



The Great Prank

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CHAPTER ONE

"Here. Hold this."

Peter Newman was drawn up short on his way to St. Walburga's administration office by a half-smoked cigarette that was unceremoniously shoved at him. He took it out of reflexive politeness and looked up at the lovely young woman who'd put it there.

Student, he told himself firmly. Not woman. Don't even think woman, regardless of all those deceitful, soft, alluring curves, stacked in all the right places. Think senior—this was a high school after all, and a Catholic high school at that. Freshmen simply did not come built like that.

The blonde flicked her long golden ponytail back over her shoulder, propped one foot up on the lip of a wooden bench and bent over to re-tie the loose laces of her regulation oxford shoes. The pose presented Peter with an unavoidable view of her very shapely bottom, barely clad by the grey pleats of her uniform skirt. She looked adorable, particularly from this angle, but he was a teacher for crying out loud, and she may as well have a brightly lit neon 'Jail Bait' sign flashing over her.

The blonde finished tying her shoes, adjusted her socks, and stood. When she reached for her cigarette, her blue eyes twinkled mischievously up into his brown ones and she fluttered her lashes. They were long lashes, and she was a heck of a flutterer. Marilyn Monroe could not have executed a more come-hither lash-batting, at least not without spraining

an eyelid, and for such a look of feminine wiliness to have come from one of his potential student was ... well, distracting.

"Thanks," she said, her voice sultry and low, forever dashing whatever illusions still lingered that she might have struck that bottoms-up pose sheerly by accident.

As she walked away, uniform skirt swishing around hips that wiggled so suggestively that such a walk should have been illegal ... What was he thinking? It was illegal!

Jail bait, he told himself even more firmly than before. Don't watch her.

But still he turned to follow that stomach-warming, lower-extremity-arousing sexy sashay, and promptly found himself confronted by the blonde's up until now unnoticed companion. A brunette, just as pretty, grinning up at him with an entirely too knowing Cheshire Cat smile.

Caught.

"Hi," she said.

His face began to burn. "I, uh ... I'm looking for the administration office."

"Going to see the Penguin, huh?" the brunette asked.

Peter blinked twice. "I beg your pardon?"

"Sister Mary Magdalen, the principal. Everybody calls her the Penguin on account of the habit ... And the fact that she's got a nose on her sharper than any beak you ever saw." The brunette's smile deepened. "It's okay to call her that. She likes the nickname."

He just bet she did. Peter's jaw clenched as, hot on the heels of his humiliation, came a small tide of annoyance. He was new, but he wasn't born yesterday.

"We're headed there, too," she told him, and thumbed over her shoulder after the blonde. "If you'll just follow the swishy booty you were so admiring a moment ago, we'll take you right to her."

He flushed even brighter, her Cheshire Cat split wider, and she turned and sauntered off after the blonde.

Only on campus for twenty minutes, and he'd already ogled a student's rear end. Not a good way to begin his tenure at St. Walburga's.

Peter frowned as the two girls looked back at him, then leaned their heads together and giggled. So much for the natural bond of respect students were supposed to show their teachers.

As the girls fell into synchronized step, their pleated skirts swishing and their round little hips wiggling in a much-too-sexy walk, he had the most absurd urge to rush over, tuck them one at a time under his arm and give the seats of those pleated skirts the sternest paddling they'd ever received! He had to reassert his authority and quickly, preferably before the new school year started next week. If he didn't, he had a feeling those two impish, smiling, mischievous young ladies might very well sink his teaching career at St. Walburga's beyond all redemption.

With cross eyes and an itching palm, Peter followed in the wake of the swishy-skirted females. It was all he could do not to take off his business coat and roll the sleeve of his white

shirt up past his elbow. When he got his hands on those two, they'd better hope they had cast-iron butts under those Catholic school uniforms!

* * * *

"So," Brandy said out of the side of her mouth when her brunette friend finally caught up to her. "Did you see the look on the new kid's face?"

Nellie chortled. "If his eyes had bugged out any further, they'd've popped from his head and rolled around down on the sidewalk."

Brandy smirked. "I'll bet he remembers me for a long time."

"Sure he will," Nellie said airily. "Eighty years from now, lying on his death bed, he's going to look up at the people gathered around him and say, 'Wheez—I don't remember a thing about high school—wheez, cough-cough—Except ... I did once see Brandy Smith's butt—wheez, cough—What a butt!'"

Laughing happily, the warm sun shining down on her shoulders, Brandy added a little skip to her step. School didn't officially start until Tuesday, barely half the students had even arrived yet, but already things were going well.

St. Walburga's Catholic High School was as old as time. Or at least it felt that way. Located fifteen minutes west of the Eugene city limits, the school consisted of twelve stately, red-brick buildings covered with ivy and surrounded by towering pines and rhododendrons, situated in the middle of five wooded acres. The boys dormitories lay on the right side of

the campus and the girls at the left, with the gym, school and administration buildings all standing sentry between them. Fraternization between occupants of the two dormitories was, of course, strictly prohibited. As was associating with the nearby occupants of Colonel Oberst's Military School, which went a good way towards explaining why nearly half of Walburga's female student had a steady boyfriend.

