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Opening extract from

Spies in Disguise: Boy in Tights

Written by

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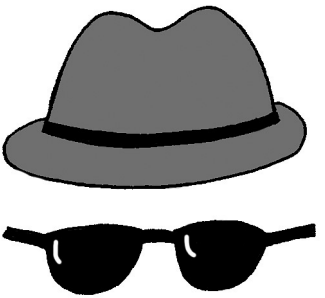
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Chapter 1



I'm doomed. There's nowhere to go, nowhere to hide – I'm trapped like a rabbit in a cage.

She looms over me, her hands in plastic gloves. She's holding a bottle that has something foul-smelling in it. Any second now, that eye-watering gunk is going *on my head*. I lean as far back into the chair as I can go.

'For heaven's sakes, Joe, keep still.' My mum sighs.



'I'm trying!' I squeeze my eyes shut and focus on the one positive thing about this – no more wigs. My hair's finally grown enough to dye and style and there is no way a new hairstyle can be as bad as the itchiness and worry that comes with wearing a long blond wig.

Probably.

When Mum and Dad first told me they were spies I thought my life was about to be transformed into one long Best Day Ever. I thought it would be full of car chases and spy gadgets and missions to catch criminals. I thought I'd have a life like Dan McGuire, the hero of my favourite spy books. And, okay, it's true that Mum drives like a maniac and that we have a Mission Control hidden in the kitchen stuffed with top-secret gadgets. And it's true that Mum and Dad

swan around talking in code most of the time.

There's just one little problem.

When I say little, I mean ENORMOUS.

I've had to go undercover – as a *girl*.

Think about the most embarrassing moment in your life. Really think about it. The way your skin burns as if someone's shoved your face against a freshly filled hot water bottle. The way your stomach decides to try to hide in your toes. The way you think about digging a large hole in a far-away place and leaving home to live in it. *That* kind of embarrassing moment.

The most embarrassing moment in your life is not even *close* to what I'm going through.

And there's absolutely no way I'd be doing it if it wasn't for two things:

1) We're in danger. Serious danger. Mum and Dad's last cover was blown and enemy spies are looking for a man, a woman and their son. So me dressing as a girl helps keep the bad guys from finding us. And the girlier I look, the less likely it is I'll be suspected of being what I really am. That's

what Mum and Dad seem to think, anyway.

2) Mum and Dad have agreed to train me as a proper spy, along with Sam, the girl who lives down the road from us and who's become my one real friend since we moved here.

After Sam and I managed to catch our teacher, Mr Caulfield, trying to run off with a whole lot of school money, Mum and Dad *promised* that we could be in charge of an official, HQ-approved mission. Soon.

Except they've been saying 'soon' for weeks. So as Mum puts the foul-smelling stuff in my hair, I bring up the subject – again.

'When are you going to find us a mission to take on?'

'Your problem is that you have no patience,' Mum tells me, wrapping a wad of my hair in silver foil.

'Your problem is that you don't keep your promises,' I say, scowling into the mirror in front of me. My head is covered in little rectangles of shiny silver packages. I look like an alien having a bad antennae day.

‘If you want to be a professional spy, you have to have a professional attitude.’ Mum wraps the last of my hair in the foil and puts the timer on.

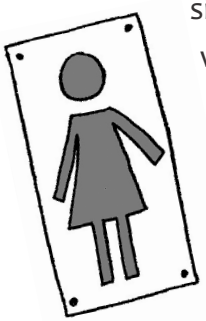


‘What’s that supposed to mean?’ My scalp tingles from the hair dye. I hope Mum knows what she’s doing. She might be brilliant with high-tech gadgets and at changing her disguise at the drop of a wig but I’m not convinced she knows a single thing about hairdressing.

‘It means you have to be prepared to wait. Your dad and I want to find the perfect mission for you and Sam. Something we know you can handle.’

‘Something that isn’t too dangerous, you mean.’

Mum's a top spy but she's also a mum – which means she worries about me getting into difficult situations. Though she doesn't seem to worry about all the difficult situations that dressing up as a girl has got me into. Like using the girls' loos, being forced to go to a pamper party, having to get changed with people who think discussions about BRAS are a good idea. If you ask me, that's all a *lot* more dangerous and more worrying than a spy mission.



Forty minutes later, my hair's been rinsed and blasted with a hairdryer (noisy, hot and *pointless*) and I'm staring at my reflection.

'I thought this was supposed to be an *improvement*?' My head is covered with bright yellow sticky-up tufts. I look like a hedgehog after a bleach-and-run accident.

'It is! Now you don't have to worry about that wig coming off every time you go to play football.

And the styling is sweet . . .' Mum fluffs the hedgehog spikes with her fingers.

