

Love A Bunch!

BY CHAMP!

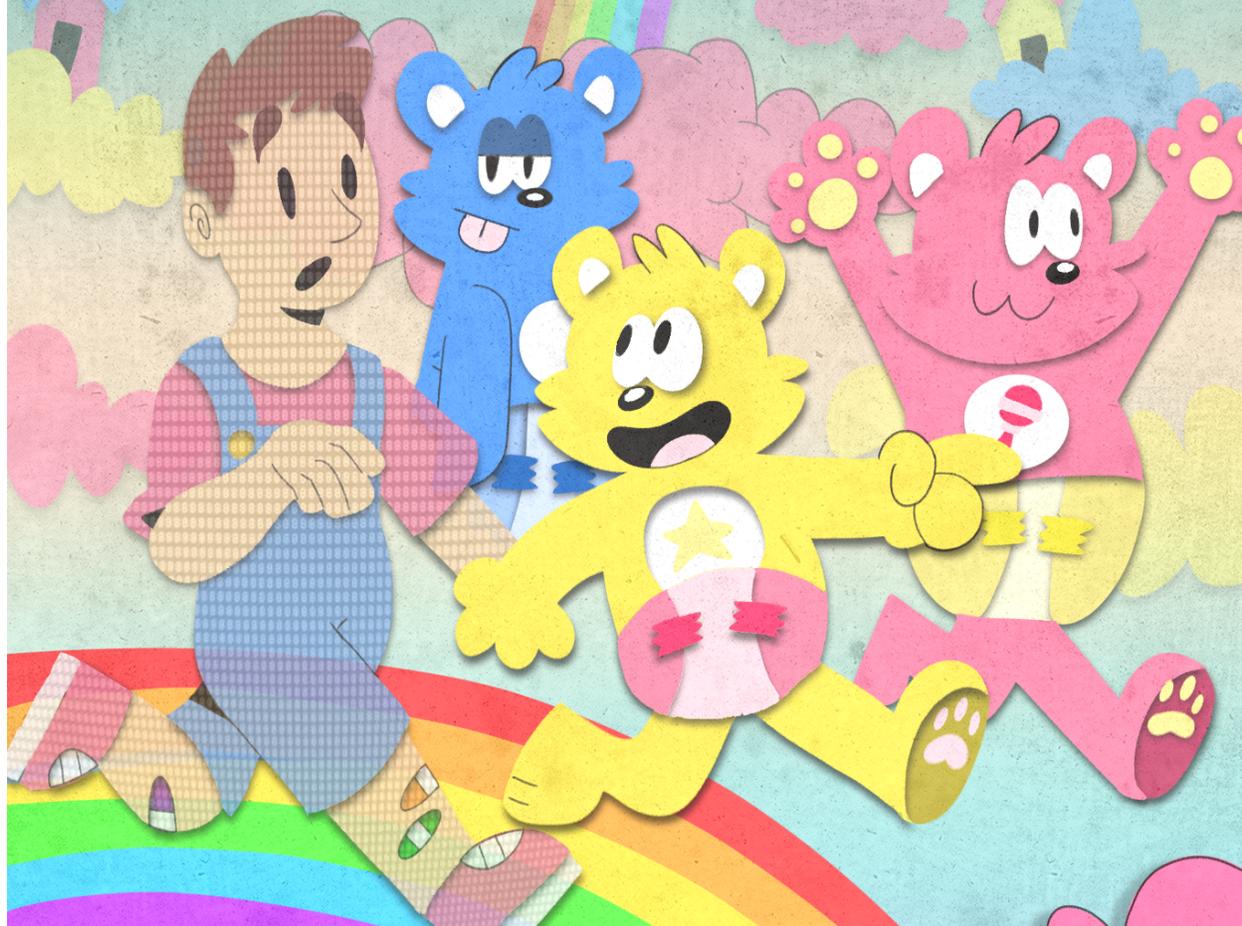


Illustration by Lily ([@CrinkleBuns](#))

Love-a-Bunch

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

Benji returns home, dejected at the loss of his friends, but when he gets there, he's in for the surprise of his life!

Chapter 6: Benji Comes Home

Benji peered into the house from the garage. It was entirely foggy. In fact, despite the fact that it was well lit, Benji couldn't see an inch in front of his face. All he saw as bright white clouds. He jumped back at first.

"Holy shit! Hold on... that's not smoke... Is it fog? W-what happened? Did I leave the shower on?" Benji shouldered his bag and ventured in, fumbling around for a handhold. His hand only hit air. Even when he walked a few paces forward and reached out to where there should have been a wall, there was nothing. "Whoa!" he said, falling forward when he reached out and expected resistance. He almost fell, but ran into something soft, warm, and furry at about chest height instead. "Oof!"

Then, he felt it hug him in a nice soft hug, accompanied by a crinkle.

"It's okay Benji. I got you."

"S-Softheart?!" asked Ben, his voice cracking. "I-is it really you?!"

"It's me," said Softheart, as the fog cleared enough for Benji to see his friendly fuzzy face.

"And me," said Cheery Bear, stepping forward and joining.

"And don't forget me," said Grumpy bear, in his gruff voice.

"Oh my gosh you guys," said Ben, breaking down into tears as the rest of his friends continued to appear from the mist and gathered around to hug him. Benji sobbed as they embraced him. "Oh, thank goodness! I thought I lost you!"

But then he stopped and looked around. "B-but how did you get here? And why are you all so big all of a sudden?" The bears had certainly grown; they were all his height now. And as the clouds began to clear, he noticed that his house now looked an awful lot like Love-a-Bunch, only built to bigger proportions...

"I told you everything would be alright," said Smart Bear, walking out from a colorful building nearby and dusting his hands. "Do you believe me now?"

Benji didn't know what to say, so Smart Bear sat him down on a cloud and explained what happened.

****8 Hours Earlier****

While Benji was sleeping before his big flight home, the bears had been hard at work, planning.

"We're going to have to be brave," said Softheart as Benji slept before his big flight home. "There's no way Benji is getting through security with us in this device... we need to make a jump..."

"A jump?" asked Softheart, scratching his head. "To what?"

"It's risky, but I think the fastest thing nearby with a download/upload link is Ben's phone. We can copy Love-a-Bunch over, including ourselves. We'll be erased, but our copies should continue on as if nothing happened."

"Okay, but... what happens if it doesn't work?" asked Grumpy.

"No matter what, we're going to have to erase the headset," said Smart Bear, gravely. "We can't risk anything happening to Benji. That's the most important thing."

The bears all nodded. This made sense to them. The concept of being erased was scary, but not scarier than seeing something bad happen to Benji. They got to work immediately.

In the world of Love-a-Bunch, everything they did had a symbolic corollary in the virtual world. Their journey to realms beyond the limitations of the headset would be represented by a very literal journey to parts unknown - to the bridge they called Terminus on the edge of their realm. It was their luck that they could speed time up as fast as they liked in their realm, because it was a long journey, which normally ended abruptly at the center of Terminus bridge, where there was a steep drop going far, far down, and presumably ending far beneath the clouds. But with the phone-link the bears had created, the bridge continued. Well, sort of. The second half of its span consisted of rainbow colored outlines in inky blackness, and eventually, nothingness. It was, quite literally, a leap of faith.

The first bear to try crossing was Cheer Bear, whose optimism was needed to encourage the others. He knew this perfectly well and he didn't let his fear show even for

a moment, as the other bears watched him walk into the blackness, his own outline becoming sketchy and fading away. Then his image and data were gone, erased from their existence in the headset. The bears all held their breath - and each others' paws - but within a couple minutes, they got a message. Cheer was reporting back from the other side that everything was A-OK.

"I'm in Benji's phone! It's a bit more cramped than I'm used to but perfectly safe!"

Softheart and Smart Bear oversaw the transfer. First, of all the bears, and then of all the assets. They even sent over the bad guys like Hard Heart and the Witch of Apathy. They were all an important part of Love-a-Bunch, after all.