Every dormitory was guarded by an attentive Penguin, who enforced the no fraternizing rule with militant precision. But if you were sneaky and you had a first floor dorm—or a sturdy rope ladder and someone rooming below you who wasn't prone to snitching—then fraternizing sometimes took place anyway. Rules, after all, were meant to be broken, and in that, Brandy was a firm believer.

As they reached the administration building, Brandy took one last drag on her cigarette, then flicked the butt off into the grass. She popped a breath mint into her mouth and quickly spritzed her hair and neck with a mild perfume to cover the smell of the cigarette. It wasn't likely to fool the sharp-nosed Penguin, but she did try not to be obvious in her rule-breaking. "Okay, let's go."

Sister Robert Claire was elbows deep in a box of file folders when they walked in. Each of the five filing cabinets had a half-filled drawer yawning open, waiting to be filled, every inch of her receptionist's desk was covered in green and manila folders, six large boxes were stacked upon the floor and somewhere under all the sheaves of paper, a dot-matrix printer was hammering out the first quarters class schedules.

And on the wall directly behind the desk, was a three-by-four-foot portrayal of Christ on the Cross, overseeing all.

"Hello, girls," the nun said cheerfully. "Have a seat." She tossed a casual wave to the row of blue seats lined up just outside the Head Penguin's office, then slowly extracted herself from her box with an armload of file folders, which she stacked on top of her cluttered desk. "This must be some kind of record. Usually students wait for school to start before getting sent to the principal's office."

"Really?" Nellie perked a little as she sat down in the chair next to Brandy's. She arched her eyebrows. "Well, that's an honor, isn't it?"

"Not quite the one I'm looking for," Brandy said, sucking on her breath mint. "Couldn't hurt to have it in the year book though."

"I'll tell Sister Mary Magdalen you're here." The nun rapped lightly upon the door, then disappeared inside.

As they settled back in their chairs to wait, Nellie said, "What are you looking for?"

Brandy rolled her head to look at her, then sighed. "Listen."

Nellie fell quiet.

"Do you hear that?" Brandy asked.

"It's the air conditioner. It always rattles."

"That's a door slamming shut on our childhoods," Brandy corrected, then she sighed. "I turn eighteen next week. A whole chapter of my life will be over. Poof, gone, and with nothing to show for it. Do you realize, we have spent a quarter of our lives in this school? And for what? So we can

pass namelessly into a stale existence, bound by common conformity and unoriginality until the day we die?"

Nellie blinked. "I thought it was so we could be educated and avoid a lifetime as fry flippers at McDonald's."

"The new kids who come to this school next year will never know we were here. The younger students we nod to in the halls this year, will forgot us like we've forgotten last year's graduates. Like the graduates of this school a hundred years ago have been forgotten." Her breath mint clicked against her teeth as Brandy switched it from one side of her mouth to the other. Then she said, "Doesn't that make you sad?"

"My 'Spanking Imminence' radar just kicked on," Nellie said.

"I don't want to be just another smiling face in the historical archive of yearbooks. I want to be immortal."

"Is that going to get us into trouble?"

"We have to do something spectacular this year," Brandy said passionately.

"It is, isn't it?" Nellie bent over, elbows on her knees, and covered her face with her hands. "Oh, God."

"It's our last chance before we pass into complete anonymity. We have to do something so outstandingly outrageous that, fifty years from now, kids will still be talking about us. They're going to walk these halls and say to themselves: 'I wonder if my locker once belonged to Nellie Goodman or Brandy Smith? I wonder if Nellie Goodman or Brandy Smith once sat at the same Home Ec desk I'm sitting at now?'"

"I wonder if the paddle whacking my ass'," Nellie chimed in, "is the same one used to whack the asses of Brandy Smith and Nellie Goodman?' Cause I've got a funny feeling that's where this conversation is headed."

"Don't be so pessimistic."

"You do this every year."

"This year will be different though."

"You say *that* every year, too."

"But this time, I've got it all worked out. This year we just won't get caught."

"Oh, Lord," Nellie said, covering her face again. "Here we go again."

That was when the front office door swung open and Peter walked in. He glanced once around the cluttered office, but when his eyes fell on them, his expression suddenly darkened and he glared.

Brandy smiled winningly back at him and batted her lashes. With her elbow, she nudged Nellie, who straightened up long enough to blow him a kiss.

He pointed at them and opened his mouth, but just then Sister Robert exited the principal's office and cheerfully announced, "All right, girls. She's ready for you—Oh, Mr. Newman! How wonderful to see you again. Ready for the new school year?"

"Yes, Sister," he said, giving Brandy one last hard look, before turning his attention to Sister Robert Claire.

As she crossed into the Penguin's office, Brandy half turned around to glance back at him. Handsome though he was, with all those dark boyish curls and those big brown

eyes, he looked much too comfortable in a three piece suit and tie for her tastes. What a pity.

* * * *

The Penguin was sitting at her desk, her bony hands folded on the green matting, glaring at her over the top of her plain wire spectacles. Brandy couldn't help but feel just a little bit cowed every time she came into this office. Sister Mary Magdalen had to be at least fifty; and she'd been at least fifty ever since Brandy had known her. There was a running debate in Theology as to whether or not the good Sister might actually be the original Mary Magdalen of the Scriptures.

"Sit," she told them.

