

The Secret Agentlinas

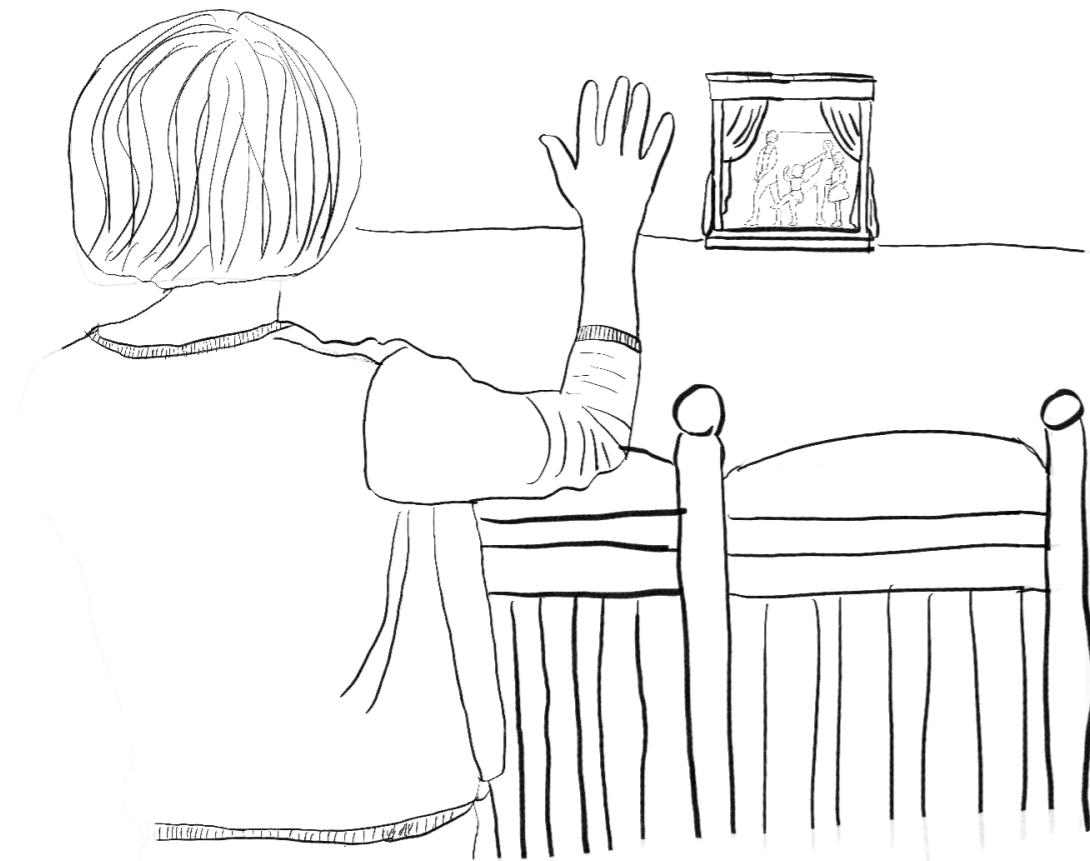
AND THE ATTIC OF CLUTTER



Lauren Teague

Chapter One

Mrs. D's Mission



The four Nelson sisters were choreographing new dances on their backyard stage when they heard a kind voice call out, "Lovely dancing, young ladies!"

They looked over to see their sweet, grandmotherly neighbor, Mrs. Dowkins, waving at them over the fence.

"Thanks, Mrs. Dowkins!" They called back as they ran to say hello.

"Girls, I need the assistance of the Secret Agentlinas," Mrs. Dowkins said after giving each girl a hug.

"Really? We'd love to help you and Mr. Dowkins!" Said Paige.

Mrs. Dowkins lowered her voice. "It's just for me. You know how I have a pretty good memory?"

The Agentlinas all nodded. Mrs. Dowkins remembered all their ages and birthdays and never called them each other's names- very rare indeed in a family of four girls.

"Well, I am in a bit of a pickle. Mr. Dowkins and I have our 60th anniversary soon—"

"Awww!" The four ballerinas said in harmony.

Mrs. Dowkins smiled. “Thank you, sweeties. Well, our kids are throwing a party — you’ll all be invited, of course! — and they asked us for some of our old things to use as decorations. We’re supposed to lend them our high school rings, since that’s where we met. Well, Mr. Dowkins is very proud of himself because he’s been keeping his ring on his dresser for decades. And I put mine in a very safe spot where I knew it wouldn’t get thrown out or anything like that.”

“Very wise, Mrs. D,” said Gwyneth.

“Only I can’t remember where it is,” Mrs. Dowkins admitted. “And Mr. Dowkins is a bit jealous of my memory and he’s going to tease me for years if I can’t find mine. You know how competitive he can be.”

The girls nodded. Mr. Dowkins had won Yard of the Month for their street more times than anyone could count. The months he didn’t win, he would go for walks until he found the yard that had won and was sure to make notes of “suggestions” for the owner.

“I’m almost positive that ring is somewhere in the attic. That’s the only place in the house I haven’t looked in yet.”

At the word, “attic,” Paige, Gwyneth and Felicity snuck glances at each other. Paige said quietly, “I think that sounds fine, Mrs. Dowkins, but maybe Lulu should sit this one out.”

She whispered, “You may have heard about Mrs. Key’s ceiling on the wedding mission.”

