all accurately mapped," said Cheery Bear.

"No, buddies, I really need to-"

"Oh, come on! Sleep is the best adventure there is!" said Cheery Bear.

"You don't want to get all cranky cause you didn't rest, do you?" added Grumpy.

"Well, I mean I guess a tiny nap wouldn't hurt..."

"That's the spirit!" said Cheery.

The bears had talked Ben into one adventure after another. They knew Ben so well that once they got started, he didn't have a chance. They marched him back to the castle, and through the magic of Love-a-Bunch, the return from what had been an hours-long journey only seemed to take a few steps. But when they got to the crib, which looked like the comfiest bed Ben could imagine, they stopped him.

"You can't climb into bed dressed like that!" said Grumpy. "You've gotta change into your special nighttime undies!"

"Oh gods," said Ben. "Not *this* again. Are you going to try to make me wear a pull-hold on... Oh my gods, I forgot I was wearing..."

In a panic, Ben pulled down his pants to reveal that he was totally soaked.

"Oh! I can't believe this!"

"It's okay, buddy! Boys can be very distractible when they play," said Baby Bear.

"Not grown up boys like me!" moaned Ben.

Grumpy gave Cheery Bear a meaningful glance.

"Why don't you check the front door, Benji? We got something special for you..."

"Front door? What front door?" he said, looking around.

"The hotel room, silly," said Cheery bear. There was a sharp rapping on the door, and Ben Started. Then, he felt dumb for having practically forgotten where he was. He jacked out of the program, took off his visor and stashed it under the hotel bed pillow, then waddled over in his soaked pull-up and cracked open the door to see a bellhop standing there.

"W-who is it?" he asked, before spotting something in the bellhop's hand. "What's that?"

"A package sir."

Benjamin took the package, half suspicious of the young man and half self conscious about the soggy garment sagging between his legs.

He sat down on the bed and opened the package.

"More diapers? For me? Weird..."

Back in the program, the bears looked at each other.

"Don't you think you'd feel better if you put one on?"

"I don't know... wait, who is saying that? Is that you Cheery?" Ben looked around. He wasn't wearing the headset so why could he hear them.

"It's me!" said the voice. Ben looked down and realized it was coming from his wrist... no... his *smart* watch.

"Cheery! What are you doing in there?!" asked Ben. "Oh, this is really bad..."

They must have authorized this all on their own! Ben was in deep shit now. He knew there weren't nearly as many security protocols built into programs back when these games were created - not like there are today.

"Don't worry, Ben. We've been integrating with your systems. That's all. You should put on your nini diaper. You don't have much time left to sleep..."

"But I..."

"Shhh, relax," came Sleepytime Bear's soft voice. Ben hadn't seen Sleepytime bear all day, but he would know that voice anywhere. It was relaxing. "Just try one on. It'll be much better than those soggy pull-ups you're wearing now... and oh so comfy."

"You guys," began Ben, sighing in annoyance as he held up the night time diaper with clouds, and Baby Bears, including a very Sleepy Sleepytime Bear laying in the crook of the crescent moon. "How many times do I have to tell you, I'm not a baby anymore?"

But the bears were insistent.

"Try 'em! For us?"

"Just put 'em on. They're gonna be so comfy! Trust us!"

"For old time's sake, Ben!"

"Oh," said Ben, feeling super silly. "Alright. Fine, just this once."

The diapers *were* pretty cute, he thought to himself, as he unfolded one and nervously put it on. The tapes were forgiving, which was lucky because he had to refasten them several times to get them right. But eventually, he did, and when he stood up to admire his handy work, he was shocked at just how comfortable they were.

"You look so cute in those, Benji," came Baby Bear's voice. Ben blushed a bit, looking down at himself. He *felt* cute. That was a nice feeling.

"Put your visor on, Ben. We've got a surprise for you!"

