Undercover

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How far would you go to get back a stolen phone?

The Costume Box
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Chapter 1

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How far would you go to get back a stolen phone?

Brandon's heart pounded in his chest to the point where he almost thought he could see his shirt rising and falling. Why was he so nervous? He looked at the poster of the girl in tap shoes, dressed in some weird yellow outfit that was as feathery as it was sparkly. Because I don't belong here. He thought with a sigh. He had to go in there. Yesterday, McKenna had stolen his phone. He had to get it back before Mom and Dad found out he had 'lost' another phone. I didn't lose it, he thought grumpily. McKenna took it!

He had tracked her down only to learn she had given it to her friend Josie. Josie, he was told, took ballet here every Saturday morning. McKenna swore that she would definitely have it. So, here he was. He had even gotten up super early – almost as early as a school day – to sneak out of the house. The last thing he needed was for Mom or Dad to find out.

"But I don't want to talk to some weird ballet girls." He muttered, trying to casually look through the window. He froze as he saw some girls walk by inside. His mind ran wild as he imagined an action movie where he was a spy trying to infiltrate the enemy encampment.

"She'll probably have it in her bag, so you'll have to wait until she's done prolly." McKenna had said. That wasn't good enough for Brandon. He needed it back now. He took a deep

breath. Boys took dance classes too. As long as he was careful, he wouldn't look suspicious, would he?

He pulled open the door, the cool conditioned air hitting him in the face. The place smelled weird, though he could not say quite how. All he knew was he had to hurry. He heard a lot of voices coming from the right, so he made a hasty beeline to the door on the left. All he needed to do was pop into the girls' locker room and find the bag, right? It sounded so simple, he didn't waste time trying to point out all the holes in his plan. He launched himself into the room, quickly grabbing the door and gently easing it to almost closed. He did not want it to slam, but he also did not want to risk somehow locking himself in here.

Brandon turned and sighed. This was not the locker room. It was a bunch of shelves with boxes on them. Winter 2022 recital, 2023 Spring Fling. He groaned. Storage? He heard voices in the hall and hurried away from the door, deeper into the storage room. Maybe there was another door? It made sense. At the very least, he would need to stay here until things settled down outside.

"Yes, Layla. We'll be doing our regular class today too." He heard a woman say. She had to be right at the door. "You go into the studio." Brandon dove between the shelves nearest to him as the door opened. In the instant after the light came on, he grabbed a wig by his hand and popped it on his head. With luck, she wouldn't even look close enough to realize someone was wearing the wig.

Lea sighed as she scanned the storage room. There was nothing exciting in here, but it never failed. Every single time she accidentally left the storage room unlocked, one of the students got curious and went snooping.

“Alright, young lady, come on out. Yes, I'm talking to you four shelves in.” A panic-stricken face appeared. She could see just enough of her shoulder to know she was not dressed. “What are you doing? Class is about to start.” By serendipity, she was right by a box of class uniforms. She dug in, pulled out a package, and tossed it toward the girl, who still looked like a deer in headlights. “Tights, leotard, slippers. Now.”

“But”

“No buts. I’ll stand right here until you are prepared for class.” She raised an eyebrow. “And you know what'll happen if you're late.”

He in fact did not know, but what choice did he have? He stammered, trying to find some way out of this.

“If you're shy, you can stay right there where I can just see your head and shoulders, but I'll give you” she looked at her watch. “Five minutes before I come over and help you.” Her tone made it clear that her help was not something he wanted. Besides, wouldn't she call the cops if she found out who he really was? Was… was he really about to do this?

This had to be trespassing or something, right? He was screwed! I'm really gonna have to do this. He thought as his fingers fumbled to unbutton his jeans.

Brandon kept his shirt on, but had to remove everything else to put on the tights. And tights was not a lie! Derek T at school called his underwear tighty whities, but they had nothing on these things! Superheroes wear tights, he reminded himself, staring up at the ceiling in an attempt to ignore the fact his tights were pink and sparkly. He winced as he realized the tights were nothing compared to the leotard. Sparkly sequined shoulder straps and that horrifying tutu. I can't do this! I won't do this!