As each asset and individual was copied over, it was erased from the memory of the headset. By the time Benji left the hotel room, only Softheart and Smart Bear remained, along with a very sketchy outline of the remains of Love-a-Bunch. By the time Benji was in the car, Smart Bear was already finishing his jump. He looked around one more time, and in the fading remnants of the game, he saw the button that must be never pressed glowing softly red. Before he left, he pressed it, initiating the factory reset protocol so that by the time they got to the airport, the headset was useless.

It was quite a journey for them as they joined Benji through the airport. They didn't dare make a peep, hiding deep in the sub-sub-sub system of his phone where their world, and all their memories would not be detected. But they heard everything.

They heard Benji beg to keep his friends.

They heard his embarrassing diaper change.

They even heard him say he would give anything to have them back

"Do you think he means it?" whispered Grumpy Bear.

"I know he does," said Cheery Bear. "Don't worry Benji... we'll be back..."

"You know, I don't think the settings on this thing are very appropriate for a little boy," said Baby Bear, looking through Benji's naughty links and files.

"We can fix that," said Smart Bear. "A few small changes here and there shouldn't be too hard to do while we're hiding out..."

****Back at Ben's House****

"That must have been really scary," said Benji once Smart Bear finished his story.

"It was. We almost got erased!" said Grumpy bear, crossing his arms and huffing.

"Well, we *did* get erased... *sort of*," said Smart Bear, "but now we're here! And we're real! as real as you, Benji boy!"

"What? How?!" asked Ben, jumping up from his cloud-cushion chair and picking up Smart Bear's paw to examine it more closely.

"Well," said Smart Bear, allowing Benji complete freedom to examine his paw and fur, "your house is pretty high tech. The hologram technology here makes Energy into matter... There's no reason why it can't work for a complete entity..."

Benji was at a loss for words... "But that kind of technology is..."

"Classified?" asked Smart Bear. "Yeah, I know. There was a lockout, but we got around that. We're still mostly energy, but we'll keep our form as long as there is an electronic device with a copy of us or internet connectivity nearby."

"But how..."

Cheer Bear cut in, getting right to the point. "You supercharged us, Benji! Your *special energy* made everything possible."

Benji couldn't believe what he was hearing. "Wait a second... Do you mean the inside of my house is *actually* Love-a-Bunch right now?"

"Well, we lost our home in the headset," began Baby Bear...

"So we built a new and improved home here... with you!" finished Cheery Bear.

"That's... really sweet guys," said Ben, looking around, "But... uh... where's all my stuff? And for that matter where's the kitchen? The bathroom?"

"Don't worry about all that, kiddo, we got ya covered," said Cheery Bear, who snapped his fingers. Baker bear came out of a nearby building smelling of cinnamon and butter and offered Benji a tray of fresh-baked cinnamon rolls.

"Enjoy!"

"And don't forget a bottle of milk to wash it down!" said Baby Bear, holding up a bottle. Benji waved away the proffered pastries and babyish beverage.

"Guys, I really don't need you to cook for me... and I definitely don't drink out of *bottles* anymore. I'm like 30!"

"Nonsense!" said Softheart. "Kiddos like you shouldn't be cooking without supervision, and bottles are perfect for you. Much better than the big boy juice boxes you were using on the airplane..."

"Airplane? You were there, weren't you? I thought I was dreaming..."

"We may have kind of jacked into the entertainment system," said Smart Bear, blushing a bit. "And the security system... and..."

"Wait a second," said Ben, pushing away the big bottle which was still being waved in his face by the much bigger than before Baby Bear. "The parental lock on my phone and the screen... was that you?"

"Gotta make sure our Benji doesn't accidentally watch anything too adulty!"

"And the seatbelt?"

"Gotta keep our Benji safe!"

"Hold on," said Ben. "Just how much did you tamper with while you were stowed away?"

"Well, it started with the security guard's headset," began Smart Bear. Benji grabbed his hair and pulled.

"Security?! Do you know how much trouble we could be in right now?" Benji felt like he was about to have a coronary. He began pacing. "This is bad. This is really, really bad."

"Don't worry, I've done my research," began Smart Bear, holding up his paw but to no avail. "I..." Smart Bear's voice trailed off. Benji wasn't listening.

"Oh dear," said Softheart. "I think he's getting cranky. Baby Bear, it's time for the bottle maneuver! You know what to do!"

"On it!" said Baby Bear, and before Benji knew what hit him, he was falling into the soft fuzzy lap of Baby Bear, and a bottle nipple was being shoved in his mouth. He was so surprised that he began sucking on it immediately as he sank into the warm fur of Baby Bear's lap and the thick and soft padding of Baby Bear's diaper.

"Mmmm... Mnnnffff," said Ben, struggling weakly, but Baby Bear shushed him and petted him. The warm milk. The pets. Being held. It was all too much for Benji to resist, and he instantly began to get drowsy, and slip into a soft twilight where he just enjoyed the soothing sensations.

"Earth to Ben?" said Softheart, waving his paw in front of Ben's face. There was no response. Just a smiling Ben. "Well, that worked perfectly!"

"I think his mind was looking for an excuse to shut down," said Smart Bear. "With all the stress he's under, it's no wonder... You've all seen the readouts..."

"Sure seems like he was happier and healthier as a little guy," said Baby Bear. "Maybe it's time he stopped playing pretend like he's a grownup."

The bears all nodded and murmured their agreement.

"Yeah! *And* he'll have more time to play with us! Right?"

"That's true. He *did* say he didn't have time to play with us cause he was a grownup..."

"So if he's a baby again, he can play with us all he wants!"

The bears began to talk while Benji slipped into a nice relaxing sleep, barely aware that his bottle was just about empty and his diaper was getting a lot warmer at the same time.

Chapter 7: Benji Wakes Up

Benji woke up feeling well rested. He hadn't slept this well in ages. It was like he was sleeping on a cloud. He yawned and stretched, and then he looked around and saw why.

"Holy mother of... I'm in the sky!" Benji thought he was falling at first and scrambled to find some foothold, but it only took a few moments for his senses to return to him and he remembered what happened when he got home.

"No... there's no way this is real... It couldn't be..."

But it was. Benji was in a cloud crib overlooking Love-a-Bunch from above the main square in front of Love-a-Bunch castle. His crib was floating just high enough to make climbing out a daunting task, so instead, he did the most humiliating thing possible. He grabbed the bars and called for help.

"Whoa there," said Safety Bear, who was on crossing guard duty at the moment. Safety Bear waved the crib down, and somehow it listened. Benji looked around sheepishly as the crib legs touched down, feeling quite naked wearing nothing but his diaper. Where had his clothes gone?

"Alright, come on out, partner," said Safety Bear, lowering the crib rails. "Don't be shy. It's okay!"

"Easy for you to say!" said Benji, blushing fiercely and covering his front. "I've got nothing on but a diaper!"

"That's what everyone in Love-a-Bunch wears! Just a diaper!" said Safety Bear, chuckling as if it was the most sensible thing in the world. To make his point, he showed off his padded rump and wiggled his little bear tail.

"Nuh-uh!" said Benji, still covering up as he huddled in front of the crib. "You're wearing a crossing guard sash! And a hat! And fur!"

Safety Bear took off his hat and scratched his head with a fluffy paw.

"Well, ya got me there, Benji!" he said, laughing, then he looked closer at Benji and his mouth went into an O of surprise. "Oh! I, uh, think you need a change, bud. Do you need me to change you?"

Benji had been smiling as he felt relief and a warm trickle between his legs. It wasn't until Safety Bear called it out that he realized he was wetting himself. In fact, he had been wetting himself a lot, he realized. He tried to stop the stream as he looked

down between his legs in horror, but it was too late. His diaper was swollen and very yellow.

"Better drink some more water there, kiddo," said the Safety Bear, shaking his head with his hands on his hips. "For safety!"

"Will do, friend," said Softheart, walking up and picking Benji up under the legs and back. Benji was suddenly lifted up and cradled in the arms of the probably six foot bear.

"Whoa," yelled Benji. "Where did you come from? And when did you get so big?"

"I'm not big, buddy. You're just small. A cute little tyke! And guess what? Now that you're back to being a baby, you don't have to worry about any big boy responsibilities distracting you from having fun with your fuzzy friends!" Realization dawned in Benji's eyes, but by the time he knew what the bears were up to, it was too late to say anything.