There were two sets of chairs in the principal's office: the soft, plushy, blue-cushioned equals to those out in the front room, and the hard wood, uncomfortable, you-know-you're-in-trouble-if-you're-sitting-on-it bench. Years and years ago, it had been unofficially dubbed the Bad Girl Bench after a particularly nasty and yet brief war with a second grade teacher resulted in Brandy and Nellie having been sent to said bench three times in a single two-week span.

Neither girl so much as glanced at the cushioned chairs. They turned from the door and went straight to the Bad Girl Bench, taking their respective places: Brandy at the right end and Nellie on the left. After so many years and so many trips to this office, it was a wonder there wasn't an engraved plaque hanging on the wall behind them and permanent butt imprints worn right into the rigid slat seat.

While the Penguin stared on, they affected a pose that was by now more habit than contrition: hands folded in their laps, heads bowed, eyes fixed firmly upon their knees.

"Well," Sister Mary Magdalen began. "How was your summer?"

"Good, thank you, Sister," Brandy said in unison with Nellie.

"Was it hot?"

"Yes, Sister."

"I hope you're both getting used to it." The Penguin unclasped her hands and sat back in her chair. "You'll notice I have learned from past experiences. You will spend your senior year in separate rooms, in separate dormitories, and with different roommates."

The girls looked at one another, then back at their knees.

"In fact, I have decided to learn from all of my past mistakes, spanning from Kindergarten to now. We are going to start this year off right." She got up and walked around her desk to stand in front of the Cupboard.

There was no moniker fiendish enough to describe that particular article of furniture. Nellie had come close one year with 'The Devil's Toy Chest', but mostly because when you're twelve anything with 'The Devil' in it was just naturally the end-all-be-all of all evilness and nothing could top it on the scale of all things bad.

Sister Mary Magdalen unlocked the Cupboard doors and withdrew from it the dreaded Board of Education. Brandy couldn't quite suppress her involuntary shudder as the nun turned and held the twenty-inch-long paddle aloft. She

grasped the pale handle with familiarity, her frosty eyes never once leaving them as she hefted the business end and let the smooth oak wood slap lightly down into her open palm. Brandy's bottom cringed at the sound.

"We aren't going to have any repeats of last year's shenanigans," the nun announced, lifting her chin with authoritative confidence.

"No, Sister," both girls said in unison.

"No mattresses in the swimming pool." Sister Mary Magdalen again tapped the paddle into the palm of her hand. "No wiring the speaker system to play Revelry at dawn." Another tap. "And should Cardinal Stritch once again deign to pay us a visit on All Saints' Day, you will not be on kitchen detail and there will be no Matzo Balls, Gefilte Fish, kugel, latkes, or Massah Cakes served at supper. Are we clear?"

The Board lay another crisp pat into Sister Mary Magdalen's palm, and Brandy heard Nellie swallow hard.

"Yes, Sister," they meekly said again.

There was a knock at the door, and Sister Robert Claire poked her head inside. "Mr. Newman is here."

The Penguin's stern countenance changed instantly. She beamed. "Wonderful, wonderful. Show him in."

"Are we excused, Sister?" Brandy asked. Both she and Nellie started to stand in anticipation of a 'yes.'

"Sit," the principal commanded, pointing at the bench with the end of the paddle.

They promptly sat, and the new kid walked into the room.

"Girls," she said with a welcoming smile. "I would like you to meet St. Walburga's new science teacher."

"Peter Newman," he said, his dark eyes glittering as he extended his hand to them both.

Nellie squeaked, Brandy swallowed her breath mint, and Peter smiled.

"Nellie Goodman," the brunette squeaked again.

"Brandy Smith," Brandy said, feeling almost sick to her stomach when his hand engulfed hers. He squeezed firmly and held it just a half second longer than necessary.

"It's wonderful to have you here," Sister Mary Magdalen said when he finally turned to her. "And on such short notice, too! I confess I was beginning to worry. Our last science teacher, Mr. Rivers—" her eyes slid to Brandy and her smile dimmed slightly. She cleared her throat. "Well, he hasn't yet fully recovered his nerves. Are you easily unnerved, Mr. Newman?"

He glanced once at Brandy as he said, "Not even remotely. I—" He froze mid-sentence when he turned back to the nun. He bent down slightly to look out the window behind her. "Is that smoke?"

"What?" Sister Mary Magdalen turned around and her smile vanished. Rounding her desk, she threw open the window and leaned out. "Oh! Oh gracious! The grass is on fire! Oh! You, Tommy! Put it out! Yes, you! Stop gapping and stomp on it! Quick!"

Peter joined the nun at the window, promptly followed by both Brandy and Nellie, who pressed their hands and faces to the cool glass panes, watching shocked horror as another senior dutifully stomped on the flames. The small fire was squelched before it could spread, although it did leave an

oblong, two-foot-long burned patch smack in the center of an otherwise perfectly maintained lawn.

"Which of you did that?" Sister Mary Magdalen thundered, glaring down at the handful of wide-eyed students gathered around on the grass. "Who was it? Tommy, was it you?"

"Jesus, Mary, and Joseph! No, Sister, I swear!"