I'm too traumatised to move. Somehow I imagined that the hair dye and styling Mum did would make me look a bit more like I was before – before I had to wear tights and a dress, that is. And yeah, it's great that I won't have to wear a wig any more – I *hated* that wig. I hated it the way Dan McGuire hates cockroaches in *Dan McGuire and the Six-Legged Invasion*. But at least the wig was long and straight and could cover my face. This short, tufty hairstyle gives me nowhere to hide.

'All you need is a few of your nice hairclips and it'll be perfect,' Mum says.

'Mum!'

Dad is the one who insists on me being a real girly girl – complete with pink sparkly bunny hairclips and frilly dresses. I know now from Sam that not all girls dress like this or even like pink – something Dad doesn't seem to want to understand. But I thought Mum knew better.

'I know, sweetheart,' she says. 'But we do have

to make sure your cover is completely convincing. The enemy spies are still after us, remember. It'll only take one slip for them to find us . . .'

I sigh heavily. Obviously I won't do anything that puts us in danger, and obviously I've got the point that to protect us I have to dress up as a girl.

But it doesn't mean I have to be *happy* about it.

Sam calls round in the afternoon for a game of football. Sam's become my best friend since I started at my new school as Josie, and we completed our own mission with the help of a few 'borrowed' gadgets from Mum and Dad. She knows my parents are spies and she's promised to keep our secret safe. Mum and Dad must trust her as much as I do because even when we finally told them that she knew I wasn't really a girl, they didn't freak out nearly as much as I thought they would. They still insist Sam calls me Josie at all times, though, just to make sure she never slips up when we're not at home. So Sam raises her eyebrows at my hair and says, 'Nice haircut, Josie,'

when Dad shows her into the living room. She waits until we go outside to react properly.

'Well, it's different.' She catches my eye and snorts.

'It's a disaster. I look like a poodle that's had its fur ironed.'

Sam laughs. 'It's not *that* bad.'

In Sam language, this means it's bad – very bad.

'Anyway,' she says, grabbing my football from the lawn and spinning it on one finger, 'I thought you were dying to get rid of your wig.'

'I was.' I run a hand through my hair and shudder. 'I guess not having to worry about it falling off in a game is worth looking like a poodle for.'

Sam lobs the ball at me. 'Come on, let's play. Take your mind off it.'

Sam's the only person in the world who can make me feel better about my undercover disguise. She loves football as much as I do.



She likes the Dan McGuire books *almost* as much as I do. She sticks up for me when I'm in trouble. Most of all, she makes me forget that I'm a boy dressing up as a girl and wearing clothes that make me want to lose my lunch. Not to mention my breakfast, dinner and assorted snacks.

I take the ball on my chest and drop it down to try a shot at the goal Mum and Dad set up at the beginning of the holidays. Sam manages to cover the whole length of the garden in about a second and slides in front of the ball before it passes the bar. She traps it with her foot and swings her right leg back to take the shot. I run up to block her but she's already slammed it into the net.

The downside of being friends with Sam is that she's a bit better at football than I am.

Yeah, all right – a *lot* better.

An hour later, after Sam's scored twenty goals and I've scored five, Dad appears at the back door and waves at us. 'Hey, you two, come inside. We have some news.'

He disappears before we can ask any questions. I glance at Sam, who's looking as excited as I feel. This must be it! Our mission has come in at last!

I pelt after Dad, Sam so close behind that we almost get wedged in the door.

Once we're in the kitchen, Dad sits down at the table next to Mum. There's a pile of papers in front of them. Dad grins at us, tapping the top sheet. 'You're going to like this.'

The word *CLASSIFIED* is stamped across the front page. Our first top-secret document – blinding!

'It's perfect.' Mum leans over Dad's shoulder.

I pull out the umpteen sparkly kitten hairclips Dad made me put in my hair (he seems to think I need twice as many now I don't wear a wig) and throw them on the table. '*What is it?!*'

Mum motions for us to sit down. I yank out a chair and plonk myself down in three seconds flat and Sam does the same.

'The leisure centre is putting on an exhibition of football memorabilia,' Dad says.

'Brilliant!' I'm already wondering if they have



anything from my favourite team in the world, Santos.

'Hang on.' Dad raises his hand. 'HQ has discovered there is going to be an attempt to steal it – it's a really valuable collection. It's full of things that used to belong to the most famous footballers in the world. The day after the exhibition finishes, there's going to be a large auction of sports memorabilia in Spain. HQ thinks the thief will try to take everything there the night the exhibition ends. If they do it quickly, and fake the ownership papers, no one will realise everything is stolen until it's too late.'

'Why don't they tell the police?' I ask.

'Their information hasn't come by routine channels and they can't go to the authorities without compromising their sources,' Mum says.

Sometimes Mum and Dad go a bit heavy on the spy speak but I get the gist. They can't tell the

police about this because they might put their own spies in danger.