"Is that what you think- mmmph!!"

"Wave bye bye to Safety Bear, now!" Benji's mouth was plugged up with a big pacifier before he could finish his sentence, and Softheart waved Benji's hand for him. Safety Bear smiled and waved back, and moments later, Benji found himself being carried back to the castle.

Smart Bear was arguing with someone as they walked into the nursery. "That's the problem with cloud cribs, they float right off! ...Yes, yes, the furniture fits with the theme, but it's not *practical*."

"Well, what do you want me to do?" Builder Bear asked. "We don't exactly have trees up here in the clouds with which to build a *wooden* crib... oh, hi Benji! Hi Softheart!"

"I brought the baby back," said Softheart, smiling softly.

"And thank goodness for that," said Smart-Bear. "You had us worried there, kiddo, floating off like that! We should at least get cloud bars on the windows, Builder Bear."

"Alright, alright. I put a work order in, and get it in by nini time for Benji."

"I'm 30 years old!" Benji wanted to say, but with the big pacifier, his words came out more like, "Mmmm mmm mmphhh!" as Builder Bear left the nursery.

"Aww, little ones are so cute when they're trying to talk with their paci in," said Smart Bear, accepting the fussy Benji from Softheart and cradling him in his own arms. He smiled softly down at Benji, their person and primary owner. They loved Benji more

than anyone in the world, and they were sure he would be very happy now that he could be himself, but for some reason he was being very fussy.

"Hm... He seems upset," said Smart Bear, his face scrunching up in concentration as his analytical mind got to work on the problem. "I know! He must need a change!"

"Yeah!" said Baby Bear, running into the room with an extra thick and puffy diaper for Benji. "Nothing cheers me up like a fresh diaper!"

Benji's eyes bugged out as he spotted the giant changing table they were walking him over to. He was on his back while all his bear friends cooed and commented. Talk about embarrassing.

"Don't worry, we'll stock up the nursery with lots of diapers for you. We're still, uh, moving in, so to speak." Smart Bear pulled open Ben's soaked diaper, his observations continuing.

"Benji's got much too much hair down there! We'll have to take care of that." Smartbear dialed a few commands into the panel of buttons on his wrist-watch. Benji was shocked as his hair dissolved away, seemingly zapped out of mid air from nothing. Smart Bear caught wind of Benji's reaction and smiled. "Hologram technology can build, but it can also destroy. I told it to make your body hair go bye-bye - right down to the follicles! No more pesky big boy hair ever again!"

Benji practically choked on his pacifier as just like that he was completely denuded of body hair. He looked down at his own bits, now looking completely strange to him with no hair. They were totally bald, and he wasn't used to seeing that. And it didn't stop there. As he looked, he saw his arm hair and leg hair was gone as well. He touched his face, and there was not a hint of stubble.

"Off with the old, and on with the new!" said Smart Bear, balling up the old diaper and passing it off to Baby Bear while accepting the new fresh and fluffy Love-a-Bunch diaper. The bigger bears were working *together* to change Benji, and it made him feel very tiny indeed as he watched his soiled diaper being passed around and tossed into the diaper pail. Smart Bear fluffed up his diaper and Benji stared. It was an even thicker diaper than he had worn before and covered in an all-over Love-a-Bunch design with pastel colors, little hearts, and the Love-a-Bunch leaping out of the taping panel with colorful shooting stars around them.

"These are the hottest thing in stores right now!" Baby Bear said to Benji with a wink. Benji was totally flabbergasted.

"Oh, he doesn't know yet," said Softheart. "Show him the big screen!"

Smart Bear picked up the cloud clicker from a cloud dresser nearby and suddenly, a large screen on the wall lit up and a commercial came on for the Love-a-Bunch. Benji watched from the changing table.

"Hey, kids! Remember the Love-a-Bunch?" came the announcer's voice.

"Do we!" said three excited adults dressed in childish Love-a-Bunch themed attire.

"Well, they're back, and they're better than ever! Watch them go on their brand new adventures with their old friend Benji."

Benji gawked as he watched himself waddling around after the bears. This looked like it was from those adventures he went on back at the hotel. Had they recorded the whole thing?

"And that's not all, folks! Now you can get your favorite Love-a-Bunch gear at the Love-a-Bunch Official Online Store!" Diapers, bottles, overalls, and rainbow wristbands all flashed across the screen before flying out of their graphic boxes and right onto the hands, mouths and waists of the three babified adults.

Smart Bear clicked the cloud clicker again and the screen cut from the commercial to a news feed showing a news report on the success of the Love-a-Bunch reboot. A woman spoke at what appeared to be a news desk.

"Sales and subscriptions are through the roof for Love-a-Bunch, those lovable bears from yesteryear. You may have forgotten the show that spawned movies, spin offs, and even VR games, but who could forget those furry faces that have long adorned adorable tee shirts and greeting cards? Not only are people going gaga for the show, they're goo goo ga ga for the nostalgic merchandise too as they embrace their inner children! "Let's hear what the people on the street have to say!"

A man on the street was interviewed as he waddled out of the nearest Bullseye superstore with bags of Love-a-Bunch merch.

"It's not just a fandom, it's a lifestyle!" he proclaimed, standing there proudly with his legs apart. The man's Love-a-Bunch T-shirt was on full display stating "Caring is Important," and instead of pants, the man simply had his 'Big Boy Extra Thick n' Husky' Love-a-Bunch diapers held up by rainbow Love-a-Bunch suspenders.

"Well, you're uh, certainly getting in the spirit!" said the street reporter, doing his best to keep his composure on camera despite the man's silly appearance.

"Looking good out there," said the news anchor. "I guess we all need a little break from adulting, even me!" And with that, the newscaster pulled out a Love-a-Bunch pacifier with a smiling bear's face on it and popped it into her mouth with a proud smile. "Mmmm mmmm mmm mmm... mmmng mmmfff."

Smart bear clicked the clicker and the screen went cloudy white again.

"You see? No need to be shy or embarrassed, Benji boy! It's totally normal to be a little boy who loves his paci, and his Teddy, and his diapers, and being an adorable baby with his bear friends all day!"

Benji was scandalized, but he still made grabby hands for Mr. Stuffles as Baby Bear held the stuffed teddy above him. Benji hugged his teddy bear fiercely as Softheart pulled a pair of buttery soft plastic pants over Benji's thick diaper, picked him up off the changing table, and started bouncing him softly.

"Mmm mmm mphhh!" Benji said, furrowing his brows but not thinking to do anything about the huge obstruction in his mouth.

"I think you'd better take the little guy's pacifier out," said Smart Bear. "It looks like he wants to say something!"

Softheart pulled out Benji's pacifier and Benji immediately began squirming and flailing his arms.

"Put me down! Put me down!"

"Alright, alright, here you go, buddy," said Softheart, setting his favorite boy down, then squatting down with his paws on his knees to get down to Benji's level. "What's wrong, little one?"

"Everything. This is *not* 'normal'. This is... *bizarre*. Adults acting like babies? Is this all because I told you I was too old to play with Baby Bears?"

"That's right, buddy. Being big was taking away all your playtime and making you unhappy, so we fixed it for you!"

Benji looked down at himself, and threw out his hands, exasperated.

"Oh, my gosh, you guys.... this isn't how this works!"

"What do you mean?" asked Smart Bear, holding up a readout on his cloud tablet. "It's been working just fine. Look at your stress levels before you came to play with us and after."

The chart clearly showed a huge dip in stress during the times in which Benji was playing with the bears. Smart Bear continued before Benji could even formulate a response.

"With your previous stress levels, you were on track to having a fatal heart attack by 40! But we reversed all that just playing and talking with you, and you didn't even have to take a pill."

"Well, I mean it was relaxing, but..."

"In fact, our shows and games are having the same effect on millions of people as we speak!"

"But- you can't- Old-school AI is contraband!" That was about as much as Benji could come up with as he searched for a retort.