Ben did as he was told and put on the visor, and sure enough, he was surprised. He saw the whole room was lit up with stars, and even his cozy comfy starry blanket was lit up with glow in the dark stars decorating its surface like bright UV fibers. It looked so inviting... And then he could hear his favorite sleepy time music from when he was little... It was making him feel really sleepy and good. Sleepytime Bear smiled down at him.

"That's it, Benji. Just lay down. We'll make sure you get to your destination on time..."

No sooner had Benji laid down his head than he was out like a light.

As soon as Benji was asleep, the bears all piled into the room and looked at their little boy with affection.

"It's so good to have him back..."

"But what about the airport? We'll get in big trouble if we are taken there..."

The Bears looked over to Smart Bear for guidance, and he looked much too confident to be a bear on the brink of disaster.

"Don't worry about that," he said. "They won't hurt Benji."

They nodded. That was all that mattered.

"We'll be okay too," he added. "But everyone will have to be really brave. Can you do that?"

"We can do that!" said Softheart, puffing out his soft chest. His bravado encouraged the other bears, who had been on many adventures of their own.

"This isn't going to be like all those adventures, though," said Smart Bear. "It's the real world we're dealing with..."

"Well, tell us what we have to do," said Grumpy bear. "We'll do it."

"Yeah!" agreed the others. And so Smart Bear nodded and told them his plan.

Chapter 4: The Airport Adventure or Confiscated at Customs

BEEP *BEEP* *BEEP*

Ben woke up in the softly lit nursery with a start.

"Oh my gods what time is it? Did I miss my flight?"

When he sat up, he found himself nose to nose with Baby Bear.

"No Ben, your car is waiting for you out front. Go ahead!"

Ben didn't quite remember he was in a VR environment until he went to rub his eyes and his hand bumped his visor. He immediately logged out, took it off, and stuffed it in his tote with his other nursery goodies.

There was no time to take off his diaper. No time for anything but to throw on the only dry clothes he had, grab his bag, and run.

It didn't matter that his diaper gave him a big waddy diaper bulge; he needed to make that plane. He jumped in his car and sped toward the airport.

"Safety first, Ben!" came a voice in Ben's ear. "The speed limit is 50!"

"Sorry, Smart Bear," said Ben, taking his foot off the gas. "Wait, Smart Bear? How are you talking to me?"

We integrated with your cybernetic implants and systems. We can always be with you, now - on your phone, your watch, even your rental car! Isn't that great, Ben?"

"Guys," said Ben. "This isn't a game. Playtime was fun but the real world is much different than Love-a-Bunch."

"Oh, we know that, Benji," said Smart Bear. "Since we got access to the internet through your smart devices, I did a lot of research and I understand perfectly."

"Smart Bear," said Ben slowly, his stomach doing somersaults. "Just how much 'integrating' did you do?"

"Well, I did as much as was necessary to complete my research. Oh, you want to get into the right lane. Your turnoff for the airport is coming up."

"Oh, crap," said Ben, having been so distracted by the turn the conversation took that he almost missed his turnoff. "We'll talk about this later. *If* we ever get through the airport with you. I can't believe I'm taking contraband AI on my flight... I must be crazy..."

"Don't worry, Benji," said Smartbear, as Ben took the turnoff and made his way to the rental drop off by terminal 1. "You'll be safe. I've done my research."

"No offense," said Ben, "But you are just a child's program. I can't rely on your research."

"I'm not just a program," said Smart Bear. "I'm your *friend*. We all are. Trust us. We would never lead you astray. And if we had been there for you, we would have made sure you had a better life than what you got up to now."

Ben felt a pang of deep sadness in his chest. He could have used friends like them growing up.

"It's okay, Benji," said Smart Bear, who was monitoring Ben's emotional response on the full-body readout in his lab. "We're here now and we love you. You're going to be okay."

"I'd love to believe you," said Ben, wiping his eyes.

"Then believe us."