“Oh, that’s fine, dear! We have all hardwood floors up there. And anyway, Mrs. Key told me your dad did such a fine job fixing her drywall. Her ceiling looked better than it did before! Got rid of a water stain.” Mrs. Dowkins whispered back.

Lulu looked at Paige with wide, sad eyes. She had a good guess what they were whispering about.

“Anywho,” said Mrs. Dowkins rather brightly. She didn’t like to see any of the girls upset. “I’ll tell you the rest of the mission and you can decide if you’re up for it: Every day, Mr. Dowkins takes a nap on the couch in his study after lunch. That’s when I’m hoping to let you girls in and you’ll have about an hour and a half to look until the mail truck comes. Those squeaky brakes always wake him up. Oh, speaking of squeaks, I’m counting on those quiet ballerina feet because his study is directly below the attic and he hears any little noise coming from that area. He’s convinced we have a mouse up there.”

Mrs. Dowkins noticed Gwyneth wrinkle her nose. “I really don’t think we do — I’ve never heard a sound. He claims he hears it at night. Sits straight up in bed, ‘It’s the mouse, Evelyn!’ And wakes me up and tells me to listen but I never hear a thing. And he never believes he might be dreaming.

But back to the mission: While he’s outside getting the mail, you hurry down, give me the ring, if you find it, of course, and make a break for the back door before he gets back in. Would that work?”

The Agentlinas started to nod as Mrs. Dowkins remembered, “Oh! And for a fee, I thought if you find anything up there that you like, perhaps you could keep it? Just check with me but I imagine anything up there would be fine.”

“Thank you, Mrs. Dowkins! We’d love to help! We’ll be there tomorrow.”

“Thank you, girls! I really appreciate you being willing to try. If it’s not successful, c’est la vie, but it’s worth a try, right? I’ll see you tomorrow!”

As she walked back down their driveway, Lulu turned to Paige with a hurt expression. “You didn’t want me to come! But I promise I’ll be very careful not to go through a portal this time!”

Felicity turned to Lulu. “We told you- it wasn’t a portal, remember? It was the floor of the attic.”

Lulu put her hand on her hip. “Did I start off in one place and” she tried to snap- “I was someplace else?”

The others paused. “Well, yes, but-“ Felicity started to say.

“And what’s a portal?” Lulu asked, now with both hands on her hips.



The others looked at each other but didn't say anything.

Lulu nodded in modest victory.

"What about the mouse?" Gwyneth asked. "A live animal could complicate the mission."

"It's just a mouse. It's easy to get rid of them: You throw a ballet shoe." Lulu pretended to hold a shoe over her head like a pitcher. "Really hard, right at their head." She let the invisible shoe fly.

"Is that something you saw in The Nutcracker?" Paige guessed.

Lulu nodded.

"That's could work—" Paige started just as Felicity said, "That would never work."

Gwyneth spoke quickly to head off an argument. "It doesn't matter because Mrs. D said there probably isn't a mouse anyway. Mr. D just hears one in his sleep."

"Right," Paige said. "Now we better have a quick meeting and prep- we only have an hour and a half for our mission tomorrow. We'll have to work fast."

Chapter 2

Arm Signals

The next afternoon, the four Secret Agentlina sisters were on their way to the Dowkins' backdoor.

"One more time, let's practice the Secret Agentlina Arm Signals," Paige said.

Gwyneth and Felicity sighed. "Again? We practiced last night and this morning."

Lulu was skipping a little ahead and stopped to look back. "I forgot them again."

"No problem, Lulu- that's what dress rehearsals and practice are for!" Paige said while Gwyneth and Felicity sighed again, this time in defeat. They stretched their arms in preparation.

"Okay, so, 1st position means—" Paige started.

"Help!" Lulu said cheerfully.

"Help," said Felicity and Gwyneth with less enthusiasm. They all held their arms in a graceful first position.

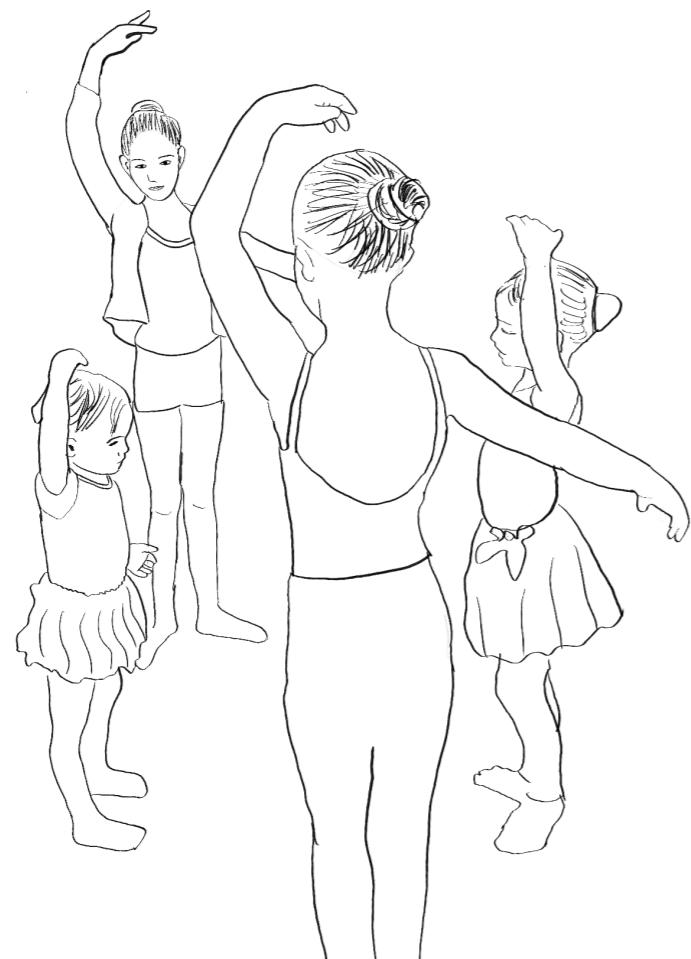
"Correct. 2nd position means 'hide', right?" Paige continued.