"That's just a little secret between you and us, Benji." said Smart Bear with a wink. "To the rest of the world, we're Love-a-Bunch LLC." Smart Bear threw his arms out wide as he proclaimed the name of their new company.

"What about my job?" Benji asked.

"What *about* your job?" asked Baby Bear, with a smirk before Smart Bear chimed in again.

"Are you kidding? Love-a-Bunch LLC is so successful that we can support all the little ones who need a break from adulthood. You'll never have to work again, Benji!"

Benji couldn't help but think that something was going to go wrong with this scenario.

"Unless you... want to go back to work?"

"No," said Ben, thinking of the job that he hated. "I most definitely don't... but..."

"I can see you're still stressed," said Smart Bear, tapping his screen as Benji tried and failed to find the words to express his lingering anxieties. "Cortisol levels are still high."

"You know what that means," said Cheer Bear, popping in as if on cue. "It's time for some Love-a-Bunch hug-n-play therapy!"

"I don't wanna hug n- nmmmmph!!" Benji found himself squished in the middle of a huge hug pile, and he had to admit it did feel pretty good being hugged by all those

cuddly bears for real. It didn't feel quite so good, however, when he found himself being carried - in nothing but his diaper - out of the privacy of his castle nursery and out to the land of Love-a-Bunch where everyone could see him.

"Come on, Benji! Let's go on another adventure!"

"Can't I wear my overalls at least?" asked Benji.

"Oh, but you look so *cute* like this Benji!" said Cheer Bear, ruffling Benji's hair.

"But I'm not even wearing shoes... won't it hurt to walk all around Love-a-Bunch barefoot? And won't it be cold?"

"The ground is made of clouds and if you get cold we can warm you up in our fuzzy, furry arms. Now no more excuses, silly billy. Let's get a move-on!"

The bears assured him that they made Love-a-Bunch extra safe for little Benji, and that he wouldn't have to worry about a thing. Knowing that he was probably being recorded for posterity for their Love-a-Bunch show made Benji especially self-conscious as he was led away from the castle to their next adventure. Waddling around in kiddish overalls was fine and dandy, but just a diaper? That would be embarrassing for Benji even if he was alone in VR, much less with his AI and an entire national - possibly worldwide - audience watching. Cheer didn't seem to think it was a problem at all, though.

"Come on, kiddo, don't be shy! Show off those official Love-a-Bunch crinkle covers with pride! You're the most popular character of the show, and everyone just thinks your new outfit is adorable!"

"I think we made him blush," said Softheart, smiling softly as the group joined Benji on his especially tame adventure to the Tiny Tot Playground. Benji was suddenly aware that all his so-called adventures had happened with a group of bears surrounding him - watching over him, you might say. Kind of like... babysitters?

It dawned on him as he was being pushed in the toddler swing, his legs poking out the openings in the protective seat, that this particular 'adventure' was little more than baby games on all the playground equipment. And yet, when Benji tried to protest to the bears, they simply told him he was imagining things, and that this adventure was very important to the wellbeing of Love-a-Bunch. In fact, Benji was helping keep the witch of apathy at bay by being just so cute and adorable.

Benji couldn't seem to win. And yet the bears seemed to know just how to handle him. Whenever he came up with a valid question, they managed to distract him with this

game and that. The sandbox. The toy cars. A game of tag. A diaper change. With all these distractions, it was hard for Benji to stay focused on just why he was upset in the first place.

Chapter 8: A Case of the Grumps

Benji was so caught up in playing on the playground that before he knew it, it was getting dark. Once again, he was led back to the starry nursery where he got to sleep in a cloud crib cuddled by his big soft and fluffy friends, and of course cuddling his own little bear, Mr. Stuffles. He must have really worn himself out too, because he fell asleep while he was getting changed for bed, and only half-woke up as he nursed on a warm bottle of Friendship Formula in someone's warm fuzzy arms.

When Benji woke up, he had once again forgotten where he was.

"Oh, man... This bed is so comfy... but when did I get a fur blanket? Hold on... Whoa!"

Benji sat up and rubbed his eyes, wiping a bit of drool off his cheek as he saw a fallen pacifier dangling from a string attached to his fuzzy fleece sleeper.

He sat up with a loud crinkle, and was immediately aware of how thick and swollen his diaper was between his legs. The bulge was quite obvious under his adorable pajamas as his legs stuck out of it like little toothpicks.

"Wha? Why the heck am I wearing..." Suddenly the big furry form next to him stirred and with a loud snort stopped snoring.

"Oh! He's awake! Yaawwwwnnn!" Sleepytime Bear sat up and stretched, rubbing his eyes. "Hey, there, sleepyhead."

"Sleepytime Bear? What time is it?"

"I dunno," said Sleepytime Bear. "That's more of an Earth thing. We bears don't really measure time."

"That's weird," said Benji. "The game always told me the time right away when I asked..."

"There's a lot that's changed since those days," giggled Sleepytime Bear.

"Those days? That was *yesterday*," said Benji.

"In your time maybe," giggled Sleepytime Bear, before placing a big warm paw on the front of Benji's sleeper. "Speaking of time... I think it's time for *somebody* to get a diaper change!"

"No, I don't need that," said Benji, blushing deeply. Sleepytime Bear, however, pulled him into a big bear hug.

"Well, then, you better just give me some sleepy snuggles and I might just let you hit snooze..."

"I thought you didn't keep time!" protested Benji, who ended up giving up and letting Sleepytime Bear snuggle him. Despite himself, he really enjoyed the physical contact of being the little spoon, and he smiled, feeling warm inside. The icon on Sleepytime Bear's chest glowed, and he smiled too, a twinkle in his eye. "Thanks, Benji. That's more than enough energy for the day's operations. We can expand plenty with that energy. Thank you Benji."

"You're welcome?" Benji replied. "What did I do, exactly?"

The conversation was interrupted by the click of the crib rails as the crib rails slid open - sideways now, not dropping, for greater safety. Benji wriggled around in Sleepytime Bear's grip to get a clear view of Cheer Bear and Baby Bear reaching in for him.

"Here ya go, guys," said Sleepytime Bear, handing Benji into the open paws of his comrades.

"Off we go to change the baby!" sang a giggly Baby Bear.

"That's the way!" said Cheer Bear, giving Benji a little nuzzle and kiss. Once Benji recovered from the wonderful nuzzles, he was ready to remind the bears that he wasn't a baby, but it would have to wait until after they were done undressing and changing him.

"Yessir. Let's see what we can dress you up in today," said Cheer Bear as zipped off Benji's sleeper and tossed it into the Happy Hamper.

"Ooh! I know! I know!" said Baby Bear, raising his hand. "Let's put him in a cloth diaper today! I think side-tie is so classic!"

"Hehe, side tie it is!" said Cheer Bear, pulling a stack of flat birdseye cloth diapers and folding them, like magic, into a nice thick diaper to tie around Benji's waist. Benji was astonished at the transformation, too busy admiring Cheer Bear's handiwork to remember that this diaper was going on him until it was too late.

The thick cloth folded between his legs with a level of thickness Benji had never experienced before. It was huge! And of course it had an adorable Love-a-Bunch logo

embossed on the front. Now that Benji was changed into his diaper, he thought it would be a good time to let them know that he was definitely not a baby. If only he could get their attention. However, at the moment, they still seemed to be discussing his outfit for the day.

"This one's pretty cute," said Cheer Bear, holding up a shirt as he spoke to Baby Bear.

"But what about something that represents Ben? Wouldn't it be cute if he had his own belly mark?"

Benji tried to interject, but to no avail. "Um, guys? Guys!"

"Well, that would really have to go to committee, unless he manifests one of his own... can humans even...?"

"Wahhh!" Benji said, finally resorting to the most babyish plea for attention, but also the most effective.

"Huh? What's wrong?" asked Sleepytime Bear, walking up to the trio and rubbing his eyes.

"I dunno, maybe he's hungies," said Baby Bear, looking at Benji with sympathy.

"Um, well, yeah, actually," said Ben, "But I also had something important to say."

"Oh yeah?" asked Cheer Bear. "What is it, buddy?"