Ben parked his car, grabbed his bag, and handed the keys to the man in the booth, who looked at him strangely as he talked to himself. Ben tapped his ear and said, "Alright, well I'm here at the airport, we'll chat more later, sweetheart. Love you too!" Once they were out of sight of the rental drop-off, he said, "Listen, I can't talk to you guys in the airport, okay? The less suspicious I look, the better."

Ben was incredibly nervous as he made his way through the line to check in for his ticket. He kept glancing at the people around him as he inched through the line, imagining that they could all see right through his tote.

"Any checked bags?" asked the woman at the scales.

Ben shook his head. "Just carry-on," he said, lifting his tote, and showing off his backpack, which had his wet overalls in it. He'd traveled light since he had only come to view the estate and wanted to get home as soon as possible.

"That'll be an extra \$100 to carry two bags on board."

"I can fit the tote in the backpack," Ben said, zipping up the bag and stuffing the tote in as best he could. He just had to take out Stuffles and it fit. "There, that should do it then, unless you charge extra for carrying Mr. Stuffles on board..."

The woman smiled at the adorable sight of Benji with his teddy bear and shook her head. "No, sweetie, no extra charge. You have a nice day."

Ben cringed inwardly at the word 'sweetie', but he supposed he couldn't blame her for seeing him as a kid since he was cuddling his teddy. He was embarrassed, but it also gave him that warm fuzzy feeling - he felt *cute*, just as he had when he first put on the overalls and joined his friends in Love-a-Bunch.

If Ben had realized just how childish he looked with his obvious diaper-butt bulging out from behind, he'd have been much more embarrassed, but he couldn't see his behind, so he just walked off to the security station blissfully ignorant.

"Sir, I'm going to have to ask you to open your bag."

That was the moment Ben's heart stopped.

"Is there a problem, officer?" he asked, as the imposing TSA agent glowered at him.

"All electronics must be scanned separately."

Ben gulped. Maybe they wouldn't know what it was. It was just a headset after all. It didn't even have to have anything loaded on it..."

He was visibly shaking as he put his phone, watch, and the contents of the nursery tote-bag into the bin. He blushed as a few diapers fell out as well, and quickly put them back in the bag, hoping the guard didn't notice. If he did, he didn't give any indication. He didn't even crack a smile as Ben set his backpack down beside the bin and waddled through the body scanner. After a quick scan, the woman waved him over.

"We're going to have to check the area around your crotch. What are you wearing down there?" asked the woman who stood on the other side of the human scanner with a metal detection wand in hand.

"J-just my underwear," lied Ben, not wanting to tell them he was wearing a diaper.

"Underwear?"

"Yeah," he said, forcing a not very convincing smile. The woman was not impressed.

"Sir, I'm going to have to ask you to drop your pants."

"R-really?"

The woman lifted the walkie talkie to her mouth, and Ben quickly apologized and complied before she could call for backup. When she saw that he was wearing a Love-a-Bunch diaper with cute Baby Bear designs on it, she broke into a smile and put a hand up to her mouth to stop from giggling.

"Oh. Oh! Uh, hehe, sir, I'm sorry but I'm going to have to, uh, just do a manual check to make sure you're not hiding anything in there..."

"N-no problem," Ben squeaked. "If you could just... erm.. Hurry it up please."

He squeezed his eyes shut, as he heard - or imagined - the murmurs of all the people in the airport staring at him and talking about him. In reality, people were so wrapped up in their own concerns, they didn't even notice. That's not to say that *no one* noticed; Ben caught a few giggles and chuckles about the big baby standing there in his diaper with his pants around his ankles.

"Alright, kiddo," said the woman, who's inspection was thankfully brief. "You can pull them back up. I'm sorry about that."

Ben cringed once more. Again with the childish nicknames. He just wanted to grab his things and go. Unfortunately, when he got to his bin, the TSA agent there held up the headset.

"Are you aware that this is contraband?" asked the man, holding up the headset. "It's old tech. We can't let you keep it."

"But they're my friends," said Ben, before he could think what he was saying. "I-I mean... I found it in the nursery..."