Brandy and Nellie looked at one another, then as one, turned and met the knowing gaze of the new science teacher. Brandy felt a hand grab onto her arms, the fingers digging in like claws.

"Oh," Nellie said faintly.

"Probably some irresponsible youth," Peter added slowly, "who likely didn't stick around long enough to witness the damage his carelessness caused."

"You're probably right." A very irate nun closed the window. "Smoking: such a nasty habit, yet the students all seem to gravitate to it."

"The rebelliousness of youth," Peter commented.

"A Venial sin," the nun returned.

"One which the culprit," again that grim smile touched his lips as he glared at Brandy, who swallowed hard, "or culprits," his eyes flicked to Nellie, whose hand tightened on her arm, "will likely come to repent of very, very soon."

"May we go now, Sister?" Nellie asked weakly.

"Yes, yes." Sister Mary Magdalen waved them off without looking away from the window. "Just bear in mind, girls. I've got my eye on you. No shenanigans!"

"No shenanigans," Brandy echoed, as they backed quickly around the desk.

For a moment, it seemed as though Peter were about to follow them, but he stopped and picked up the pale, oak Board of Education instead.

"What a lovely paddle," he said, turning it over in his hands, his eyes never leaving Brandy's. "It wouldn't be more decorative than functional, would it?"

Nellie's grip tightened that much more on Brandy's arm.

"Teaching Goodness, Discipline and Learning; that's our motto here at St. Walburga's and the Board of Education is often used to uphold it," Sister Mary Magdalen said, then shook her head in irritation as she glared down at the burned spot of lawn. "Some of us must need more discipline than others, apparently."

"Apparently," Peter agreed, his eyes never leaving them, and Brandy and Nellie ducked out of the office, shutting the door hurriedly behind them.

They looked at one another, then fled the receptionist's office on shaky legs.

Brandy's knees nearly buckled as she jogged down the single flight of stairs and ducked quickly out of the administration building. They froze in the shadows of the front entrance way, leaning up against the brick wall for support.

"Well," Nellie breathed. "No one's ever set fire to the lawn before. That was fairly spectacular."

"No, that was arson," Brandy hissed. She crept out of the doorway, peeking up the face of the building to check if the principal's window was still closed. It was, and she let out a nervous sigh of relief.

"It's likely to be remembered."

"It's also likely to result in expulsion and jail time," Brandy said. "Thanks, but no thanks. Besides, that sort of thing doesn't count anyway. It was an accident. I don't want to be remembered for an accident. I want to be known for something brilliant, ingenious, never before done anywhere in the history of the world."

Nellie covered her eyes. "Did you see the way the new guy was looking at us? Like he wanted to glare us right through the floor and straight into Hell."

"Where's my cigarettes?" Brandy patted her pockets with slightly shaky hands. "I need a cigarette."

"So do I, and I don't even smoke. Let's go back to your dorm first though, okay? If we get caught lighting up out here, the penguin'll have our butts smoking worse than the lawn."

"Right." Brandy took a deep calming breath. "We're cool, we're confident, we're undefeatable."

"More importantly," Nellie chimed in, "We didn't get caught."

Brandy held out her hand, palm down. They touched fingertips and twiddled them together, a special handshake developed back in the first grade and stubbornly held onto throughout the years. With one last glance up at the principal's window, they headed for the girls' dormitories.

As they walked, Nellie said, "You know, we've already set fire to the school, Mr. Newman knows it, and the Penguin's going to be watching us like a hawk. You know I hate to say this, but maybe we should be good this year."

Head down and thinking, Brandy said, "Don't be silly. Being good is for people who lack imagination. That isn't us. We'll be bored to sobs in minutes."

"How do you know? We've never actually tried being good before. We might like it." Nellie was quiet. "At least it'd be different, and just once I'd like to make it to Thanksgiving without having to bend over the principal's desk for a discussion with the Board."

Brandy stopped in her tracks. She turned and looked Nellie through half-closed eyes.

"What?"

Brandy just stared at her.

"What is it?"

"That," she emphasized, "was us being good for ten whole seconds."

Nellie blinked twice. "That's what it feels like?"

"In a nut shell."

They started walking again, and after a moment, Nellie sighed, "You're right. It wasn't very interesting."

"Mm," Brandy agreed. "Besides, no one ever remembers the good ones. Unless, of course, they die in some spectacularly tragic way. I really wasn't planning to go all out this year."

From a second story window in the administration building behind them, Sister Mary's voice called down, "Hold it, girls!"

With her stomach sinking down to her toes, afraid they'd been ratted out after all, Brandy turned around. She shaded her eyes from the afternoon sun and looked up.

"Mr. Newman is on his way down," the Penguin told them. "Escort him to his classroom so he can prepare for next week."

"Oh lord," Brandy muttered under her breath, then joined Nellie in a chorus of, "Yes, Sister!" Shaking her head, she lowered her gaze to watch as Peter pushed through the door and come down the administration building's front steps. "Talk about a wet blanket."

"He might not be that bad," Nellie said, with a touch of hopefulness. "He hasn't ratted us out for the fire."

Brandy frowned. "I wonder why not."

"We're not in trouble," Nellie said. "Who cares what his reasons are. Never try to pick the minds of geniuses and science teachers: the intellectual depths are unfathomable."