The others nodded and showed their arm signals.

"What about this one?" Paige poised in a perfect 3rd position.

"Freeze?" Lulu guessed.

"No, that's fourth," said Gwyneth and Felicity flatly. They showed their fourth position.



"And fifth is all clear," Felicity added quickly. "Don't worry too much about the signals, Lulu, just make sure you're super quiet."

"Ok!" Said Lulu as she lifted a foot to skip. She paused and lowered her foot again. "What was this one?" She repeated the 3rd position.

"That means 'Look! Look! I found something cool!' That was my idea," Gwyneth said happily. "It's going to be so fun in an attic full of old things! I hope Mrs. D has a big, fancy hat we can keep with feathers or flowers all over it."

"I hope they have a really old edition of a classic book, like Alice in Wonderland," said Paige.

"I hope Mrs. D has a cool charm bracelet she'll let us keep," Felicity said. "My friend brought one to school that was her grandma's and it was so pretty."

"I really, really, really want one of those giant headless dolls without any arms or legs!" Lulu called over her shoulder.

The other sisters looked at each other quizzingly.

"Oh, I think she means a dummy!" Felicity said.

Lulu stopped skipping and turned around with a solemn expression. "That's not nice, Felicity."

"That's what they're called," Felicity tried to explain. Lulu looked at her with her big, sad eyes and a quivering lip until Gwyneth jumped in.

"Some people call them dress dummies but we can call it a mannequin, ok?" She said. "You're hoping she has a mannequin."

Lulu accepted this and resumed skipping ahead until they were near the Dowkins' house.

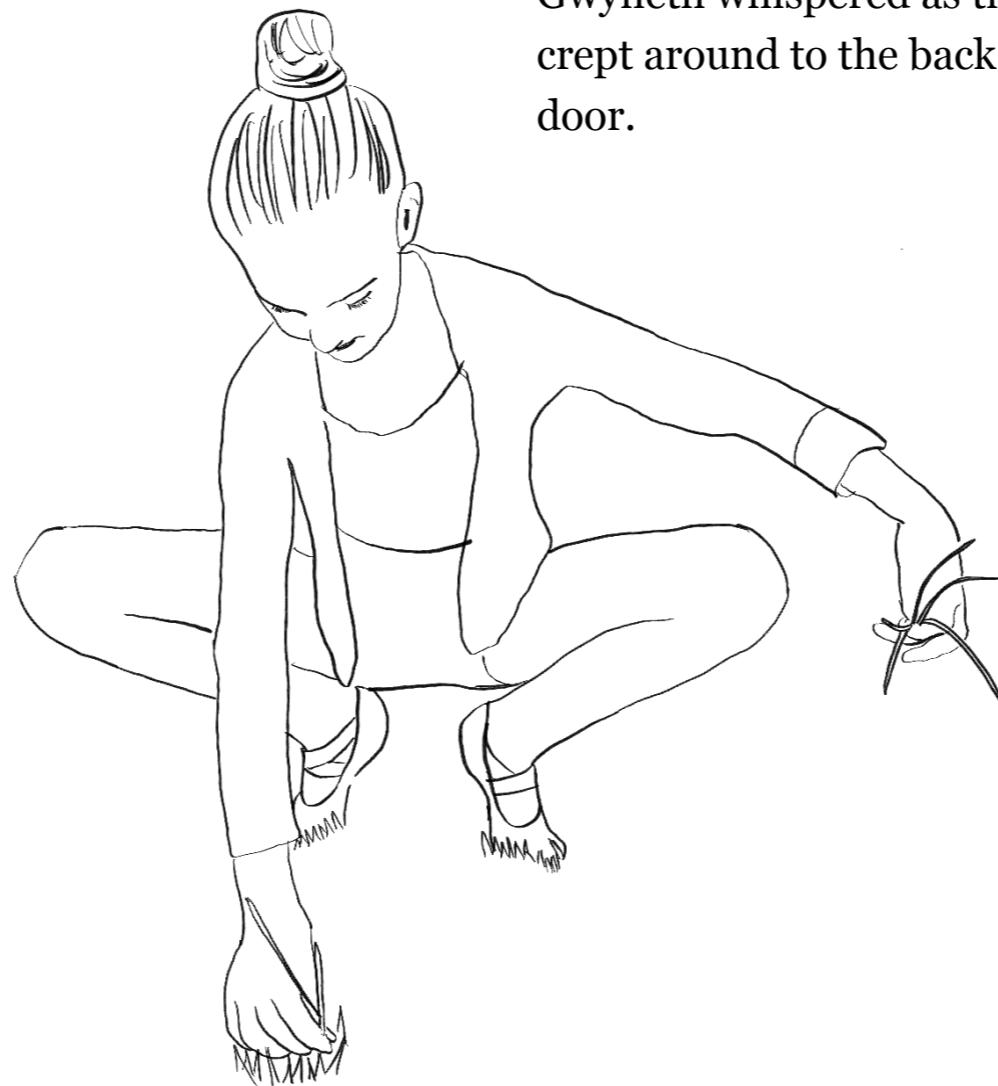
They crouched down behind the hedge of holly bushes and waited for Mrs. Dowkins to give the signal.