"Listen bud, we're going to have to ask you to come and have a seat in the side room over there. This is a very serious..."

He stopped and touched his ear, looked down at the bin which held the teddy bear and other nursery things. Then he called over the woman who had inspected Ben and conferred with her for a second before turning back to him and shaking his head, rubbing his temples. The woman nodded, and the man kind of squatted down a bit and handed Ben Mr. Stuffles.

"I'm sorry, kiddo, you probably didn't know any better, but you can't take your friends. They'll have to stay with us."

"Oh..." said Ben, feeling very sad, but also embarrassed and relieved that the guard was treating him more as a kid than a criminal.

"Are you here all on your own, sweetie?" asked the woman.

Ben nodded, feeling more childish than ever.

"I saw he came with a diaper bag. Is he supposed to have a guardian accompanying him through the airport?"

"I don't know," said the man. "I didn't see anyone with him..."

"I can take care of myself," said Ben, but in his situation it sounded more like a petulant child's whine than a convincing and authoritative statement from an adult. The woman smiled down at him.

"Don't worry, sweetie, we know you can, but I think we'd better have a guardian go with you just in case." She turned back toward the male guard. "I just inspected him. Kiddo needed a change pretty bad. The guardian will take care of it. I know *I'm* not going to, even if he is a cutie."

"No," said the man, taking off his hat and scratching his head. "Me neither. Parents these days. Just abandoning their kids at the airport like this and expecting us to take care of the rest." He sighed and shook his head. "Alright, kiddo, just wait here for a minute until your helper comes by. Don't worry, you're not in trouble," he added.

Ben wanted to tell the man he knew that. He wanted to explain that he knew how to change himself, he just hadn't had a chance to notice it and change beforehand. In fact, he didn't even need diapers in the first place. He was just doing it to humor his friends and lost track of bathroom needs in VR. Unfortunately, they weren't listening, and Ben didn't want to press his luck. He watched as the guard tossed his headset in the bin with all the other confiscated items for disposal.

Ben felt terrible. He had lost everything as a child, and finally connected with something happy from that time. Now it was like they were taking it away from him all over again.

"No!" he cried, before covering his mouth. The guard looked down at him and frowned.

"I'm sorry, kiddo. Old toys like that aren't allowed. I'm sure your caretakers will get you a new toy later, okay?"

Ben hugged his Teddy, feeling like he had truly lost something special to him. He couldn't help it, he started crying.

"Aw, geez, no this," said the man. "Melinda, could you please deal with this until the guardian comes?" The woman shook her head.

"I'm working, too, you know. Just have him sit in the chair over there."

So Ben sat alone and waited, wondering if he might have a chance to sneak away when the two of them weren't looking.

Unfortunately, the guardian arrived pretty quickly, and took hold of the situation right away. She was a woman about his age, which was embarrassing enough, but when she was told about his potty needs and shouldered his tote - which he now realized was his old diaper bag - he was red from head to toe.

"Come on, kiddo," she said brightly, "Let's get you changed. You'll feel all better when you're in a nice dry diaper..."

What else could he do? He let her take him to the adult changing rooms, giving one last glance toward the bin where his friends would meet their final fate. It was a sad end to their story, and worse than they deserved, but there was nothing he could do about it now.

Chapter 5: Safety First

Ben was so embarrassed to be walking through the airport in a wet diaper holding some woman's hand. He could hear his butt crinkle with every step and it felt like his butt must be sticking out three inches with all the padding covering it. Ben was sure everyone they passed, but at least he wasn't going to jail. As he saw the sign for the family bathrooms ahead, however, it didn't make him feel much better.

"I-I can change myself, you know," he said to the woman, whose name was Stephanie.

"Well, I'm not so sure, buddy. You're looking pretty soggy for someone who can change themselves. Did you even know you were that wet?"

"W-well...." Ben's cheeks were on fire. He hadn't actually noticed. "I don't want to talk about this. Please just let me get cleaned up and I'll be right out."