"Miss Goodman, Miss Smith," he said as he jogged up to them.

Nellie smiled warmly. "Well, if it isn't Baby-Face Nelson? Are you old enough to be a teacher, sonny?"

Brandy was slightly less friendly. "Drop dead, Doogey Houser."

She turned and would have continued on to her dorm, had he not hooked her arm in his hand. He steered her towards the school and fell into step next to her. "I'm sorry if my being a teacher bothers you. Perhaps you should think twice before playing your pranks on people you don't know."

"Don't lecture me, infant," she said snippishly. "How old are you anyway? Twelve? Thirteen?"

"Yeah," Nellie added as she fell into step on Brandy's other side. "Does your mommy know where you are?"

"I'm twenty-three, actually," he replied. "I understand I'm the youngest member of St. Walburga's staff."

"You only have to be under forty to make that claim," Brandy muttered.

"I was also the only one to apply for the job. This school has quite the reputation, you know."

"Reputation?" Nellie asked. "For what?"

"For you."

"Me?" Nellie's brown eyebrows shot up into her hairline.

So did Brandy's. She also stopped stalk-still on the bottom most step of the school building, her jaw dropping in a mixture of shock and outrage. "Her? What did she ever do? I'm the brains of this operation!"

"Oh hey, thank you very much!" Nellie glared at her. "If that's how you feel, you can just become immortal all on your own!"

Peter smiled, catching Brandy's elbow when both girls did an abrupt about-face to stomp off to opposite barracks. He let Nellie go, but steered Brandy back up the steps of the school and through the front door. "Why don't you show me to my classroom?"

Hands clenched at her sides, she started down the hall, but only got a few steps before turning sharply back to him, demanding, "Did you really hear about Nellie before you came here? Nellie, not me?"

"The rumors were more in regards to the student body as a whole. They were also less like rumors and more like warnings, so I wouldn't be too proud of it if I were you."

"But they could have been about me, right?"

"This is a point of real contention for you, isn't it?"

Brandy closed her mouth with a tight little snap, then turned around and started walking again. "No, of course not."

"What did Miss Goodman mean by your becoming immortal on your own?"

"Your room's the last room down this hall," she said tight-lipped. She turned the corner just past the cafeteria and pointed to the brown, window-less door at the very far end. "Right down there. Have a nice day."

"You're not going anywhere just yet, young lady." He caught her arm when she again tried to walk past him. "I haven't excused you yet."

"Like I need an excuse from Doogey Houser," she scoffed as he dragged her down the hall to the science room.

"More and more what I'm beginning to think you really need is a good attitude adjustment."

Brandy gave him a smile so sweet that it dripped saccharine. "Better than you have tried." His laugh held only a minute degree of amusement in the low notes. He pushed her through the door ahead of him and flicked the light switch on.

There were twelve two-person stations in twin rows down the middle of the room, with the instructor's station at the very head of the class. All came complete with beakers, vials, Bunsen burners and microscopes. There was a full-sized plastic diagram of the human animal, at various stages of exploration from the outside in, in front of the blackboard, and a stainless steel specimen refrigerator by the emergency exit.

"Not bad," Peter said, looking around. He let go of her arm and gestured to one of the stations. "Take a seat."

She didn't move. "I'd rather go back to my room, thank you. I have a lot of unpacking to do."

"Not until we're done, you don't." He walked over to the fridge, opening the door to look inside. "Whew! Smells like—like—"

"Limburger," Brandy supplied, folding her arms across her chest.

He raised both eyebrows, turning back to her. "Limburger?"

"Yeah, Mr. Rivers had a thing for mold. So, last year we replaced some of his specimens with Limburger. We just scraped a fine coating of it in the bottom of a few petri dishes, cut the power to the fridge, let it age a few weeks, and by the time everyone got back from spring break—" Noticing his frown, she shut her mouth. "Never mind."

"No, no. Please continue." Peter came back to her. Folding his arms across his chest, he leaned his hip against one of the science stations. "I'll bet the smell must have bowled him over the first time he opened the door."

"Didn't do us much good, either. We were sitting right next to it at the time."

"You and Nellie?"

Brandy kept her mouth shut.

"Did you get caught?" he asked.

"Yes." She met his eyes steadily, her own blue gaze unwavering and unapologetic. "It took three days to air the

school and a lot of bleach to clean that fridge. They threw the petri dishes away, I believe."

"And did Sister Mary Magdalen apply her Board of Education?"

Brandy blinked slowly. "No, she used the cane."

"Six of the best?"

"Panties down."

"You didn't learn a thing from it, did you?"

"Sure I did. When the smell of rotting Limburger hits you, gag with everybody else and don't laugh. Now, if we're done, I really need a smoke." She turned around and headed for the door. "See you around, Doogey."

"If you walk out that door, you can give yourself five minutes before Sister Mary Magdalen finds out exactly how that lawn fire got started."

Brandy immediately turned around again, blue eyes flashing. "What do you want, Mr. Newman? Do you want to blackmail me in exchange for your silence?"

"You, Miss Smith," he said, "are a brat, and my palm's been itching to take care of you since you pulled that eyelash stunt. But I'm also willing to give you the choice."

"Eyelash stunt?" She frowned. "What kind of choice?"

