Beau Peep

by andlat

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The Costume Box
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Chapter 1

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“Why the heck am I doing this?” Beau moaned, sliding down in the seat.

“Because.” His sister said, her eyebrow rising disapprovingly at his almost swear. “You know why.” He only grunted.

“What do I even have to do?” Ava looked at him.

“So you admit you weren’t listening when I went over this earlier?” He grunted again and she rolled her eyes.

“Well, Beau, you’re going to be my helper for Storybook Hour.”

“Why do you do this stuff?” He asked with a scoff.

“It’s fun. And it’ll look great for college.” She smiled and patted the steering wheel. “It’s simple. We do a nursery rhyme and then two or three books. The kids clap and it’s all over. Sometimes they even have snacks afterwards and, yes, my Storybook Hour helper can help himself to those snacks.” The way to any teenage boy’s heart was through his stomach.

“It’ll be boring.”

“I bet it won’t be.” She replied.

“Whatever.” He muttered. “Long as I’m done in time to go see Slug Man with the boys.”

“The boys?” His cheeks turned slightly pink, but he nodded.

“Storybook Hour’s only an hour long. We have some prep to do before, but it’s usually done right at 3. And the mall’s not that far, so you should be able to get there in plenty of time.” He nodded. “Isn’t that movie PG-13 though?”

“I’m 13!” Beau exclaimed, voice cracking.

“Oh, right. I forgot. My little brother’s growing up so fast!”

“My birthday was two months ago.” He muttered.

“I forgot! Geez!”

“So dumb.” She could not tell if he was mumbling about her or the fact that they had just arrived at the mall, so she did not press it.

“Grab the cardboard box from the back.”

“What’s in it?”

“Some props and stuff. If it’s too heavy for you, just let me know.” The challenge issued, she knew he would not dare make it seem like it was too heavy for him. “My big strong brother.” She praised, holding the door for him. “Storybook Hour’s in the kids’ section. Left down the hall.”

Ava followed Beau into the familiar setting of the reading room. Colorful animals danced along the walls, interrupted only by signs proclaiming the joys of reading.

“Take the box over here.” Ava instructed, opening the back room. “We’ll get ready in here.”

“Ready?”

“Yeah, unpacking the box, stuff like that. Plus I need to get into my storyteller outfit.”

“Outfit?” He snorted.

“Yeah, the kids listen better when they think I’m a princess.” He scoffed, rolling his eyes.

“What? Why?”

“Cuz they’re good kids, not cynical teens named Beau.” She looked at her phone. “Most of them are like four years old, so if you dress up like a princess, they buy it. Heck, even you could — oh shoot.” Beau did not seem to catch the hint. “Oh, this is bad.”

“What is?”

“Lexy cancelled.”

“Who’s Lexy?” The girl I just made up, Ava thought.

“Oh, she’s another volunteer. We usually open with a nursery rhyme and she’s the one who does them.”

“Wow, sounds really important.” The sarcasm dripped from his voice.

“Glad you understand!” She said, sticking her tongue out at him. “Hey, you could do the nursery rhyme. You can read, can’t you?”

“Screw you.”

“Language! Well, can you?”

“What do I have to do?”

“It’s not hard.” She said, “You just gotta read animatedly.”

“Ani-what? What’s that mean?”

“Once upon a time!” She said, grandly waving her arms around.

“I’ll look like a dork.”

“Look, it’s just you and me here, so I’m using you.”

“Fine.” He said with a sigh. “What do I gotta read?”

“We’ll worry about that in a sec. Get the books out of the box while I’m getting dressed.” She pulled a folded bag out of the box and disappeared behind a partition. “And don’t even think about sneaking out.”

“I wasn’t.”

“Good. Get those books out, Beau.”

“What’s this other stuff?”

“Oh, there’s some other costumes in there. Come to think of it, you’ll need one.”

“What? A costume?”

“Yeah. We go all out for Storybook Hour.”