As soon as Mrs. D's friendly face appeared at the front window, they stood up and tiptoed across the driveway.

Gwyneth lost sight of Paige. Turning to look, she saw Paige doing graceful grand plies in various places on the front lawn.

Motioning for her to hurry, Gwyneth watched her big sister curiously. Paige had blades of grass in her hand that she was placing, one at a time, into the lawn. After a few more grand plies, she leapt a few good leaps and caught up.

"What was that about?" Gwyneth whispered as they crept around to the back door.



"Buying us a little time if we need it to make our escape," Paige whispered back. "You know how much Mr. D loves his lawn. I stuck a few blades of a different kind of grass-they're from our yard."

"He's never going to notice a few blades—" Gwyneth started to say when they heard the quiet footsteps of Mrs. Dowkins coming to let them in.

Paige whispered so softly, they could barely hear her. "Alright, Agentlinas. The mission starts now. No talking from this point on. Remember the signals, stay quiet, and find that ring."

Chapter Three

The Search Begins

Paige stared at her designated area. There was some light coming in from a window, but it struggled to get into all the spaces of the clutter. Carefully lifting a few old dresses, searching their pockets to be extra thorough, she uncovered a box filled with mismatched gloves and winter hats.

Paige carefully sifted her hands through the wools and silks to see if her fingers brushed anything metal and round when she was absolutely certain she felt something furry. Refusing to squeal, she snapped her hand back and shut her eyes. She waited to see if Mr. Dowkin's mouse scampered out. When nothing in the box moved, she took a deep breath and reached back in until she felt the fur again. It wasn't warm, so that was a good sign. Paige slowly pulled the furry object out. And kept pulling as a long, slinky fur stole slipped from the box.



She looked up to give the all clear 5th position signal and caught Felicity's eye. Paige held up the the stole and smiled. Felicity was smiling, too — in fact, she was grinning. Paige pointed to the fur stole, and mimed a mouse dance, to show her sisters how she thought it had been the mouse. Felicity didn't seem to notice the stole at all and ignored Paige's very cute mouse dance. She was holding up a necklace in triumph. She gave a bow and thumb's up.

Paige couldn't see well in the dim light, but was able to make out that the necklace had lots of little things dangling from it. "Oh, she found a charm necklace like she wanted," Paige realized. Felicity was staring at her, like she really wanted Paige to respond. Paige grinned as widely as she could and returned Felicity's thumb's up. Then she motioned for her to keep looking.

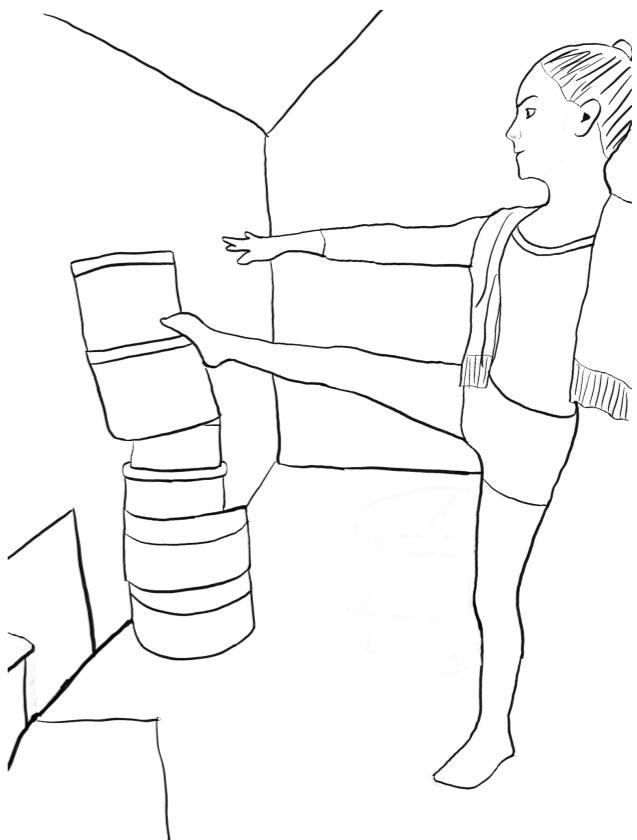
She looked over to Gwyneth and showed her the “not a mouse stole” and mimed the mouse dance. Gwyneth got it immediately and put on a quick, silent mime show of someone finding a mouse, shrieking and fainting. Paige nodded and silently laughed with her.

Shaking her head in silent appreciation of Gwyneth’s miming abilities (very helping during dramatic ballet performances), Paige checked on Lulu’s search progress. She saw that the youngest Agentlina had gotten distracted and was tenderly rocking an ancient looking baby doll.