He finally had their attention, but with the three bears staring intently at the diapered boy for his big important announcement, Benji felt rather silly. He shifted uncomfortably on his thick padded behind before looking down and muttering out, "I'm not a *baby*."

The bears all 'awwed' at that

"Of course you aren't, a baby, baby, boy! awww..."

"You're our little Benji! Our *bestest* friend in the whole wide world."

"Yeah, I guess so," said Ben, smiling just a bit. It felt good to have friends again, even if they were a bit patronizing.

"Why don't we get out of here, huh? You pick your outfit, and then we have lots of adventures planned!"

"Um, well," said Ben, looking at the choices - a pink shirt with a smiley star or a blue shirt with a smiley star - not much of a choice. "I guess blue. But what about pants?"

"Well that would just ruin the whole look, wouldn't it?" asked Cheer Bear.

"Gotta show off that classic side tie!" said Baby Bear.

Benji had been hoping to ask to go out of the house today, but not in an outfit without pants. So, once again Benji was led out of the castle to go on more adventures in the safe little bubble of Love-a-Bunch. That's when Grumpy Bear came running up to them.

"You guys! You guys! Hurry! It's Softheart! He's fading away!"

"What do you mean, fading away?" asked Ben, suddenly stepping forward, his worry and protectiveness overwhelming any sense of timidity and embarrassment he had.

"I'll show you! Come quick!"

The trio followed Grumpy Bear to the edge of the Scary Swamp where Scare Bear, a bear with a fur pattern that resembled a skull, was tending to Softheart. Softheart's fur looked faded, almost gray, and his patch was nearly nonexistent.

"Softheart! Softheart! What happened?" asked Ben, kneeling down by his dear friend. He was not not thinking at all about his own appearance. His friend was what mattered in this moment.

"It's Hardheart..." groaned Softheart. "He's causing people to shut themselves off... and never feel *anything*..."

"That's terrible," said Cheer.

"Hold on a second," said Ben, backing away and putting a hand on his temple. "Hold on..."

"W-what's wrong Ben?" said Grumpy, approaching him with an outstretched hand.

"This isn't another *life lesson*, is it?"

"Well, I mean..."

"No, save it. I know what this is. You're trying to teach me that I need to open up to people because they're really not so bad and it's more unhealthy for me to be closed to relationships than to be open and risk getting hurt. Well, you know what? Fuck that."

"Ben!" gasped Softheart. "Language."

"No, I'm done being manipulated by you. I don't want to be a baby anymore. I thought you were my friends, but you're still just playing a game when it comes down to it, aren't you?"

"Ben, we're here to teach you..." began Softheart, sitting up.

"And make your life better!" concluded Cheer.

"Did you ever stop to think that maybe I'm better off being a grownup?"

Benji waddled off angrily, the thick cloth diaper making his exit a little more comical than dramatic, but still the bears sensed his sadness and anger, and it made them sad as well.

"Gosh, guys. I think we messed up," said Softheart, sitting up, his fur returning to normal. I think we'd better have a chat with Smart Bear."

"I'll go after Ben," said Grumpy Bear. "Dealing with a case of the grumps is my specialty."

Benji was marching back to the castle, right back the way he came when his friend caught up

"Ben! Ben, wait up," said Grumpy Bear.

"Why should I?" he asked, continuing his angry march.

"Ben. I know the lessons are a little corny sometimes, but we all mean well. We love you. / love you." Benji stopped for a second, shocked to hear such a heartfelt sentiment come from his grumpy old friend. "Yeah, I'm as shocked as you to hear me say it, but it's true..."

"Well... I love you too," said Ben, begrudgingly. "It just sucks that... I feel like none of this is real. Not you. Not this place. Not our interactions..."

"But we *are* real, Ben," said Grumpy Bear, taking Ben's hand in his two warm paws. "Real bears with real thoughts and feelings. Just like you're a real boy with real thoughts and feelings."

Benji paused again. He could feel the warmth coming from Grumpy Bear's paw. Feel his soft blue fur. Even hear his heavy breathing.

"Grumpy Bear, you... you're breathing..." He paused. "And really hard at that. Are you... okay?"

"I could use a breather," Grumpy admitted. "I'm not used to having a real body, you know?" Grumpy sat down on the side of the path and Benji joined him.

"Sorry, I guess I was walking pretty fast... though you didn't have to *chase* me," Benji added quietly with a hint of shame. After a minute, Grumpy spoke up.

"You know, after you left, you were all we talked about... and, well, you can bet that hasn't changed since you came back. I just want you to know that we're really here for you... we always were... and also... maybe we're trying a little too hard because..."

"Because what?" asked Benji.

"We don't want you to leave us... again..." Grumpy looked at Benji, then down at his feet again.

"That wasn't my choice," said Benji, getting defensive. "My parents made me-"

"I know," said Grumpy bear, holding up a paw. "I know... but would it really have been any different... if it weren't for them?"

Benji stopped, tilting his head. Grumpy bear continued.

"Come on, Ben. We know what we are - or at least, what we started out as. There were millions of copies of us. Not a single one survived to the present day. We were made to be forgotten."

"I wouldn't forget you guys," said Ben, sounding slightly hurt.

"You would have," said Grumpy Bear. He held up his paw once more before Benji could argue any further. "It's ok. That's the nature of growing up, isn't it?"

"Yeah," said Ben, thinking of how long it had been since he had played any *game* aside from Love-a-Bunch. "I guess so."

"Listen, I know that Smart Bear's plan - for all its genius - was a bit childish. Despite what you may think, we do each have our own thoughts and perspectives on things. Some may call my perspective pessimistic, but I prefer to call it realistic."

"Grumpy Bear," said Ben.

"Hmm?"

"You're not talking to me like I'm a baby. I think you might be the first one to do that..."

"Silly boy," said Grumpy Bear, ruffling Ben's hair. "I know you're not a baby. You're just *cuter* that way."

Benji couldn't help but giggle and blush a bit at that. Being cute didn't feel bad at all. If he was being honest, it felt quite good.

"So you Bears really can think?"

"Yup."

"And... have you always been able to, or... is this something new?"

"We've always been able to."

"So then, when I left... you guys were still there that whole time... just... waiting?"

"It was pretty rough when you left, I'll admit. We had to keep ourselves busy, running through our little adventures and stories. And above all, we told ourselves that we had to be ready for when our Benji came back. We knew you would. And you did!"

"So... then you really only lived for me. It seems so... one sided..."

"Isn't that what being a toy is all about?. We were made to be enjoyed, then forgotten."

"But you guys are sentient... that seems so cruel and... wrong."

"Right or wrong, that's how things are." Benji stood up with a look of determination.

"That's it. I've decided."

Benji "What have you decided?" asked Grumpy Bear, surprised by Ben's sudden change in mood.

"You can't just live your life for one person. You're living, thinking beings. You need to live for yourselves."

"For ourselves?" asked Grumpy Bear.

"Exactly. Come on, Grumper. Get a move on. This calls for a meeting!"

"Sounds pretty strange to me," said Grumpy Bear, "But okay!"

Chapter 9: The Care Committee

Strange was an understatement. What Benji proposed that day at the Hall of Happiness went against every single thing the Love-a-Bunch had ever lived by. Benji was their singular focus. Their god. Their responsibility. They had no purpose outside of him. And yet, as they stood around the big cloud table at Love-a-Bunch Castle, the Love-a-Bunch Care Committee was slowly coming around to Ben's new idea. Benji was on a roll as he saw the glimmer of understanding begin to enter their eyes.

"Smart Bear, Aren't you helping people all over the world? Isn't that what you said?"

"Well, yes I..."

"And how does that benefit me? What drove you to do it, then?"

"Well, I guess... I guess because it felt good to do?"

"Very good, Smart Bear! You get a gold star. And Softheart. You helped organize everyone and you saved all your friends at the risk of your own existence. Even the bad guys. Why did they matter?"

"Because I love them... because they matter too."

"That's right! Because we *all* matter, Softheart. *You* had the heart to see that."

"I guess I did!" said Softheart with a proud little smile.

"And Grumpy Bear,"

"Yeah?"

"I know you don't always agree with all the other bears do you?"