“But I”

“Need to get to your movie? There will be time to change after, don’t worry.” She emerged. “Yeah, yeah. Laugh it up.”

“You look like a dork.” The dress she wore was blue and very princessy. She took her hair out of its ponytail, brushing it out so that it cascaded royally on her shoulders.

“Well, it’s princess enough to hold the kids’ attention.” And keep the dads from trying to look up my dress, she thought. “Grab that paper out of there. It’s the calendar.” She said, pointing with the brush. “Which nursery rhyme does it say we’re doing?”

“Uh, Hey Diddle Diddle.”

“That was last week. Good thing too. There are a lot of puppets for that and it’s a pain. This week is” she took the calendar from him. “Oh! Little Bo Peep!” She had known it was that one already. After all, she had to make sure she had the costume. And, more importantly, her brother. “Which means we really need to hurry.”

“Why?”

“Cuz the Bo Peep costume’s pretty extensive. Bloomers, dress, bonnet.” She rattled them off. “Get undressed.”

“What? Why?” His jaw dropped. “Uh, oh no. Nope. No way. No fucking way!”

“Beau! Seriously! You can’t be cussing like that!”

“Well, you can’t.”

“I can. You volunteered for this.”

“Mom said I could either help you or paint Mrs. MacGrady’s

fence.”

“And you picked this.”

“But I didn’t”

“Beau. You can either cooperate and help me out or I can tell mom about that F you’re hiding.”

“F?”

“On the math test? I saw it on your desk when I was in your room.”

“What were you doing in my room?”

“Mom asked me to grab your dirty dishes. Not my fault you left that test out. Now c’mon, get undressed.” She tugged at his shirt.

“Get off me! I’m not! There’s no way!”

“Well, I’ve got two counts of swearing and a failed math test.” She shrugged. “All that can go away if you wear this outfit for five minutes. The whole nursery rhyme is like ten seconds long. I recite it so you don’t even have to talk and then you’re home free to change.”

“And go to the movies?”

“Yep. Once you’re off stage, you’re free. I’ll tell mom and dad what a huge help you were and everything. Won’t even make you come back next week if you’re really good and do the motions.” Beau sighed.

“This is blackmail.”

“What it is is a sweet deal for you. One quick thing for like three secrets.”

“But”

“Beau, come on. It’s perfect. Beau, Bo Peep.”

“Like that’s gonna get me to do it!” Ava laughed.

“Well, get dressed or I’ll keep making that joke.”

“But Ava!”

“It’s a bunch of little kids. Most of their parents don’t even hang out for it. They won’t even know. They just see the outfit, not the person.” She held up the enormous pink and white sun bonnet, the boy’s face paling as he saw how feminine it was. “This covers your hair perfectly and your face too, pretty much. No one will ever recognize you. I promise.”

“Fine.” He groaned and stomped his foot.

“Here, take the bloomers, socks, and dress. I’ll do the bonnet and shoes when you get done with that.” She pointed to the partition as her brother shuffled off. She knew it would be tough for him. “Unless you’d prefer me to dress you?”

Beau stripped to his underwear, groaning over and over again. Why had he agreed to this? Sure it would have been torture to paint a fence in the hot sun, but this? This was torture too!

“How do I do this?” He nearly jumped as Ava’s voice came right from the other side of the wall.

“Step into the bloomers. The socks are just like your socks. Less stinky and washed more often, sure, but be sure to turn them down so the lace is on the outside. Then just step into the dress too.”

“Can’t believe I’m doing this.”

“I really appreciate it.” She said in sing-song, setting the bonnet and shiny Mary Janes nearby. Childhood memories of forcing Beau to wear her dresses as she practiced her make-up skills on him danced through her head as she imagined just how precious he would look as Little Bo Peep. This was almost too good.

She was right in the middle of remembering the time she and their cousin Olivia had kept Beau, then only six or so, as their dress-up doll for the better part of a weekend when the current Beau emerged, red-faced and humiliated, in his lavish Bo Peep outfit.