“Three minutes.” His nerves failed him. He didn't want his parents to know he had lost his phone. If it meant going undercover as a prissy pink ballerina, so be it. This would give him easy access to the girls’ room to find it. He pulled off his shirt and struggled into the leotard. His plan made it slightly better, but he still had to fight back nausea as he felt the tutu settle against his waist. Everything was tight and soft at the same time. How did girls handle feeling this stuff on them all the time? “Are you dressed?” He swallowed and forced himself to nod. She rushed over and looked him up and down. “Slippers.” She said with a sigh, Isn't it enough I'm in… all this!? He thought as she impatiently pushed him onto a nearby chair, stepping daintily over his jeans and shirt on the floor. “Foot.” She eyed his foot in pink tights. “You have broad feet.” She said, pulling one of the satiny pink slippers over it. “Good for balance.” He forced a weak smile.

With the unfamiliar sensations growing now that he had ballet slippers on, Brandon got cautiously to his feet. He froze as she touched his sequined shoulder.

“There, one pretty ballerina. Out we go!” She grabbed his arm.

“What about my clothes?”

“We're already a few minutes past start time. They'll be fine in here until after class.”

“Class?”

“Ballet class, young lady. We cannot keep wasting time like this.” She half-led, half-dragged him out of the storage room and across the hall, his feet sliding on the tiled floor. He was going to break his neck at the pace they were going.

Brandon nearly fell over when they entered the dance studio. There were about a dozen ballerinas dressed just like him, laughing, chatting, and milling around. These were capital G girls, at least based on how they were dressed. I'm dressed just like them, he thought. He wondered which one was Josie.

“Ballerinas to the barre.” The teacher announced. She gave Brandon a little nudge toward the girls. “Mel, can you start them off on warm-ups? I'm going to lock up the storage room.” She smiled at Brandon. “Since you were worried about your clothes.”

“Not that worried.” He said. He wasn't really going to have to do this, was he?

“Go join the other ballerinas.” She said. Brandon spied the door to the changing room and a new plan developed. He shuffled over to where the actual ballerinas were gathering,

preparing himself to dash into the clearly labeled locker room.

“Come on, slowpoke.” An older girl in a black leotard said, touching his shoulder. This must be Mel, he thought as she gently moved hm over to the group. He tried to get to the position closest to the locker room, but she had other plans and he ended up with three girls between him and his target. “Third position.” Mel said softly.

“Huh?” He looked at the girl right in front of him and noticed everyone had the same exact pose. He quickly did his best to copy them. Mel smiled and, reaching over, adjusted his hand so that it lay on the barre rather than wrapped around it and then grabbed his ankles to adjust his feet.

“Let's try and focus on ballet.” She said, gently stroking his hair. He was almost certain she would rip the wig off, but she stepped back and surveyed the group. “Alright, girls, who's ready for pliés?”

Mel and the teacher Ms Bennett put them through a variety of drills. Each time she said some new nonsense word, Brandon would copy the girls in front of him and then inevitably get corrected by either Mel or Ms Bennett. Every drill was repetitive enough that he felt like he was going to end up a master. Did boys even do these exercises? He knew boys did ballet, but they must have their own class because this was nothing but girls, girls, and more girls.

Aren't we done yet? He thought. He was supposed to be at Eric's right now, but instead he was in a tutu and tights, having to stick his foot out to the side over and over and over

again!

“Stretch that foot!” Ms Bennett said. “And keep your arm” she took his wrist. “Here.” He waited for her to move on, but she stood right by him. “And foot back to first. Plié.” He had learned quickly that that was the weird squat. “And arm back up, leg out. Better!” She stepped slightly away to address the whole class. “And let's see smiles! Our recital is just around the corner.”