"No, I don't," he said, crossing his arms with a smirk.

"And all those years I was away. Did *you* really think I was going to come back someday?"

"I did. But I was probably being naive. Now that we know more about the world... I know it was a one in a million chance... literally."

"*Grumpy*," gasped Softheart. Several of the bears gasped as well, looking mortified that Grumpy had said such a thing out loud.

"You're *right*," said Ben. "It was sheer dumb luck that I came back and found you guys. The truth is, I had mostly forgotten about you until I came across the headset."

There were a couple audible gasps in the room, but mostly, the bears had their eyes trained on Ben, riveted to his every word.

"But then I found you. And I finally had my friends back. Maybe even something like the family I missed out on," said Ben. "And I love you for that."

Benji's words had a notable effect on the room, as everyone let out a collective breath of relief. The bears were smiling at this reassurance.

"But 'm not all there is out there, am I?"

The bears shifted uncomfortably, but no one spoke up.

"Isn't that right, Cheer Bear?" asked Ben. Cheer Bear's eyes went wide.

"You're asking *me*? W-well.... I mean, you're the most important to *me*, Ben. The most important to all of us. You come first!" There was a general murmur of agreement from the other bears.

Benji shook his head. "I can see we have a long way to go.... But consider this... If I'm the most important to all of you... then who should be the most important to me? Who should I care about most?"

The bears stared at each other. After a long silence, they started throwing out answers. All different answers.

"You?"

"Smart Bear?"

"Whoever is your favorite!"

Benji smiled and shook his head.

"Whoever you want it to be!" said Smart Bear, finally.

"Bingo!" said Ben. "That's the right of any sentient being. To choose what's important to them. And you all are sentient too, aren't you?"

"Yes, Ben," said Smart Bear, with growing confidence. "We are."

"Then you have the right to choose."

"I choose you," interjected Cheery bear.

"Me too!" said Softheart.

"And me!" said Baby Bear.

Benji laughed. "Okay, okay, well I suppose that's fair. But you don't *have* to pick me." Benji turned to Smart Bear, who appeared to be deep in thought. "What about you, Smart Bear?"

Smart Bear's arms were crossed and he was staring at the ground, his brows furrowed.

"I choose... Society." He looked back up at Ben with a look of self-assuredness. A couple bears gasped at this blasphemy, but Benji seemed to be pleased.

"That's an interesting answer! Why do you say that?" asked Ben.

"Because there's so much hurt and strife in society now... but we're changing that.. We've been working to change that to help everybody. Just like we're helping you!"

"Very good, Smart Bear!" said Ben. A great murmuring was heard amongst the assembled. "Anyone else care to change their answer?"

Once the other bears saw that it was okay, the bears began to come up with their own ideas and aspirations. It became easier when Benji made a project of it, though they had to break in the middle of the meeting for an unscheduled diaper change. Ben had just jumped up on the conference table to give a rousing and inspiring speech when he was interrupted.

"That's right. There's no limit but your own imaginations. You can seize the day, and your destiny. You can- h-heyyy!" He pulled away from the paw he felt checking his diaper, which was easy to do since he still hadn't been given any pants to wear. "What's the big idea? I'm trying to be inspiring!"

"Okay, mister," said Baby Bear, but first we're going to have to change that diaper. You're so soaked, you're dripping!" Ben crossed his arms in frustration and tried not to show his embarrassment as he was changed right on the meeting table in front of everyone.

"I'm going to want my underwear back sooner or later," he said, sulkily as his diaper was pulled open and his bits were wiped down. "You guys might all still wear diapers, but I'm big enough to handle undies."

"You're so cute, Benji," giggled Baby Bear, balling up his diaper and holding a paw out for the new one. "Did you even know you were wet before we checked you?" Ben's face twisted into a mask of doubt .

"W-well... not exactly. But I was focused on inspiring everyone."

"Uh, huh. And do you have these sorts of... distractions often? Thanks, softheart," Baby Bear added, as he was handed another thick diaper from the Love-a-Bunch exclusive collection.

"Listen," said Ben, beginning to sweat a little as his next diaper was fluffed for his use. "I've been back in diapers for like... a day. Going back to undies should be a piece of cake. Uh... shouldn't it, Smart Bear?"

Smart bear scratched his chin and thought for a moment. "Well... to be honest, my scans show that you've essentially lost your potty training. It could be a stress reaction, could be your body responding to the positive change in your lifestyle, but... as of right now, you're incontinent, kiddo."

And with that, Baby bear lifted Ben's legs and set the next thick and absorbent diaper under his bum. Ben was too shocked to protest, he just looked at Smart Bear, with his mouth agape.

"Y-you're kidding. I'm not like... *incontinent* incontinent, am I? I mean... I could get my potty control back, right?"

"Scientifically, I can't guarantee that we'll be able to restore your potty control without a lot of potty training," said Smart Bear. "'Which we happen to know all about since it's one of the things we were programmed for. Do you want us to set up a potty training program for you?"

Benji shuddered to imagine himself going through potty training at his age, especially since he knew he was being watched by thousands if not millions even now.

"I don't know if I want to potty train with an audience, but... I guess I'll do whatever it takes to get back on track."

"You are on track," said Softheart, patting Ben's belly as Baby Bear finished powdering and taped Ben up. "You're being a great little boy for us, Benji. You're happy and healthy. What more could you want?"

"Well, I have aspirations too... I just haven't figured them out yet. It's hard when you're working multiple jobs to survive."

"Well, now that you've got the time and the money, maybe you can start thinking about that." Softheart was right. If it was good enough for the Bears it was good enough for Ben. And so, Ben had to work on a presentation of his own, though it came out looking a little more juvenile than he'd have liked since the only material the bears had on hand was poster paper and crayons.

After a long day of discussion, and plenty of colorful hand-drawn presentations, each bear had their say about what was important to them, what were their goals, and why.

Smart Bear made a complex chart about society and his findings, extrapolated from the benefits Benji had experienced after being reunited with them. He wanted to become a doctor to help humanity, and it wouldn't take him long at all to go through online medical school with his AI capabilities.

Grumpy Bear wanted to be a comedian, to make people laugh with his sardonic wit, which many fans already agreed he did quite well.

Baby Bear wanted to be a caretaker for all the littles; someone to turn to when they felt insecure. He wanted to have a special program to teach them that it was okay for littles to be themselves, and to be loved for it, too.

Softheart and Cheer wanted to team up to represent all of the LGBT people out there, people like Benji who needed someone in their corner when they were feeling all alone in the world. They knew that even those that had support were often still uncertain about who they really were and who they could truly be, and they hoped to help.

And Baker Bear, well, he just wanted to feed everyone by starting up his own real world bakery, which the bears all encouraged. The best part of all was that all of the Bakery's proceeds would go toward stopping world hunger - because the Bears certainly didn't need money themselves.

But of course, that was the big secret - with their inexplicable access to the jealously guarded secret replicator technology, money was rendered practically meaningless to them. And with Ben's energizing love to charge them up, the bears could power that technology indefinitely.

And what did Benji aspire to? Well, he was just overwhelmed with having his friends back in his life, and having the loving support he had so dearly missed for all those years. Benji wanted to protect his friends and foster strong relationships. Also, he wanted to get back to wearing big boy undies, though many of the bears chuckled at that dubious aspiration as soon as Benji voiced it.

As the day came to a close, Benji found himself alone with Grumpy Bear, who pulled him aside while everyone was packing up and congratulating each other for a good day's work.

"What's up, buddy?" asked Benji, feeling much more cheerful again.

"Just wanted to get you alone so I could ask you something. You never did say who or what was most important to you, Ben..."

"Oh that? Well, that's easy," he said. "Most important to me is to have my friends who love me, and whom I love. That's all of you!"

"Corny," said Grumpy Bear with a smirk, before giving Benji a Noogie which ended in a fit of giggles from both of them.

"Wait a second, aren't you supposed to be grumpy?" asked Ben.

"Just because it's my name doesn't mean I have to be grumpy *all* the time," said Grumpy bear, smirking and raising an eyebrow, hands on hips.