"We can go to Sister Mary's office, right now, you and I together, and tell her all about your mishap with the cigarette and the fire—"

Brandy threw her head back with a sharp laugh of disbelief. "Are you out of your mind? I can't do that!"

"Or," he said over the tail end of her protests, "I can settle the matter myself, just you and me, and no one else has to

know. No embarrassment for you, no risk of expulsion, and I will get some small measure of vindication for the humiliation you've already caused me. Personally, I think this is a good deal for everyone involved. But as I said, the choice is entirely yours."

Gradually, she lost her smile. Her stomach clenched. "What does that mean, the choice is mine? What are you going to do?"

He held her gaze steadily. "I'm going to spank you."

Brandy stared at him in opened-mouthed shock, and then she did the only thing she could think of to buy herself enough time to come up with something better. Her eyes rolled back in her head, and she fell to the floor in a dead faint.

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CHAPTER TWO

Gradually, Brandy lost her smile. Her stomach clenched. "What does that mean, the choice is mine? What are you going to do?"

Peter held her gaze steadily and said, "I'm going to spank you."

She stared at him for a moment in shock, then her eyes rolled back in her head and she fainted dead away. Or at least did her best to make it look as though she did, even though Brandy had taken enough spankings at St. Walburga's to know the odds of this ploy working were against her from the start. Still, maybe the new guy wouldn't know this just yet, and even if he did, where was the harm in trying?

His mouth flattened in a tight line, and he didn't move. "I'm not falling for that, so you may as well just get up off the floor."

She didn't move.

Neither did he, other than to fold his arms across his chest, tilt his head to one side and glare down at her sprawled form.

"Crap," Brandy said and reluctantly sat up again. She looked at him. Just what she needed in her senior year: a teacher determined to be a challenge.

"You might want to consider stopping all this foolishness before you dig yourself into a deeper hole. I guarantee you've already got more of a spanking coming to you than you want right now."

That wasn't saying much since, to date, Brandy had yet to ever *want* a spanking.

She looked at him, her eyes narrowing as she studied his stern face. Well, fainting hadn't worked, so she switched to bluffing instead. "You can't do that."

"Spank you?"

"Yeah. You're not even a real teacher yet. It'd be a pity to get fired before the school year even starts."

"Your concern for me is touching. Get up."

His expression was positively implacable, and as Brandy pushed slowly back onto her feet, she actually felt her bottom tingling. How disconcerting!

Don't fidget, she told herself as she stood in front of him. Don't fidget.

She fidgeted. "How, uh ... How do you want me?"

"Over my knee," he confirmed. "Skirt up."

Her mouth dropped. "In your wet dreams!"

"All right." He pushed up from the science station and reached for her arm. "Let's go talk to the Sister. You obviously prefer to do your explaining panties down to the Board of Education."

"Wait! No no no!" Brandy dug in her heels. She quickly latched onto the threshold as he dragged her to the door. Bracing her feet and her hands to either side of it, she struggled to keep from being shoved out of the room. "All right! I agree, I agree! Just—" she sighed in defeat when he stopped pushing at her back. "Just don't tell the Penguin, okay?"

Without letting go of her, Peter asked, "You agree to what?"

"You know what I agree to!" she snapped testily. "I'm not going to say it!"

He opened the door.

"Okay, okay!" she yelled, stiffening her arms and legs when he started to lean his heavier weight against her back again. Very slowly, he let go of her. Even more slowly, she turned around.

Brandy glared up at him through her lashes. A woman in better control of her emotions might have been able to flutter them sexily, coo some sort of brazen comment in his ear and gotten off Scott-free. As it was, it remained all Brandy could do just to keep from running. She'd never been all that crazy about spankings. She was real good at earning them, ironically enough, but not at all accomplished when it came to bravery in the face of receiving one.

"Okay?" Peter prompted.

She drew a fortifying breath. "I-I'll let you spank me."

"How very gracious of you."

"Does the Penguin know you're a perv?" she demanded.

"I am no more perverted than any other St. Walburga's teacher who has ever hefted a paddle or cane to uphold that grand St. Walburga's motto: Teaching Goodness, Discipline, and Learning. And anyways, where you and Nellie are concerned, not only she has given me *carte blanche* in the handling of your misbehaviors, but I have a feeling she'd likely approve. Now come here."

He walked to his desk at the head of the room, wheeled the chair out and took his coat off.

Brandy stayed where she was, rooted to the tile floor while he unbuttoned the cuff of his right shirt sleeve and began to roll it up. He had a very threatening forearm, she discovered, as turn after turn, his lean musculature was revealed up to his elbow.

He sat down, then looked at her. "Well? I can't very well spank you clear over there."

Figuring she was in enough trouble, Brandy bit back her retort. She cast a last wistful look at the door, then trudged reluctantly up to the front of the room. She grumbled, "Mr. Rivers never spanked me."

"That's quite all right. I'm going to do enough spanking here to cover every teacher you've ever had." When Brandy froze in her tracks, he snapped his fingers at the floor beside his feet and said, "Right up here, Miss Smith. Come on, now. At least I'm not going to use a paddle."

She almost hated to ask. "What are you going to use?"