“I know what'll get those smiles warmer.” Mel said. “Let's go to a movement exercise. Relevé!” The girls rose to their toes and Brandon followed half a beat after. “And let's go ahead and flutter like fairies around the room!” Do what, Brandon thought in disbelief. “Come on, everyone! Don't let those heels touch the floor! Use the whole space.” Brandon half-heartedly joined in, all but certain the door to the hall would suddenly fill with every single person he knew, all laughing at him. “Fluttering fairies!”

“Can you die from embarrassment?” Brandon mumbled under his breath as he did his best to flutter along without looking like he wanted to be doing this. Inspiration struck as he surveyed the room. In this chaos, he could slip away and get his phone out of the locker room. Genius!

He fluttered along, slaloming around a bit to avoid arousing suspicion. He had to keep a low profile, even if he wanted to run. He was not sure if he even could if he tried. Something about the tights, the leotard, the slippers – the everything! – made him naturally move daintily. He did not dare look at the

mirrors to know just how sissyish he looked right now.

“It's not time for a break yet!” Mel said, seeming to come out of nowhere and tapping his shoulder. “Up on those toes, flap your hands for fairy wings, there you go! And a big smile! Now flutter back to the group!” Feeling even more trapped, Brandon fluttered back over just as they were all instructed to flutter to the barre. Finally, he thought.

“Alright, let's count off, ladies.”

“One!”

“Two!”

“One!” The counting flowed down the line. Brandon ended up a two.

“Ones, turn around and meet your partner. Then each pair should find a place to stand. Use the whole room! We're going to do-”

“Mirror game!” A raucous chorus announced excitedly. Mirror game? What did that mean?

“Let's go over here!” His partner grabbed his hand and dragged him over to her chosen spot. How had he gotten stuck in this place? There were girls on his soccer team, but they didn't seem like they were from the same planet as these frilly pink prancing things! Then again, they probably wouldn't be able to picture him as a frilly pink prancer and yet, here he was.

The mirror game turned out to be not quite as bad as Brandon

expected. Sure, he had to copy the girl's movements exactly.

“Remember, we all know how these should look, so give your partner feedback if her form isn't quite right!” Brandon's partner took that to heart, pushing and pulling and adjusting him as needed as she made him pas de chat and rond de jambe and curtsey about a million times. At least he had the excuse that he was just mirroring her, not doing this because he wanted to!

“Very nice, ladies!” Mrs.Bennett said. “But remember, Cora, there's more to ballet than curtsies!” She nodded approvingly as the pair hopped in a chain of pas de chats. “Alright, everyone. Let's go to our first water break!” First water break? Brandon thought. How long would this class be? Near as he could tell, they'd been in class for an hour. Was it a good thing that no one had pegged him as a boy? It worried him he could pass as a girly girl ballerina so easily.

He tried to slip away, but everywhere he turned, there were girls in tutus. Before he knew it, they were all heading back to the barre. What am I going to tell Eric? Brandon wondered as he stared at the girls at the barre. They all wore the exact same thing and were all in the exact same pose as they watched Ms. Bennett, like some kind of army of clones. And you're stuck in here with them, he reminded himself, still baffled how Ms. Bennett had actually thought he belonged here. Why didn't I just come out with the truth?

“Allegro, slowpoke.” Mel said, grabbing him before he could join the line in the back and navigating him by the sparkly

shoulders back to where he had stood at the beginning of class. “Straight back, arm like so, hand on the barre, but don't grip it. You know this.” She posed him to match the ballerina clones. How long was this going to last?

“Did everyone remember her listening ears from break?” Ms Bennet asked.

“Yes.” The class chorused.

“Let's move on to traveling exercises. Make a circle with either me or Mel!”

Ballerinas must be a different species! Brandon thought as he learned that ballerinas have special ways to run, walk, skip, and gallop, all of which seemed designed to remind Brandon of his tights, tutu, and satiny slippers. I have to get out of here! Brandon thought as they danced around in a circle. That's what it was, a dance that was just called a classical walk.