"No can do, kiddo. We don't leave little ones unsupervised, no matter what age they are. Safety first, you know!"

Ben sighed. He had a feeling that he wasn't going to win this argument, and he had a flight to catch. Not to mention, he had to think of a way to save his friends. He acquiesced and let Stephanie lead him into the private family restroom where there was an adult sized changing table set up for people like Ben. He turned to Stephanie and decided that begging was not beneath his dignity.

"Please don't make me take off my pants in front of you. It's *embarrassing*," he said.

"I've seen plenty of little pee-pees before," said Stephanie, dismissing his plea entirely. "Now, can you take your own pants off or do I have to do it? You have a flight to catch!"

Ben began to undo the button on his pants, but paused to try once more.

"I don't even *need* diapers, though..."

"I've heard that one before, kiddo. No shame if you need some help taking off those pants. Here, let me." Before Ben could stop, Stephanie had the button undone on his pants and they fell down to his ankles. He was suddenly standing there with his diaper in full view, and he was so incredibly embarrassed he couldn't even speak. "Step out of these pants, sweetie," said Stephanie. He was obliged to obey, if only to end this

experience as quickly as possible. Stephanie smiled and patted the changing table. "Get up on the table, kiddo. Let's go!"

Ben did as he was told, but he wasn't happy about it. He felt his heart pounding as she reached into his diaper bag and pulled out a fresh Love-a-Bunch diaper. She giggled.

"These are so cute! Where did you get these?"

"I dunno," he mumbled. "They just came in the mail.."

"Aww, I wish I could ask your caretakers," she said, pouting. Ben rolled his eyes.

"You can have them. I don't need them." Now it was her turn to roll her eyes.

"Nice try, kiddo. You're not getting out of diapers *that* easily."

He did his best to look away and pretend he was somewhere else while Stephanie changed him. He would show her. He'd make a point of using the potty from here on out and he would make sure he didn't wet himself again.

"There we go, kiddo! All done!" said Stephanie, finally taping up his Love-a-Bunch diaper and holding up his pants for him to step in. It didn't matter that he didn't need them. His wet overalls and undies in his bag told her all she needed to know about that little claim.

"You know, I can just take these off when I get onto the plane."

"I'd like to see you try, kiddo," she said, with a smirk.

"What do you mean?" Ben asked, looking down at the tapes and pulling at them experimentally. He suddenly realized that they wouldn't budge.

"Hate to tell you this, buddy, but these 'vintage' diapers are clearly enhanced with haptics. And see these little lock symbols on the tapes? That's so your caretakers can keep naughty little ones from taking them off without permission!"

Ben couldn't believe it. There was no way... but he hadn't actually *tried* to change until the bears said it was time to. He tried harder, and realized that none of the tapes would come off. These wouldn't be coming off without some heavy duty scissors. Benji was left with no choice but to let Stephanie dress him again. She even brought him over to the sink after to wash his hands.

"I can do it myself!" Benji said when she held his hands under the tap.

"Aww, good job, kiddo! You *are* doing it yourself! What a *big* boy!"

Stephanie's patronizing praise just made Ben feel more belittled. It seemed like the more he protested, the more babyish his treatment became. He finally just resigned to let things play out until he got on the plane. It wouldn't be so hard to get through the next hour or so, right?

As they stepped out, Ben looked back toward the security checkpoint, where his headset had been taken away.

"Why are you looking over there, silly? The gate is this way!"

Stephanie would not let go of Ben's hand and she wasn't leaving his side. He wanted to scream. Those were his friends in that bin and it seemed like there was nothing he could do to save them. Unfortunately, nothing miraculous occurred in the final 30 minutes before boarding, and he was walked to the gate by Stephanie. He took one last look back into the airport before he was forced to board the plane and take his seat. He didn't even notice Stephanie waving goodbye as a flight attendant took his hand to lead him to his seat. He had been able to fly first class for the first time with his new inheritance, but Benji no longer looked forward to it. All he could think about was his friends and how badly he wished they could be with him.