The dress, the whole outfit really, was pink and white all over. The skirt flared out in all directions, but fell enough to give only the most coquettish peek of the very bottom of his lacy knee-length bloomers. The bodice was covered in enough lace and bows to make several dresses in Ava’s opinion, which made it all the better that the wearer was a rough and tumble teenage boy. In fact, as she surveyed the full fantastic image before her, she could not shake the sensation that someone had lost the head of their Bo Peep

doll and perplexingly replaced it with the head from a boy doll.

“It fits” was all she said. There was very little time, she told herself. She would have to tease him mercilessly after the fact.

Ava hurried behind him and zipped the dress up before securing the two buttons at the very top, almost as if they had been designed to be out of the wearer’s reach. She grabbed the bonnet and plopped it down on Beau’s head, adjusting it seemingly at the same moment she tied its pink ribbons under his chin. With the bonnet hiding his short hair, she was more able to notice that he had her long, undeniably feminine eyelashes and, in fact, bore a very strong resemblance to both her and their mom.

“No time to sit, so lift your feet for your shoes.”

“They’re too tight!”

“They’re not that bad and you’ll only be in them for the length of your nursery rhyme.”

“It’s not mine.” She looked up at the pouting boy.

“You’re Little Bo Peep now, remember?” She fussed over his skirt before, running over, grabbed a mirror and showed him his reflection.

For a moment, she wondered if he might cry. Even his weekend as a plaything for her and Olivia had been mostly sundresses and nightgowns at night. This was hands down the most feminine thing she had ever seen a boy wear and

probably far beyond anything Beau had ever thought he would wear, even in his worst nightmares. He seemed to be fighting back tears as he finally spoke in a choked voice.

“I feel like a sissy.”

“You’re still wearing your underwear under your bloomers, right?” Both the question and her gentle tone caught him off guard.

“Yeah. Why?”

“Well, there you go. Can’t really be a sissy if you’re wearing some boy clothes, right?”

“But” he sighed. “Yeah.”

“Besides, I bet you secretly love being so pretty. Don’t you love being a pretty sissy?” She laughed as she jokingly pushed on the bonnet to make him nod. “Aw, there you go!”

“Ava!”

“Come on, it’s all in good fun. Okay, so let’s run through the nursery rhyme so you can decide what to do. Can’t you hear the kids out there?” He realized he could and he shuddered.

“Ava, I can’t do this.”

“Dude, you’re all dressed. There’s no going back now. Beau’s gone. There’s just Little Bo Peep.” She patted him on the back, shoving a shepherd’s crook into his hand. “It’ll be fine. I’ll go out, greet them and then introduce you as my special guest. When you hear me say Little Bo Peep, that’s your cue.

Come out, smile and wave and then we'll do your nursery rhyme." It was only after she had emerged from the side room that she realized they had never gone over what he would need to do. Hopefully Beau could improvise.

"Hello, kids!" She said cheerfully, grinning warmly. A wave of sound washed over her. "How is everyone today?"

"Good!" Came back at her from dozens of faces.

"That's great! Is everyone ready for story time?"

"Yes!"

"And we have a very special guest with us today. Anyone know who it is?" There were a few guesses, but they were mostly lost in the tsunami of 'no!' She smiled. "Alright, well, let's quiet down and I'll introduce her to you!"

"Is she a princess like you?" One child asked.

"No, but she is wearing a very pretty dress. I bet she's admiring it right now in the other room!" She could almost feel Beau's embarrassment radiating from where he hid. "Our special guest today is Little Bo Peep!" She held up her hand elegantly and turned so that all the children followed her gaze to the door where Beau came shuffling out, dress swaying. "Now, Little Bo Peep took a quick break from finding her sheep to be here with us. Didn't you?" Beau nodded, trying not to look at the crowd of murmuring children. "Who wants to hear her nursery rhyme?" A forest of hands sprouted. "Here we go!"