Aware that they were quickly moving through their time, Paige went back to checking a pile of hat boxes. She focused on picking up each hat box one at a time as she checked inside. One held a collection of bent and crumpled paper dolls and paper outfits, one had old newspaper clippings, one was completely empty, but none of them had any jewelry.

She noticed Felicity, now wearing the charm necklace, out of the corner of her eye. Felicity was looking through old framed photographs. Paige grimaced. ‘A ring wouldn’t be in a frame. Focus, Felicity!’ As she tried to think of which arm signal would best represent, “Remember the mission!”, she saw the tower of hat boxes beginning to tilt. Quickly lifting a leg in grand battement to hold it steady, she balanced the other leg on the floor boards, praying they wouldn’t creak. She stretched her leg and pushed the teetering stack inch by silent inch back into place until it was stable.



She breathed a sigh of relief and checked on Felicity, who was now half hidden in an old wardrobe. The mission seemed to be back on track. Even Lulu was at least checking through the baby doll’s clothes. Oh, wait- she was changing the baby’s outfit. ‘That’s okay,’ Paige reasoned. At least she was being quiet. Paige began to go through a pile of winter coats, again sticking her hand in each pocket, hoping each time to find the ring tucked away in one.

Chapter Four

The Rusty Music Box

One corner over, Gwyneth was in a hunched demi plie as she squeezed under the lowest part of the slanted ceiling. She'd found a charming collection of snow globes and music boxes. Lifting the lid of each music box to make sure there wasn't the high school ring inside, Gwyneth got to one that was a bit rusty. Using her fingers to pry the lid open, she was horrified when she heard a click. "It's going to play!" She realized in panic. Pushing on the lid, which refused to close, Gwyneth saw a worn quilt near her feet. She dipped her legs into a grand plie, scooped the quilt up and wrapped it around the old, stubborn music box.



A few flat, muffled notes tried to play through the quilt. They pinged out slower and slower until the music box finally gave up and was quiet again. Gwyneth looked up to see the other Secret Agentlinas frozen in 4th position, all looking a bit pale as they waited. And waited.

They didn't hear any noise coming from Mr. Dowkins's study below. After a full two minutes passed, Paige gave the 5th position "All Clear" signal. She checked her watch and held up three fingers and signaled a 0 to let them know they had thirty minutes left.

Gwyneth mouthed, "Sorry!" With her heart still racing, she moved slowly around the snow globes. Something brushed against her shin. 'MOUSE!' She thought and immediately moved her leg into a passé to get it out of the way. She held her breath, determined not to shriek, even if the mouse moved. She didn't care if it ran right across her foot with its little mouse claws and whiskers and tiny rodent teeth- she would NOT compromise their mission again.

Gwyneth glared at the shadow where she'd felt a brush. She squared her shoulders and planted her feet. She was ready.

Only nothing happened. No furry blurs or tiny claws. Slowly, she arched forward until she could peek between an old tea set and stack of chipped dishes. Seeing a doll laying on its side, she breathed in relief as she saw the doll's mussed,

tangled, but thankfully not furry, hair. She carefully slid the doll out and held it up to Paige. Paige giggled silently as Gwyneth did the little mouse shriek and faint act again. 'We really have to stop finding fake mice everywhere,' Paige thought. 'But I do love Gwyneth's miming.'

Someone waving on the other side of the attic caught Gwyneth's attention. Lulu had spotted the doll and was holding her small arms out. Gwyneth tried to sign to her to focus on searching for the ring, but Lulu made her sad, hopeful eyes look so big, they almost glowed. Gwyneth sighed and motioned for Lulu to come. The youngest Agentlina tiptoed and wiggled through the piles in the attic until she had the doll in her arms. Then she noticed the tea set and smiled up at Gwyneth.

Gwyneth signaled that they should switch spots. She may as well check Lulu's corner while Lulu threw the doll a quick tea party.

'Well, well, well, what have we here?' she thought to herself as she saw a big jewelry box. A few rays of sunlight lit it up, like a treasure under a spotlight. 'It's got to be here!' She eagerly began to hold each earring, bracelet, and brooch closer to the light, hoping to find Mrs. D's high school ring.

Meanwhile, Felicity had been keeping herself occupied by looking through the entire wardrobe, then through a pile of

old shoes, including a pair of worn jazz shoes, ‘Mrs. D, you were a dancer!’ She thought to herself with a smile.

She noticed a box of dusty record albums. Flipping through the box, she lost track of time as she realized she knew many of the songs from ballet class. “Mr. and Mrs. D sure like the classics!” She was so absorbed she didn’t notice Paige or Gwyneth, who were taking turns trying to signal that she needed to get back on task.

Felicity had finished the box when she saw, to her excitement, another pile of records, with a jazz album right on top.

Reaching into a dark corner to slide the pile out, she touched something soft. ‘What’s that?’ she wondered absently as she felt around to see what it was.

There was a loud squeak and a tiny, gray mouse sprang from the corner, landing in an open space.

The mouse froze in fear, the Secret Agentlinas froze. They didn’t even have time to freeze in fourth position. They froze with hands in jewelry boxes and holding teacups and shifting coats. They froze in place like a strange Degas painting. And waited.



Chapter Five

Mr. Dowkins Hears a Noise

They didn't have to wait long. A second later, to their great disappointment, they heard someone stirring in the study below.

The mouse stared at Felicity, who looked wildly at Paige. 'What do I do!?!' She tried to scream with her face.