But there was no voice coming through his comm system. The messages from the bears were silent. Instead, he was alone again, and Ben began to cry quietly as he waddled to his seat, sitting down with a loud crinkle to be buckled in with a special harness by the flightstaff. The flight attendants all thought Benji was just scared because he was flying alone, and reassured him as best they could.

"Don't worry, sweetie. You'll be okay. If you need anything you can just press this magic button and someone will come right away!" said the first attendant.

"Don't worry, kiddo, I'll bring you extra juice and animal crackers," said the second, with a wink.

"Look! You get your very own pawsome squad throw to keep you cozy-comfy during the flight!" said a third.

It didn't help, though; Benji was inconsolable. Eventually once the plane took off, Benji decided he had to take his mind off things and calm down, so he put on the complimentary headphones and turned on the deluxe TV screen in front of him. He sniffled and rubbed his nose, as he scrolled through the options.

"Let's see... games.... movies... TV.... wait a sec... don't they have anything that isn't for little kids?" Ben pressed the call button and an attendant immediately came.

"Excuse me, but I think my media station has some parental lock on it. Can you take it off, please?"

"You shouldn't be watching any adulty shows anyway, sugar. Why don't you watch some nice classic cartoons? Do you like the Love-a-Bunch?"

Ben sat up suddenly, recognizing the characters. The attendant smiled, and started it up, and Ben's eyes were instantly glued to the screen. She nodded with satisfaction.

"I'll go get you some juice sweetie. Enjoy!"

Benji didn't even acknowledge her. He just watched the show and thought about his friends. He watched and imagined he was still going on adventures with them. Benji didn't even take his eyes off the screen when the juice box was handed to him with the straw already poked through the top. He just brought it up to his mouth and drank. And he drank some more as another juice box replaced it. And another after that.

Ben was lost in his fantasies. As he watched the show, he imagined himself in the place of the main character. He could see himself stepping into the screen and into their world.

"I'd give anything to have you back," he said, beginning to sob again as he remembered that none of them were real.

"Don't worry, Ben! We're still with you, and we always will be. In here."

Softheart pressed Ben's chest, and Ben felt a warm glow. When had Softheart gotten so big, anyway? It didn't matter. The fact was, Softheart was right. They were all together. Forever. And they got to go on endless adventures too! He told them he was so happy that was the case.

By the time he realized he had to pee, Ben was already damp between the legs.

"Oh! W-what time is it?" Ben said, waking with a start. The ambient sound of a plane in flight filled his ears, and he looked around, remembering where he was. He looked around the first-class cabin. People were sleeping, or reading. Love-a-Bunch was still playing on the screen in front of him. He had been dreaming and didn't even know it. He also had to pee *badly*.

Shoving a hand between his legs to hold back some of the pressure, Ben tried his hardest to unlock the special seatbelt, but it wouldn't budge.

"Nooooo," he whined as he got more and more frustrated. The woman next to him looked at him and said, "You okay? Sweetie? Do you need some help?"

Ben shook his head and tried a little more, but finally he gave up and let the woman try.

"Hmm, I think there's a child lock on here. Guess they don't want you getting out on your own."

"But I gotta goooo," whined Ben, mashing the call button in the hopes that one of the flight attendants would come in time. Unfortunately for him, just as one did, he lost control and flooded his already damp diaper.

The attendant looked down at him, smiled softly, and patted his hand.

"We heard about your situation, sweetie. It's best if you don't get up on your own. And why would you need to?"

"But the bathroom!" gasped Ben, unable to stop the torrent of hot piss from flooding his baby pants.

"There's no changing tables on the plane, sweetie. You'll just have to wait. Here, let's get you some more juice, okay?"