"Good question." He glanced at his desk, then began opening each of the drawers one at a time. In one, he made a discovery that had him saying, "Ah ha! Here we go." He held up a twelve inch ruler. "I'm going to use this. And this," he said, holding up his other hand as well. He wiggled his fingers at her.

For a moment Brandy didn't move. Then she let out a pent in breath. "Oh, thank goodness!" She covered her eyes with a shaky laugh born of relief. "For a moment there, I thought this was really going to hurt." She caught herself and blinked

at him. All relief and amusement fled from her face as she said stiltedly, "Um, and of course it is going to hurt. Hurt unbearably, I'm sure. After all, that's what spankings do. Right? Right. Well, then." Brandy stepped forward and without ceremony draped herself over his lap. She wiggled to situate herself more comfortably, then said, "Okay, I'm ready. Whale away if you're going to."

Head down, her hands braced on the base of the wheeled chair and her eyes fixed upon the floor, Brandy completely missed the at-first incredulous and then annoyed look Peter cast at the back of her head.

He dropped the ruler on top of his desk. "As you wish."

He flipped her too-short skirt up over her firm young teenaged bottom, baring her scarlet lace, completely unregulation panties to view.

"I don't suppose I could just say I'm sorry, promise to be good and you'd let me off with a warning, huh?" she asked the floor tiles.

He glared at the back of her head again. "You wouldn't know good if it bit you on the butt."

And with that, she felt his arm swing downward and his hand flattened both her bottom cheeks in a great, stinging smack that had her entire body jolting over his lap.

Brandy let out a startled shriek before she caught herself. Her eyes bugged, her mouth gaped and her bottom was stinging as though it were crawling with angry hornets. "Oo-owww! What did you hit me with, you son of a—"

Another hard smack of his hand snapped her mouth shut and Brandy felt a jolt of panic shoot through her entire body

as she came face-to-face with the uncomfortable realization that this might really, actually hurt.

"Oh! Ow! Okay, okay! I'm done!" she cried as the third swat collided with her right buttock with enough force to flatten that one as well. She scrambled to get up. "I'm all done, I said!"

But Peter only wrapped his arm tighter around her waist, hauling her more fully across his thighs. Her feet no longer touched the floor behind her, but her nose almost did in front, and the panic intensified within her as his hand landed twice more, harder than ever, before his fingers hooked the back of her panties and skinned them all the way down to the backs of her thighs.

"Wait!" she screeched. "You can't take my underwear down! I said I was done! I've learned my lesson!"

She scrambled frantically to get herself upright, but his hold on her only tightened. He completely ignored her pleas, and that hand of his, which could so easily have rivaled the Board of Education, began to beat a strong, steady, angry tattoo all over her unprotected bottom.

Brandy kicked and squirmed, a sudden frenzied mass of shrieking, grunting, gasping, flailing, scissoring limbs that waved about in all directions, completely unable to get free of him. That hornets' stinging sensation grew into a fiercely burning pain. Real pain. The kind she usually went out of her way to avoid.

And he wasn't stopping, either!

If anything, he began spanking harder. And faster.

She yelped, "Please! Stop!"

"Now that's more like it," Peter said.

The effort that he was expending in paddling her bottom actually caused him to breath heavily. That was frightening; no one had ever panted from the vigor of spanking her before! And Peter was showing absolutely no signs of stopping.

Brandy panicked. Her bottom was burning and throbbing, and the only thing that she could think was the high-pitched frantic wail that came pouring out of her mouth. "You're hurting me!"

Peter paused just long enough to shake his hand twice, flex his fingers, and then resume the spanking. "You're hurting me, too, but you don't hear me complaining."

Brandy shrieked, long screeches without words. She bucked, trying to twist her hips and get her bottom somewhere safely beyond his reach. Unfortunately, all she succeeded in becoming was even more tightly pinned. He scissored her legs between his to stop her kicking and to keep her from protecting her bottom with her feet. She then reached back to cover herself with an upturned hand, but he captured that, too, and his arm around her waist became like an inescapable steel band. She was so thoroughly pinned now, all Brandy could do now was scream.

And although she took full advantage of her vocal freedom, he still didn't stop. Not even when her shrieks reached ear-piercing decibels. In fact, the only thing he did do was switch from his hand to the ruler, and that flat stretch of wood attacked her bottom with firecracker-like pops and snaps,

which covered less area than his hand, but also intensified the pain.

"You've worn out my hand, young lady," Peter said above her cries. "It's a good thing I've got a backup."

And that's about when the thought occurred to Brandy that she was going to be here forever. Just her in this class room, lying bare bottomed over the science teacher's lap with that awful ruler walloping away without cessation. Frantic despair swelled inside her, and the next thing Brandy knew she was drooped over his lap, sobbing so hard she could barely catch her breath.

It wasn't the first time Brandy had cried from a spanking at this school. Five or six whaps with the Board of Education could make even the hardest girl screech high-C's and carry on as if she were being skinned alive. It was a rare moment when Brandy ever peeled herself up off Sister Mary Magdalen's desk with her bottom blazing and without at least the shimmer of tears in her eyes, if not spilling freely down her cheeks.

But she had never cried like this, with ragged gasps and loud mournful wails. Her eyes ran, her nose ran, and her scorched bottom was so hot that it was making the rest of her sweat.