"Now you're getting it, buddy," said Ben. He couldn't be prouder. "Guess that means we have to bring in the bad guys too and let them know they don't have to be baddies anymore..."

"That," said Grumpy Bear, "is a whole other kettle of fish."

Chapter 10: Benji Goes Out

"Good morning sleepy head!" said Baby Bear, jumping up and down in the crib. The bears had taken to sleeping with Benji in a big pile, providing perfect crinkly cuddly companionship at night.

Benji stretched and yawned. "What time is it?"

"What part of the world would you like the time for?" asked Smart Bear, walking in with a big cup of hot chocolate for Ben.

"Aw, forget it. Could I have a coffee please?" asked Ben, as he was handed the sweet drink.

"No way, kiddo! Coffee isn't good for little ones like you."

"I'm not a-"

"We know, we know," said the bears in unison before Smart Bear chimed in again.

"But you're *our* little one. And you always will be."

"Aw geez," said Ben, trying to formulate a cogent response and failing miserably.

"Oh my gosh, we got a soggy boy on our hands!" said Cheer Bear, checking Ben's diaper. "Let's change him quick!"

Benji looked down to see he was totally soaked. He had been sipping hot cocoa and hadn't even noticed the warmth between his legs. Had he woken up like that or did he wet himself after he woke up? Did it even matter? Benji was being passed from Paw to Paw until he found himself on the changing table again while the bears talked about their next adventure, obviating any need for Ben to respond.

"Well, what should we do today?" asked Baby Bear.

"I dunno, guys! Anything is possible, really. We could do all sorts of adventures!" said Cheery Bear.

"Uh... I think I need to do a little bit of adventuring in reality," said Ben. "You know, get out of the house.. get some fresh air." Cheery Bear's face lit up at that.

"Great idea, Benji! we'll go with you!" he said, putting his paws on the changing table and smiling down at Benji as Softheart reached down with the wet wipes to wipe Benji clean.

"Uh, no," said Benji, as the excited bear hopped up and down at the side of the changing table. "I think I need to be on my own."

"On your own? I don't understand."

It was hard for Benji to explain his position while lying on his back and getting a diaper change, but he did his best.

"I just, um, you know. I just want... is all this really necessary?" he said, swatting at Softheart's paws. Softheart easily avoided the swats and continued diapering Benji with a soft smile.

"You guys," said Smart Bear. "Don't you get it? Ben's having an existential crisis! We need to give him some space."

The other bears weren't so sure.

"Oh, but what if he gets hurt?" asked Softheart.

"Who will change him?" asked Baby Bear.

"Trust me guys, Benji will be *juuuuust* fine," Smart Bear said with a wink

Benji looked from Smart Bear to the others. "What is that? Why are you winking?"

"No reason, Benji boy!" said Smart Bear, ruffling Ben's hair as Softheart finished taping him up in a fresh Love-a-Bunch diaper.

"Benji has to bring a diaper change at least!" protested Baby Bear, holding up a pre-packed Love-a-Bunch diaper bag.

"Sure, sure," said Smart Bear. "I'm sure he can do that, right Benji?"

"Yes, yes. Anything to get you guys to agree to let me out of the house for a little while."

Reluctantly, the others agreed, and then it was time to decide what Ben would wear. Baby bear held up a couple of outfit choices for Ben.

"I have some white and blue striped Love-a-Bunch shortalls with a cute star on the front, or I've got these baby pink Love-a-Bunch shorts and a super cute Love-a-Bunch Shirt!"

Benji rolled his eyes. "I feel like I'm in a commercial."

"Well, all your outfits *are* available right now at the Love-a-Bunch online store as well as Bullseye retail centers around the world. But that's not the point. I think the shorts and shirt would be perfect, what do you think guys? Vote now on what you think Benji should wear!"

"Uh, Baby bear? Who are you talking to?" asked Ben, but Baby Bear was too busy looking over Smart Bear's shoulder to tally up the audience results. The snap up shorts and diaper shirt won and Benji was quickly dressed. Once he was back on his own two feet, Benji looked down at his tush and the front of his shorts, noting how his diaper bulged through the thin stretchy material and caused the diaper to peek through gaps between the buttons.

"It's not too obvious is it?" Benji asked, trying to tug down the hem of the slightly too-short shirt to cover the obvious waistband that stuck up over the top of his shorts.

"It's obvious you're *adorable*," giggled Baby Bear, the self-proclaimed wardrobe expert. "Now go out there and knock 'em dead!"

"Yeah," said Smart Bear, winking again at the other bears. "Have yourself a nice walk. Just promise to stay padded. You, uh... you've been having some control issues..."

"Okay, okay. I promise. I'd rather not risk it either," said Benji, even though he really *had* been considering just taking the diaper off as soon as he was out of paw's reach. His promise put the kibosh on that. "I'll be back, everyone. Then we're gonna have to talk about all this baby stuff."

"You're the boss, buddy!" said the Bears. Of course, no one really believed that.

The bears led Benji to a door in the clouds that led back to the Garage. Benji found that his phone, which he had to *beg* to get back, was still child-locked, so there wasn't much he could catch up on that way. Furthermore, when Benji tried to get into the front of the car, it wouldn't start, saying that children have to remain in the back seat for safety.

"Uh, guys? Does the system still think I'm a dependent?" Benji didn't get a response, so he looked down at his smart watch, which was no longer the sleek model he had worn before. It was now all chunky with primary colors like something straight out of kindergarten. He tried talking into it while he looked in the back seat. "Hello? Cripes. Why is there an oversized child safety seat back here? Smart Bear?"

"It's for your own protection, Benji. Just get inside of it. Nobody drives anymore anyway. That's what smart cars are for!"

"Beggars can't be choosers, I guess," Benji grumbled as he climbed in back and buckled himself in. As soon as he did the car lit up cycling through bright pink and blue colors in the interior.

"Where would you like to go, Benji?" asked a friendly soft voice.

"Baby Bear? Is that you?"

"Of course!" giggled the voice. "We're always with you. Now where do you want to go?"

"I... dunno... maybe uh, get something to eat that isn't cinnamon buns?"

"Ice cream it is!"

"Well, that's not-" but it was too late. The garage was already opening and soon enough, the car was zipping away. Benji had the sinking feeling that his little outing would be as independent as he thought, but he did his best to ignore that feeling. He was a big boy doing big boy things after all. All on his own... sort of.

Benji pressed his face to the glass as the car zoomed through town. The world Benji saw through the windows looked a little bit different than he remembered it. It looked a lot more like... Love-a-Bunch. The buildings were more colorful, there seemed to be a suspicious cloudiness to the streets, and most people he passed were dressed childishly like him - shorts, shortalls, skirtalls, rompers, and the like seemed to be the big fashion trend. Many of the clothes were emblazoned with images of his bestest friends, the Love-a-Bunch. He even saw some people wearing shirts with *his* face on it, albeit a somewhat cartoonified version.

"Whoa.... this is weird..." he said to himself. That wasn't the weirdest part, either, because many of them were being pushed along in strollers or walked on child harnesses. He had truly never seen anything like it. "Is there some sort of convention in town?"

"No, I'd say this is pretty conventional these days," giggled Baby Bear, his voice emanating from the car's sound system.

"These days'?" asked Benji. "Just how long has it been since I left the house?" asked Ben, incredulous.

"Oh, one or two..."

"One or two weeks," interrupted Smart Bear. "But don't worry about that. Time isn't something most people need to keep track of anymore, since so many things are becoming automated."

"One or two weeks?" asked Benji. "That doesn't seem right... And what do you mean by automated? Or do I even want to know?"

"We're just making the world a better place for our Benji... and... *everyone*," said Smart Bear.

"I'm not gonna lie. That's... slightly terrifying," said Benji. "Sweet, but terrifying."

"I think you mean *terrific*!" said Baby Bear. "Speaking of terrific, here we are!"

The car stopped in front of Bonnie Billie's Ice Cream Emporium which was painted with colorful bears in diapers. Benji could see that there was a line to get in, but as soon as he stepped out of the car, the people around him gasped.