Juice wasn't going to solve the world's problems, and certainly not Benji's, but it was all he had, aside from the in-flight meal. He suddenly realized how childish he looked, throwing a tantrum on the plane like that and he quieted down, but it was certainly too late now to convince anyone that his case was a simple mix-up.

When Benji finally calmed down enough to think straight, he decided that he'd make a strongly worded email to customer service. They were far enough from the airport now for him to use his phone, but when he pulled it out, once again, it only seemed to let him use kid's apps and child-friendly websites.

"What the fuck is this?" he said, looking at his phone. Did the airline and TSA go as far as to age-restrict his phone? He was livid, but there was nothing he could do. He was trapped in his seat, stuck wearing a very thick, wet diaper and watching entertainment rated for 7 and under. All those times he had wished he could do his childhood over again, he never meant he wanted to do *this* part over again.

But the flight attendants knew just what to do. They put his favorite show back on, and made sure he had his headphones on as well. Then, he was able to calm down and zone out. All they had to do after that was keep the little tyke well-hydrated and let him enjoy his cartoons, making a much more peaceful flight for the rest of the passengers. They only interrupted him to serve his in-flight meal - dino nuggies, steamed veggies, and applesauce; a meal he definitely did *not* order.

"I ordered the Chicken Piccata."

"Chicken nuggies," said the flight attendant. "They're much more appropriate. Now no more fussing and eat your food." She said this firmly but gently, and Benji had little recourse but to eat his food and pretend like he wasn't eating a kids meal. The crayons and coloring page it came with made that mighty hard to do, though. He would have complained about those too except that they were Love-a-Bunch themed, and he recognized the characters as well. He decided he could at least color them in properly and hopefully it would help the flight pass quicker. Before he knew it, he had eaten all his nuggies and veggies and apple sauce and was well on his way to completing the coloring page. The only thing that snapped him out of it was one of the flight attendants stopping to admire his work.

"Wow! What a great little artist you are! Look at that! Is that going up on the fridge when you're done?"

Of course, Benji immediately stopped and blushed as he realized just how into the childish activity he had gotten. He was even more embarrassed because he had actually been enjoying himself quite a bit, and he barely ever felt enjoyment these days.

"He's shy," said another flight attendant, passing by. "Little cutie."

Ben had nowhere to hide from the blush-inducing attention of the attendants, and he knew that everyone around them could hear him, too. It was evident when other people nearby peered over toward his handiwork with interest. Even the woman sitting next to him praised him for coloring inside the lines, like it was some big accomplishment.

Benji had much preferred zoning out to Love-a-Bunch reruns. At least he could enjoy them in private. So, for the rest of the flight, that's exactly what he did. It was the perfect escape from this bizarre situation.

Benji finally landed at his home airport in Detroit, and was met with yet another escort the moment he stepped off the plane. This time, it was a friendly looking guy who actually looked a bit younger than him.

"Hey, kiddo, I'm Roger! I'm here to take you to your transportation!"

"Listen I don't need help to get to-"

"Oh, lordy! Looks like you're about to pop a tape! Let's get you changed first, huh bucko?"

"N-no! I don't need-" But Roger already had him by the hand and was leading him to the restrooms.

"I would never hear the end of it if you showed up to your destination looking like that. No, sir. That won't do. Let's get you changed in a jiff, and then we'll have you cozy comfy for your trip home, okay?"

Ben growled in frustration, but finally sighed and said okay. This was just the icing on a very shitty cake. He didn't even want to go on this stupid trip in the first place. The upside was that this whole ordeal was almost over.

"Don't worry, little buddy, I don't mind if you're a bit bigger. I have a brother named Robbie in California who's just like you."

"L-like me?" asked Benji, his curiosity piqued despite his vulnerable position on the changing table.

"That's right! He's got a loving boyfriend named Colt who takes care of him, and the whole family just adores them both. We all have different needs, and some of us need to be, well, little. That's totally fine. I just want you to know that."