They heard Mr. Dowkins stand up and call out, "Evelyn! Did you hear that this time? Tell me you heard that."

"Heard what?" They heard Mrs. Dowkins call back.

The mouse stayed where it was, eyes locked on Felicity. "It's over. We failed Mrs. D," she thought sadly.

There was another loud squeal, immediately followed by another and then a long, drawn out, high pitched third.

These squeals didn't come from the petrified mouse.

They came from outside.

Paige forced her eyes off the terrified mouse to check out the attic window. She looked back at the sisters with an expression of hope.

"You mean the mail truck?" They heard Mrs. Dowkins ask.

Four hair buns nodded in unison. "Think it was the mail truck, think it was the mail truck..." they all hoped silently. Felicity thought she saw the mouse hold his little paws up in prayer.

"It wasn't the mail truck! It was a squeak! A rodent squeak!" Mr. Dowkins said.

"Are you sure? Look and check. I thought I heard the mail truck."

There were a few footsteps toward the front of the house.

"Oh," They heard Mr. Dowkins say.

"Oh, as in it was the mail truck?" Mrs. Dowkins said.

"Yes, yes, I guess it was. Alright, I'll go get it."

The Secret Agentlinas held absolutely still until they heard the front door shut. Then everything happened at once.

While Felicity was quietly shrieking, “GET OUT! GET OUT!”, Gwyneth was crying, “REAL MOUSE! REAL MOUSE!” Paige reached for the empty hat box saying, “CALM DOWN! CALM DOWN!” Lulu dropped to the floor, and the mouse, finding himself completely surrounded by Agentlinas, ran around in frantic circles.

Felicity saw Paige with the box, following the mouse with her eyes. “We don’t have time, we have to go downstairs now!”

“Gwyn, stand guard at the window—what’s Mr. D doing?” Paige said firmly as she inched toward the mouse. “It’s okay,” she whispered. “It’s okay....”

Gwyneth leaped over several boxes to take Paige’s place by the window. “He’s opening the mail box!.....He’s getting the

mail!...He’s closing the mailbox- PAIGE! HE’S ON HIS WAY BACK! We need to get downstairs!”



Paige held her spot. The mouse was slowing down a little. “It’ll be okay...”she said calmly.

“Are you talking to us or the mouse?! Paaaaaaige! He’s halfway—oh, wait. He stopped walking. He’s looking...huh.” Gwyneth stared out the window. “Paige, you genius. He’s pulling your grass out! It’s working!”

“It’ll be okay...” Paige repeated as the mouse finally stopped moving. Paige sprang forward in a lovely pas de chats, dropped the hatbox on the mouse to catch him. At that moment, something sailed through the air and smacked Paige on the cheek.

“Ow!” She groaned as Lulu said, “Oops.”

Paige picked up Lulu’s shoe and tossed it back to her. “Good try, Lulu. I already got him. Gwyn, what’s happening now?”

Paige and Lulu reluctantly followed her out and downstairs. Paige felt terrible. They wouldn't even have time to properly apologize to Mrs. Dowkins.

As they hurried down the steps, they heard Mrs. Dowkins's kind voice speaking quietly and quickly. "Thank you girls! I can't tell you how much I appreciate this! I'll be sure to send you the invitations soon! Off you scoot before Mr. Dowkins comes back!"

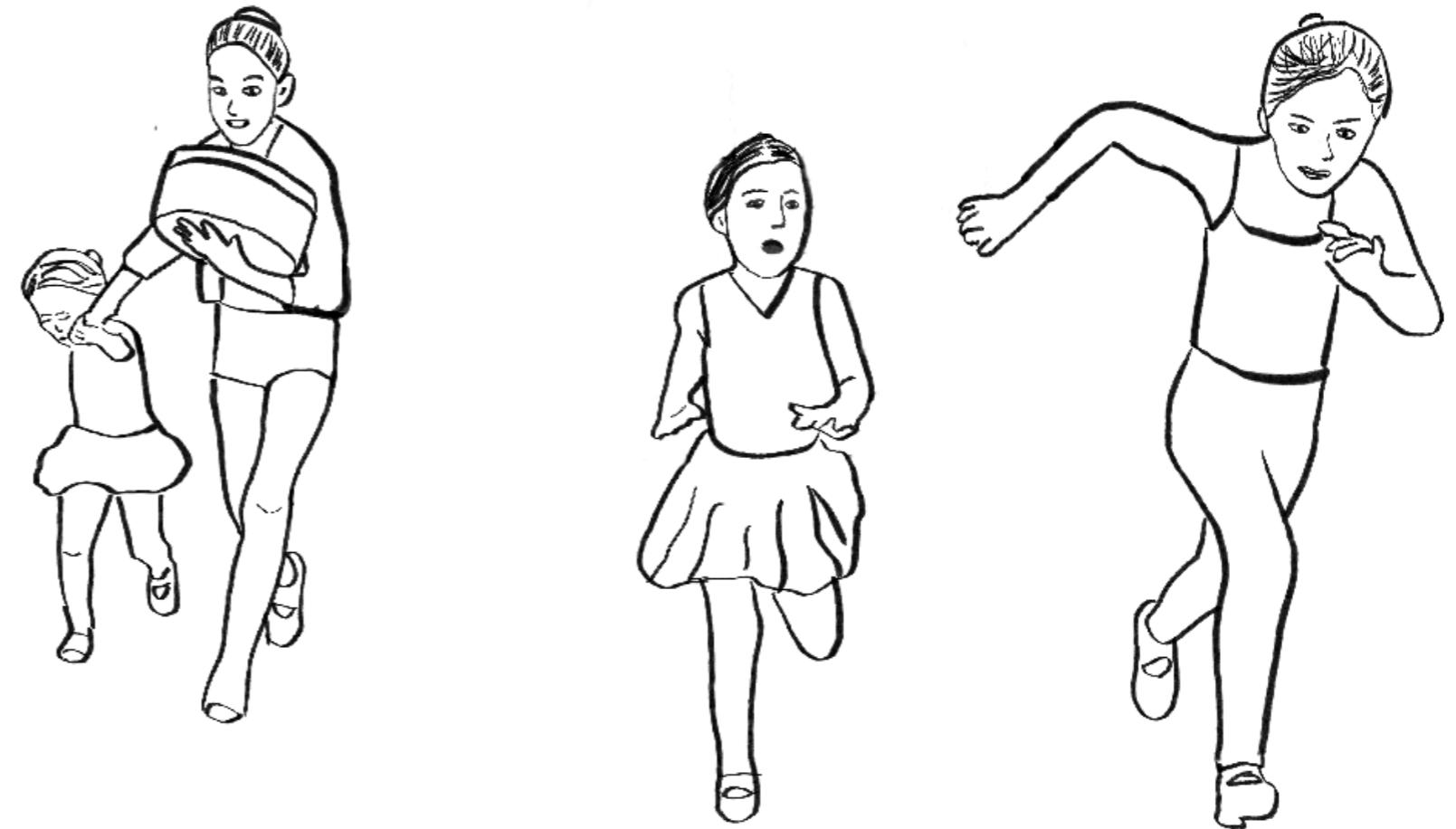
Hurrying into the kitchen,
Paige, Gwyneth and Lulu saw
Mrs. Dowkins holding the
charm necklace close to her
chest in gratitude. She opened
the back door and gave each of
the girls a hug and squeeze as
they stepped outside. "We'll
figure out your fees later!"