“Let's see smiles, ladies!” Ms Bennet called. “Happy ballerinas!” Brandon had a nagging suspicion they would keep going in circles until each and every one of them was smiling, so he forced a smile on his face, trying to keep it from turning from a smile into a grimace.

“Very good!” Mel said, pulling herself out of the circle once she got a signal from Ms Bennet. “Keep going with those unfolding skips and when I touch you, I'll tell you how to go back to the barre.” She seemed more than happy to keep them going, slowly dismissing a ballerina or two for every circuit

the group made. Finally, it was Brandon's turn, his stomach twisting as her hand landed lightly on his shoulder. “Turn outs, with your back and arms straight, remember.” Brandon began his deliberate, graceful steps, feeling like the barre was a mile away. He bit his lower lip to keep from groaning as the girl after him went past, having been told to do a ballerina run. She looked ridiculous with her arms up in what Brandon unfortunately now knew was fifth position, but she was already standing at the barre when he was only halfway back. He tried to speed up, but what if he was forced to go back and start over? He kept up his deliberate pace, terrified that somehow, everyone would realize now that he was a boy.

“It's better to do it right than to do it quickly, Jodie.” Ms Bennett called, all but confirming Brandon's fears.

Once everyone made their way back to the barre, the class fell back into the earlier rhythm of exercises, though they moved from the barre on the wall to the middle of the room to do the same exercises, being drilled over and over. It was kind of like drills from sports, but those felt useful. This just felt like they were being made to do girly things just because!

After the second water break – aren't we done yet!? Brandon nearly stomped his slippered foot in frustration. – Brandon came to the sobering realization that he was improving. Sure, he still looked like an elephant compared to the eerily graceful girls to his right and left, but he still felt like his balance was getting better and it was less difficult to move his body in the same deliberate way they all were.

“Alright, everyone classical walk her way back to the barre for révérence.” Something else new? Brandon thought. How many hours had he spent here? There were no windows, but he felt like he would not be surprised if it was nighttime outside.

“Beautiful. A line of pretty ballerinas in their pretty tutus, all set for our upcoming recital.” Ms Bennett beamed with pride. “Alright, turn and curtsey!” They turned as one with Brandon just slightly behind. It felt like it had been days since he had been forced to curtsey over and over thanks to the Mirror Game, but he still found himself sliding down and back up. "Very nice, girls. You're all looking so good! A few more things to iron out before our recital, but that's the end of class instruction.” The end? That was all Brandon needed to hear, but before he could make a run for the exit, he felt his hands grabbed and they began to pull him along.

“What? Where are we going?”

“To the auditorium! The recital's in a week, remember?” Brandon stammered a hundred excuses, but it was no use. He was trapped in a chain of ballerinas going across the hall and into the auditorium.

Everyone seemed to know exactly what they were doing and Brandon could not find any opportunity to escape. His only hope was to try to keep up. Thanks to the hours of ballet class, he felt like he at least understood what they were doing, but he remained a beat behind as he tried to pirouette, prance, and dance along with them. He almost cried out in relief

when Ms Bennett pulled him off the stage.

“I think you've had enough.” She said, smiling at him and fixing the wig that had finally begun to slip off his head.

“Huh?”

“I suppose you'll be wanting your clothes back now.” He nodded, still panting. “You stuck it out pretty well. Not a lot of boys would wear a tutu this long.”

“When did you figure it out?” He looked over at the girls to make sure no one had heard.

“I knew the whole time. I'm not stupid!” She smiled. “I can't be sure what you were up to today, but I do know I don't have time to unlock the storage room right now.”

“What?”

“I grabbed your shoes.” She handed them to him with a slight note of disdain. “If you want the rest, have your parents give me a call. You do have promise. Consider signing up. For boy classes. Now, off you go.”

“But… what am I supposed to…” her smile told him everything he needed to know.

“My advice? Run, don't prance. Even if you've proven you're good at it.”