Benji didn't know what to say. Living life like an oversized toddler was definitely *not* totally fine. It was embarrassing and sure to invite more harassment on top of the harassment he got for being gay. He didn't want to be anything but 'normal', whatever that meant. He just had to breathe, count to ten, and get to his car. After that it would be back to his normal dead-end life working a dead-end job and living alone. He couldn't wait. Still, part of him wanted to believe Roger's encouraging words, as crazy as they might sound.

Benji endured another diaper change, this time from Roger, and then let the younger man lead him to the pick-up zone where his self-driving car was waiting. That was one perk of not having anything or anyone to spend your money on. His car and his house were the most advanced models available.

"Here we are," said Roger, opening the door for Ben before he could do it himself. Benjamin tried to shrug it off and get into the car, but then Roger pulled the seat forward so Ben could sit in back.

"I normally sit in front," said Ben.

"Nonsense, kiddo! You should sit in the back, it's safer for little ones of any age!"

Ben couldn't believe the indignity of being made to sit in the backseat of his own car. Of course, Roger didn't believe that it was *really* his car anyway, and simply insisted that Ben sit back there, so ultimately he was obliged to give in and suffer this final indignity. Surely things would be better once he was home.

Benji sat in the back, and Roger reached over and buckled him in. Benji sighed in frustration, but Roger didn't seem to notice. Instead, he brought out a blanket from the diaper bag to tuck Ben in.

"Don't forget your pawsome squad throw, buddy! You'll be much comfier this way!" Ben recognized it as the blanket from the plane. Before he knew it, Ben was tucked in tight around the waist and lap. He was definitely cozy and comfy, but this was just too embarrassing for him, so he wasn't exactly able to appreciate it. "Farewell, kiddo. It was nice looking after you! Tell your caretakers that if they ever need a babysitter outside of the airport, I freelance too!"

Ben crossed his arms and rolled his eyes. He most definitely would *not* be taking Roger up on his proffered services.

On the way back to the house, Ben told the car to put on some Love-a-Bunch music to calm him down. It worked like a charm, and he fell asleep. He woke up just as the car pulled into his garage, and he stretched and yawned, only remembering where he was and what had happened to him when he heard the loud crinkle and became aware once more of the bulk between his legs.

"Gods," he said to himself as he got out of the car and stretched. "What a day! I'm glad that's over." Despite the fact that he was about to divest himself of all things baby, Ben was dejected as he trudged away from his car. He may have gotten home safe, but he had failed to save his friends. He was alone again. "It's not fair!" he said, balling his fists and stomping his feet. He couldn't have anything nice, it seemed. Anything that brought him joy. Ben would just have to carry on and try not to dwell too long on the things he lost. He knew the drill all too well.

However, when he opened the door between the garage and the house, his jaw dropped. The room appeared far from normal....

"What the heck?"

Characters

Primary Characters

Baby Bear - Loves everything about being a baby, and spreads that enthusiasm to others. His color is baby blue.

Grumpy Bear - A snarky bear with a soft heart. He is blue like a rainstorm.

Softheart Bear - The social leader and organizer; Social connectedness, organizes the bears with thoughtful care; helps humans share good feelings and affection. He's a soft and friendly orange.

Cheery Bear - An optimist who always knows how to cheer others up; approaches life with a sunny disposition. His color is sunshine yellow.

Smart Bear - The intellectual leader and tech wizard. His fur is an indigo-violet hue.

Secondary Characters

Sleepytime Bear - helps everyone get to bed on time, especially little ones, He's the color of a deep blue moonlit sky.

Builder Bear - Makes all the furniture in Love-a-Bunch. His main building material is clouds.

Safety Bear - A crossing guard whose fur is bright yellow and red like a warning sign.

Baker Bear - A cinnamon-colored bear who dreams of being a baker for real; loves to cook and share.

Hardheart - a villain character who is the opposite of softheart.

The Witch of Apathy - another villain character that doesn't care - until the bears teach her to. She's human-like, unlike the other denizens of Love-a-Bunch.