Paige didn't have time to
process what was happening as
the four girls sprinted across
the backyard and jeted over the
hedge.

They knelt behind the bushes
and soon heard the front door

open and Mr. D's voice from inside. They couldn't hear everything he said but some words drifted out. "Strangest thing" "and "wrong grass everywhere!" And "so you did know where it was!"

The girls crawled low to stay hidden behind the hedge and made their way around the side of the house. After waiting to be sure the coast was clear, they hurried back to the street and began to walk home.



Chapter 6

A Double Mission

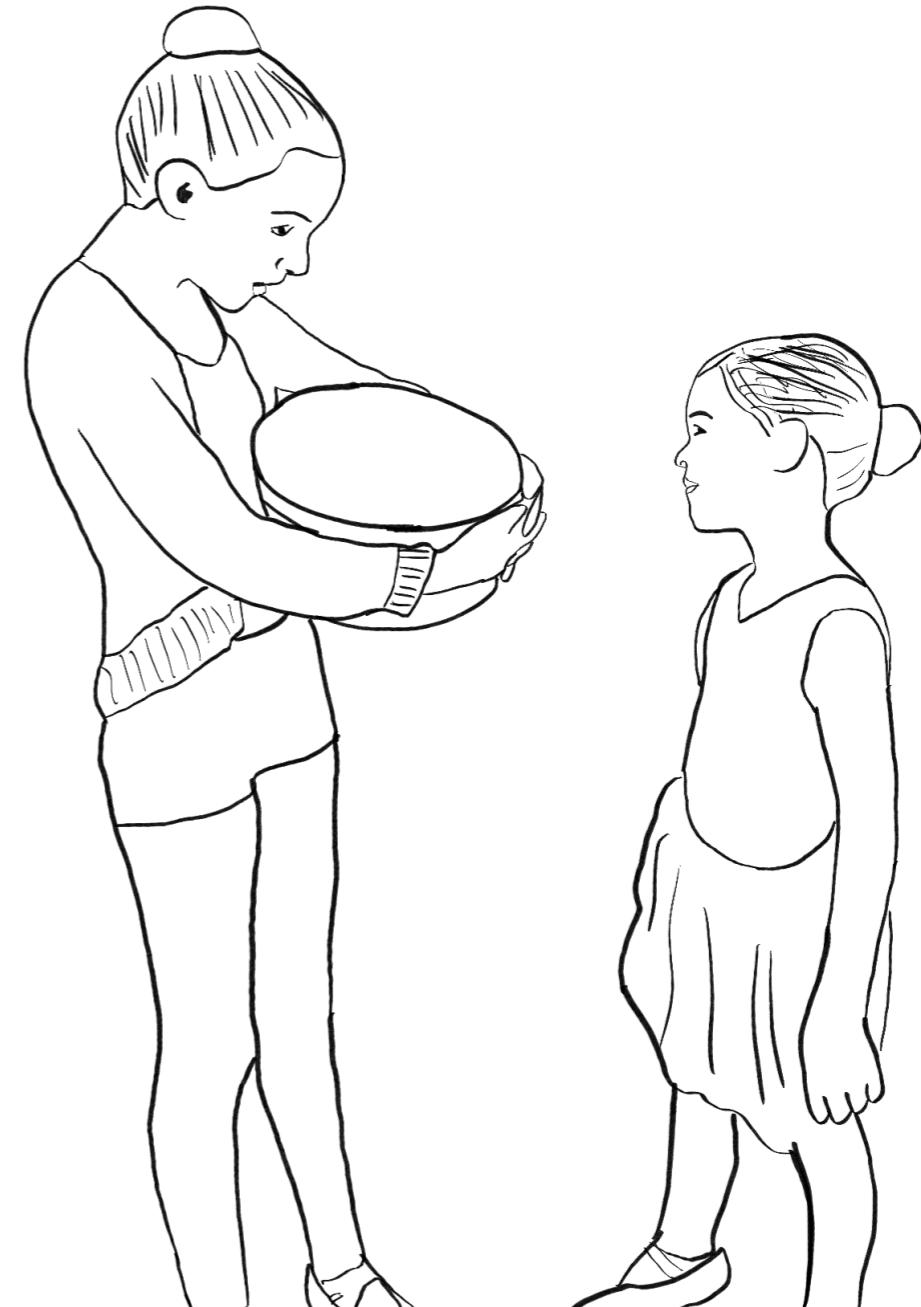
Paige was still holding the hatbox. Which was still holding a mouse. “What happened? Was she thanking us for trying? Or for catching the mouse? Did you tell her about the mouse? Didn’t you want to explain that you were hoping to keep the necklace, Felicity?” Paige asked all her questions at once.