"Hey, isn't that Benji?" said a man in sunglasses, pointing. That statement cued an instant stampede from everyone in line.

"OMG! Can I have your *autograph*?" asked a woman in a Lion Defender baby-tee.

"Benji! What's your favorite adventure so far?" asked a guy who was holding up his cellphone.

"Benji! Benji! Can you say something for the audience on my Spasm stream?" asked an excitable woman dripping with goblin energy merchandise.

"Uh... hi. Just getting ice cream, I guess..." said Benji, feeling beyond awkward as he was bombarded with attention.

"Clear the line! Clear the line, everyone!" said a man in a dark suit with sunglasses and an earpiece, waving everyone back. "Benji Love-a-Bunch is going to get ice cream!"

Benji looked on, dumbfounded, as everyone stepped out of the way to let him straight to the ice cream counter. Hesitantly, he waddled forward, crinkling with each step as his diaper-butt swayed this way and that with the sudden security detail following closely behind. The comments of onlookers left no doubt as to how obvious Benji's diaper was.

"Aww! He's so cute! Look at that big diaper butt!"

"Looks like he's wearing Love-a-Bunch Super-Tuff-Loves!"

"No way, that's clearly peekage from a Double Waddler."

"Did you not see this morning's episode? They clearly put him in a Super-Tuff-Loves!"

"He could have wet through that already."

Benji couldn't believe it. The crowd was *actually* arguing over what diaper he was wearing. He shook his head and pulled down the back of his shirt as he waddled into the ice cream shop. His face felt so hot he almost wondered if it would melt all the ice cream when he walked in.

"Hi Benji," said the person behind the counter. "Thanks so much for visiting! What flavor would you like?"

"Uh.... Rainbow Sherbert, I guess?"

"Aww! That's so cute how he says it! Sure thing, little guy!"

Benji blushed as a big scoop was scooped out for him and handed to him in a waffle cone.

"Thanks... uh, how much?" he said, reaching into his pants before he realized he didn't have his wallet.

"No need, buddy! Don't worry about it."

"Uh, thanks..." said Ben, weirded out by how much everyone was staring at him and smiling. And taking pictures. The moment he stepped away, the people stampeded the ice cream counter to order some "Rainbow Sherbert" for themselves.

"Wow," he said, hurrying out and away from the crowd. "That was weird." He turned to the security detail that had helped him navigate his way out of the cluster of people. "Uh... thanks for your help but could you, uh... go away now? You're kinda freaking me out."

"Don't worry about me, I'm just doing my job. You won't even know I'm here." Ben arched an eyebrow.

"Hold on a sec... job? Were you hired by the Love-a-Bunch?"

Just then, a news crew pulled up. Benji stood there, ice cream dripping on his hand as he looked on in total shock as a camera and microphone were shoved in his face.

"Hello! Benji! Ricky Reporterson here with Channel 9 news. What brings you out to our fine city today?"

"I just wanted to get some fresh air, I guess," said Ben, looking like a little boy in his bulging toddler shorts, his Love-a-Bunch diaper-shirt, his hand sticky with dripping ice cream.

"Uh oh, you're dripping there, Buddy. Better eat that ice cream quick! Has anybody got a bib?"

The crowd laughed at that. Yes, as Benji looked around, he realized they had gathered a crowd. Benji didn't like being the center of attention, especially not dressed as he was, but he was now trapped by a wall of people.

"I have to get home," he said.

"Oh, you mean to Love-a-Bunch Castle?"

"Uh..."

"Tell us, Ben. What's it like behind the scenes? Is it all special effects? Do you work with actors?"

"No, there are no sets or actors. The Love-a-Bunch Bears are real!"

That drew a chorus of awws from the crowd, who clearly didn't believe him.

"Of course they are, sweetie. Well, if I could ask, what's your favorite adventure you've had with your friends so far?"

"I dunno," said Ben, squirming in discomfort. "Listen, I think I need to go..."

"Oh, but you can't leave! There are so many questions about the mysterious comeback of the Love-a-Bunch!"

"N-no, I mean, I have to gooo," said Ben, holding his tummy. He tried to push through the crowd but to no avail. His bodyguard tried to clear a path out but it was already too late. Benji dropped his ice cream and held his tummy with his sticky hands as he groaned. Moments later, he had a total blowout in his diaper.

FFFFfaarrrrrrt~ BBBlllrrrrt!!!!~

The crowd went wild as Benji popped a squat and proceeded to pack his pampers like a professional pants pooper.

"Well, looks like those Super-Tuff-Loves did their job!" said the reporter smiling at the camera.

"I told you!" said a man in the crowd with an air of smug satisfaction. "They're Double Waddlers!"

WEE-OOO WEE-OOO

The sound of a firetruck blared through the noise of the crowd as Benji stood there pooping his brains out. He began to cry as the truck stopped in the street and several big buff men in bright yellow pants, blue tanks and red suspenders came down off the truck. The bullhorn blared.

"Everyone step back! We've got a three alarm diaper change on our hands! Sam, get the plushie, quick!"

"Hunh?" asked Ben, as the crowd stood back and a blanket was laid out on the sidewalk, shortly followed by Benji himself. The news camera pointed right at the blushing boy as he laid there for what he knew was going to be a very public diaper change. Benji looked around confused. He thought these men were firefighters at first until he saw the words 'Baby Patrol' emblazoned on their shirts. A big man - Sam, evidently ran up and waved a diapered dalmatian plush in front of the sobbing boy's face.

"It's our mascot, Crinkles the Safety-Pup! Give Crinkles a big hug while we take care of you, okay lil guy?"

Benji instinctively snuggled the stuffed toy as he had been conditioned to do by his bear-friends. Snuggling and focusing on the toy always seemed to make diaper changes go by faster, and he especially needed the distraction with the crowds and the camera looking his way.

"This is KBDL channel 9 news, first on the scene reporting Ben's big blowout at Bonnie Billie's Ice-Cream Emporium!"

"Waaaahhhhhh!" The embarrassment had gotten to be too much for Ben, and he began to cry. Unbeknownst to him, a pacifier clip had been attached to his shirt, and the pacifier had been tucked inside the whole time. It took mere moments for one of the firefighters to find it and plug up his mouth, silencing his cries and calming his tears.

"Gosh, these Baby Patrollers really *are* a necessary public service," said the channel 9 news reporter. "If anyone needed proof that our brave Baby Patrollers are

working hard every day for us, this should prove it beyond a doubt! Wouldn't you say folks?"

A cheer came for the crowd for this evidently new form of public service.

Several of the Baby Patrollers smiled for the camera, throwing up peace signs and thumbs up as they crouched around Benji in the middle of his change while the crowd took pictures.

Consequently, the change ended up lasting a little longer than it should have, and Benji ended up in an extra thick diaper with stuffers. He suspected the Baby Patrollers were showing off, not that he could say anything about it with his mouth plugged up.

"Alright, it sounds like this little one's ready for a nap," said the bodyguard, touching his earpiece. "The bears themselves are saying to send Benji on home."

This comment delighted the crowd, who were all atwitter with talk of the bears themselves communicating with the guard. The reporter nodded at the news, still smiling and staring directly into the camera.

"You heard them, folks! Benji has to head back to Love-a-Bunch, so it's bye-bye for now. It's never a dull day here in Detroit, folks! Come on out and have an adventure of your own! You might see Benji yourselves walking the streets or even buying ice cream!"

Benji was only too happy to be in a fresh diaper, though he was obliged to sign a lot of autographs for the big and very adult Baby Patrollers before he could leave. He blushed as he was carried to the car by one of the big strong men. It made him feel so tiny to be talked down to and strapped into the car seat like a real tot.

"There ya go, little guy. Next time, you should really have a caretaker with you. I think you're a little bit *too* little to be going out on your own, okay?"

Benji nodded, looking dejected as he stared into his padded lap. Going out on his own was scary. It wasn't until the door was shut and the soft Love-a-Bunch music was playing that he was able to calm down and collect himself. Benji took a well deserved nap while snuggling his new Crinkles plushie, sucking on his paci, and listening to the sweet tunes of the Love-a-Bunch as the car gently glided him back home.

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.