Try as he might to resist, Beau was, deep down, a natural ham. His desire for attention kicked in and he went through the motions of the rhyme with gusto. All the better, his sister thought, certain that he had no reason to know that Storybook Hour was always recorded to post on the library website. With the new camera they had just gotten, she bet an eagle-eyed viewer would even be able to see Beau's face.

"Leave them alone and they'll come home, wagging their tails behind them." She finished, smiling as Beau playfully wagged his bottom, skirt swaying to and fro. He turned to go back the way he had arrived, but she stood there, smiling and blocking his path. Taking him by the shoulders, she turned him toward the audience and grinned.

"I think Little Bo Peep should take a break from looking for her sheep," she gave his shoulders a squeeze for emphasis. "And join us for story time, don't you, kids?" Suddenly all too aware of what he had gotten himself into, Beau stared at all the eager children yelling one word.

"Yes!"

"Well, let's ask her very, very nicely." Another shoulder squeeze. "Repeat after me, 'please stay for story time, Little Bo Peep!'." Beau wished he could take off running as he heard the children repeat the request. "Oh, isn't that nice, Bo Peep. Won't you stay and listen to stories with us?" Beau glared at his sister, the bonnet blocking him from the kids' view. "I don't know if she heard us." His sister grinned wickedly back at him. "Let's ask again." She pushed the

ridiculous bonnet so that he faced the children again.

"Please stay for story time, Little Bo Peep!" The kids said.

"Won't you please?"

"Won't you please?" All but frozen by embarrassment, Beau felt his sister grab the bow on the back of the bonnet as if it was a handle and move his head up and down in a nod. None of the kids could see, of course. All they saw was Bo Peep nodding her head with all the eagerness she had had during her nursery rhyme.

"Oh, perfect. Alright, Little Bo Peep, how about you go sit right there in the middle of the kids so you can see the book too?" It was perfect. Not only did it ensure Beau had zero chance of escape, but it also meant she could see him the whole hour of story time, trapped in his frilly, sissy prison. She smiled approvingly as he struggled to keep his skirt down, flashing his bloomers.

"Is Bo Peep wearing shorts under her dress?" A girl asked. "I do that sometimes!"

"Nope. Those are called bloomers. They're technically Bo Peep's underwear." She explained. "Should we compliment Little Bo Peep on her pretty bloomers?" Anything, after all, to keep the focus on Beau.

"We love your pretty bloomers, Little Bo Peep." The children dutifully said in unison, seemingly oblivious to just how red Beau’s face had become.

"Let's start our first story." She patted the books beside her chair. "And don't worry," she added as she set the first book on her lap. "Little Bo Peep will hang out afterwards for anyone who wants to get their picture with her." Beau would miss his movie with his friends, but what choice did he have? She looked forward to hearing him try to explain to his friends he had missed out because she had dressed him like Little Bo Peep.

Of course, the experience was not completely forgotten. Whenever they were alone and even sometimes in front of their parents, Beau had to answer to his new nickname, Beau Peep. Any time he made the foolish mistake of letting Ava know he was looking for something, he had to grit his teeth as she launched into ‘little Beau Peep has lost his shoes and doesn’t know where to find them’. For Christmas that year, Beau received a video game from Ava, but waiting on his pillow, there was a second package, wrapped in pink fleecy sheep paper and labeled ‘to Beau Peep, from Santa’. Sure enough, it was a stuffed sheep with a pink bow around its neck. He made such a fuss that their parents noticed, which meant he had to keep it rather than quietly get rid of the gag gift.

Nearly a year later, Ava was designing the flyer for that summer's Storybook Hour. Ever since that day, she had known just how she wanted it to look. All the details were there in a playful font, but the focus of the whole flyer was, without a doubt, her brother with his forced grin and over-the-top Bo Peep outfit. Ms. Gardner, the ancient head librarian

who was half blind, would probably mistake it for a photo of Ava in one of her princess outfits, but Ava, and more importantly Beau, would recognize him. Thanks to him and the fact that the library always printed and distributed hundreds of flyers, there would be record turnout this year. She just knew it.