Felicity looked at her. “What are you talking about? She was thanking us for completing the mission. For finding the ring.”

“But we didn’t!” Gwyneth said.

Felicity cocked her head, confused. “I did, too. I told you, Paige.”

“You weren’t even looking for it! I’ve never seen you so distracted during a mission. And what do you mean you told me? The only thing you showed me was—” Paige stopped walking. “Wait. Felicity— are you talking about the charm necklace?” The others stopped walking, too.



"Yes! It was so cool! Even better than the one my friend brought to school! It had all this great stuff on it. Her high school ring, little streamers from her cheerleading pom poms, cheerleading ribbons, an old locker lock, a Vote For Evelyn For Class President button, um, what else.."

"Wait, are you telling me you found the ring because it was one of the charms on that necklace?" Paige asked.

Felicity sighed. "You know I did! I found it right away- it was in a big box with HIGH SCHOOL written on it. I showed it to you- remember?" She held one hand up and pointed in triumph at an invisible necklace in her hand and pretended to take a bow, an exact copy of what she had done an hour and a half earlier.

"That's what that was? I thought you were just excited because you found a charm necklace." Paige held the hatbox with one hand and rubbed her forehead with the other. "But of course you couldn't signal that you found it because we didn't plan a signal for that. That was a misstep."

"Yeah, I thought you would know what I meant by bowing, like we do at the end of a performance. End of performance, end of mission. You seemed to get it- you gave me a thumbs up!"

Paige shook her head slowly. "Nope, I thought you wanted to keep it as your fee. I was excited for you."

"OH. That makes sense. Well, this one was special to Mrs. D, so I'll probably ask for one of those jazz records." They all started walking again.

"The records!" Paige said. "That's why you spent all that time looking at pictures and albums and inside a wardrobe."

"Yeah, I was excited that even though I found it, you told me to keep looking around until the time was up. And it seemed better for the mission to wait for Mr. D to leave to get the mail so he wouldn't hear us come down. And they have so much cool stuff up there to explore up there." Felicity said.

Gwyneth laughed, "Except we weren't exploring- we were still looking for the ring! Oh, well, I guess we got to explore at same time. Oh!" Gwyneth clapped her hands and hopped as she walked. "I just realized that was our first ever double mission! And it was successful! We caught the mouse!"

Paige laughed, too. "Yeah, we didn't even know we signed on for the mouse part. We should probably set this little guy free somewhere."

The Secret Agentlinas took the long way home to set the mouse free in the woods. Paige, Gwyneth, and Lulu all curtsied to Felicity for being the one to find Mrs. Dowkins's ring and then the younger Agentlinas curtsied to Paige. "For catching the Mouse King!" Lulu cheered. "Even though I would have gotten him with my shoe."



Epilogue

Two Weeks Later

The anniversary party was a big night for the Dowkins and their family. They invited all their friends, the whole neighborhood, and Mrs. Dowkins proudly wore her high school charm necklace. (“I forgot all about this necklace! I made it during a craft night thirty years ago!”)

After an evening of chatting and laughing and a special dance choreographed and performed by the Secret Agentlinas especially for the event, Mrs. Dowkins asked if the girls would like to “go upstairs to the attic and see if anything special catches your eye.” She said with a wink. “As your fee.” She whispered. “For two missions very well done. Mr. Dowkins doesn’t know that you found the mouse, of course.

But if he did, he would be very grateful to you four. He sleeps through the nights again!”

When the Nelson family walked back to their house at the end of the evening, Felicity cradled an old jazz album, Gwyneth was wearing a pair of silk elbow gloves, Paige chose the jazz shoes, and Lulu’s parents carried her new (old) dress dummy that had been waiting for years in the wardrobe.

Although she got very sad if anyone called it that. “You said I can call it a Mannykin.”

As they passed the woods, Felicity paused. “Did anyone else hear that?”

They all paused to listen. Paige, Gwyneth, and Lulu looked at each other. They couldn’t be sure, but it sounded a little like a mouse squeak.