'Plus, they know enough to be sure it's *going* to happen, but not who's going to do it,' Dad says. 'There's no one to arrest yet.'

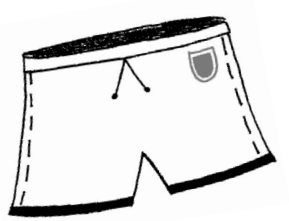
'So they don't know who's planning the robbery?' Sam asks.

'No,' Mum says. 'But they think it's got to be someone from the leisure centre staff. Some emails asking about the Spanish auction have been traced to the centre's computer server – they just don't know who it was.'

Dad flicks through the papers. 'The leisure centre has got CCTV security but HQ don't think it's enough. Their usual security spy teams are already on other missions, so they've agreed to have the extra protection supplied by a less experienced team.'

'You mean me and Sam?' I ask.

'That's right,' Dad says. 'You'll be our surveillance team. We need you to identify the thief so we can stop them before they get their hands on



the memorabilia and take it to Spain.'

Sam and I grin at each other. This is an operation worth waiting for!

'But remember, Josie,' Mum says, 'keeping your identity a secret should always come first. Nothing, not even this mission, is as important as that.' Mum's wearing her most Serious Spy look, the one that means, 'Don't even *think* about messing with me.'

'I'm not very likely to forget my secret, am I?' I point at the pile of hairclips on the table. 'So when do we start?' I can't wait to get a proper look at all the football stuff. Maybe they'll have some shirts from the Santos team. And maybe if we do a really good job they'll give us one of them as a reward.

A boy-girl can dream.

'The thing is, we have to give you a reason for being at the leisure centre on a regular basis.' Mum and Dad exchange a quick look and I get that sickly stomach feeling – the kind you get after eating too many Haribos. The look they're giving each other is the sort that spells trouble. It's the type of look they gave each other just before telling me I was

going to have to go undercover as a girl.

'What do you mean?'

'You can't just hang around the centre all the time,' Dad says. 'That would look suspicious.' He's using his come-now-be-reasonable tone of voice. It doesn't fool me for a second. 'But now that the holidays have started, we can sign you up for one of their intensive courses, so you can spend lots of time in there without being questioned.'

I narrow my eyes at them. 'What kind of course?'

'Ballet lessons,' Mum says quickly.

'Why do you always have to rush in like that?' Dad asks her grumpily.

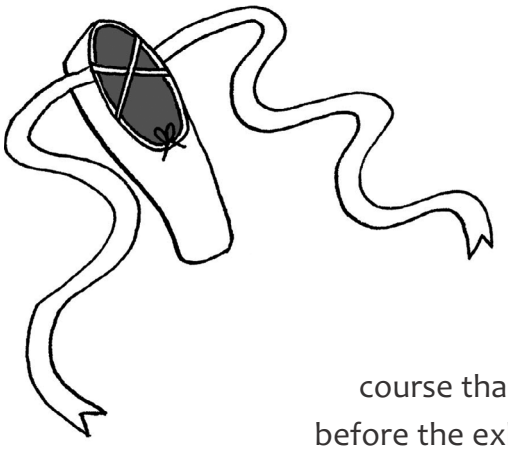
'Because you don't say what needs to be said,' Mum snaps back.

'EXCUSE ME!'

Mum and Dad stop glaring at each other and look sheepishly at me.

'*Why* does it have to be *BALLET*? Why can't we sign up for trampolining, or football, or badminton?!' It's as if my parents are *trying* to traumatise me.

Dad coughs. 'Because it's been decided that ballet



is the best cover for your activities. There's a two-week intensive course that finishes the day before the exhibition is moved on to its next location. It's a great excuse for spending a lot of time in the centre so you can carry out your surveillance.'

'But don't dancers wear *leotards*?' I can't believe Mum and Dad haven't spotted the obvious flaw in their plan. But everyone else will.

I hear Sam give a tiny snort next to me, which she quickly covers with a cough.

'Yes. That's why I've bought you a tutu,' Mum says.

'A tutu?' I stare at Mum for a second while I try to remember what a tutu is. Slowly, an image comes into my head. A skirt. Made of material that looks like meringues. Usually pink.

Oh no, no, NO.

'It solves all the possible problems,' Mum says cheerfully.

'A *tutu*?'

Sam snorts again. 'Sorry,' she says. 'It's just . . .' She bends over, holding her hand to her mouth. She erupts into giggles.

I glare at her. 'Ha. Ha. *Ha*.'

'You'll have to get one too, Sam,' Mum says. 'You should be dressed the same in case the other people in the class are only wearing leotards. If you're both wearing one it won't look so unusual.'

Sam stops giggling. We pull a face at each other – I know we're thinking the same thing.

Ballet lessons and *tutus*? This is NOT what we had in mind for a first mission.