"I—think—that's—about—done—it!" Peter said, punctuating each word with a wristy snap of that ruler. And on that final, vigorous stroke, the ruler snapped in half. The back piece flew over his shoulder to hit the blackboard as Peter threw his half down on the desk. "There!"

He took hold of her arm and pulled her back up onto her feet. Then he let her go.

Brandy could only imagine the kind of show she must have put on for him. But by the time she came back to herself—at least enough to stop dancing about, prancing and stomping her feet in agony, her hands rubbing vigorously to soothe the sizzling heat from her swollen nether cheeks—she was on one side of the room and her panties were lying in a discarded heap of red lace on the other.

That was also about the time when she realized Peter was leaned back in his chair, his arms folded across his chest, smiling at her. No, not smiling. That man was positively grinning.

"Do you think you can behave yourself now?" he asked her cheerfully.

Brandy froze mid-rub. If looks could kill, not even the best resuscitation doctors in the state would have been able to save his life. And that was only if—a very distant and unlikely if—she even bothered to call 9-1-1.

'Go to hell,' perched right at the tip of her tongue, but Brandy was neither a slow learner nor an idiot, and she answered him instead with a very safe if not the tiniest bit sulky, "Yes, Mr. Newman."

"Then it's not too much to hope that we might actually get along this year?"

Not a chance.

"No, Mr. Newman."

"Good. Because I'd really rather not have to spank you every day until you graduate, if I don't have to."

Brandy swallowed, and with every shred of courtesy she could muster, asked, "May I go now?"

He inclined his head. "Yes, you may."

Her skirt felt like sandpaper against her tender bottom when she smoothed it back down into place. Slowly she walked back to his chair to collect her underwear. Bending down was sheer torture; whoever knew a pleated cotton skirt could feel so coarse and abrasive? But Brandy kept her discomfort carefully masked. It was too soon to try attempting bored neutrality, so she settled for seething fury, directed it fully at Peter and called it good.

He wasn't quite so willing to settle. "I suggest you get that look off your face unless you'd like to go back over my knee for round two."

She tried a bit harder for some of that neutrality.

"And the next time I see you," Peter said. "I expect your skirt to be regulation length, your underwear to be white cotton, your breath to be nicotine free, and your manners to be respectful and impeccable. Is that clear?"

Brandy all but heard him fire that first cannon shot of battle with his words.

"Yes, sir," she said, but the meekness in her voice didn't even reach as far as her eyes.

He had just declared war. And whether he realized it or not, Brandy had every intention of fighting back.

* * * *

Nellie opened her dorm room door, took one look at Brandy and promptly tried to shut it again. At the last minute,

however, Brandy stuck her foot in the threshold and barged her way inside.

"We have to get Peter Newman," she announced, her mood as dark as her face.

If Nellie noticed the stiff way she was walking, she didn't comment on it. She simply stalked back to her bed, threw herself down among the pillows and resumed painting her toenails.

"I mean we really have to get him," Brandy growled. She shut the door and walked over to stand at the foot of her best friend's bed. She still burned and throbbed so badly she didn't even want to consider sitting down.

"Have fun," Nellie said flatly and without looking up.

"What's the matter with you?"

"I'll give you a few minutes to think about it. You might be able to figure it out before sunrise, Miss What-Did-She-Ever-Do-I'm-The-Brains-Of-This-Operation." Nellie continued painting her toes.

"I hurt your feelings," Brandy guessed, losing some of her anger.

Nellie dropped her nail polish on the little bedside table. "I have had a hand in every single prank you ever pulled from the very beginning. You don't plan these things alone, you know. I have poured blood, sweat and tears into being your friend. When you decided you wanted to build the world's biggest beer bottle pyramid and get in the Guinness Book of World Records, who climbed knee deep into every back-alley dumpster to sift through trash for bottles with you?"

"You did," Brandy acknowledged.

"That's right. Me." Nellie thumped her chest. "And you sure didn't stay up all hours of the night for two weeks last year all by yourself when we entered thirty bogus students into the school computer and deleted sixty real ones."

"No," Brandy nodded. "You were there for that, too."

"And I got my butt blistered right along side yours and sat next to you in detention every day for three months, too!"

"I know. You're right. I was out of line."

"Damn straight you were."

"I tell you what, let's go back to the science room. I'll give you half the credit for everything I've ever done and you can get half the spanking I just did from that jerk, Mr. Newman. I'm pretty sure he's still there. I stuck a rubber wedge so far under the door when I left, he'll probably have to go through the fire escape to get out of the building."

Nellie blinked at her. "He spanked you?"

Brandy turned around, lifting her skirt in the back.

"Jesus, Mary and Joseph!" Nellie gasped. "Holy cow, Brandy! You're practically purple. Did it hurt?"

"Well, it wasn't comfortable!"

Nellie jumped up from the bed and ran into the bathroom. When she returned a few seconds later, it was with a bottle of aloe lotion. "Here."

Brandy smeared her hands with the stuff, then carefully inched up her skirt to gingerly apply the soothing lotion to her very tender bottom. "Oh," she winced, squeezing her eyes tightly shut.

Through the open dorm window, the ear blistering wail of the school's fire alarm suddenly went off, and both girls turned their heads to look past the curtains to the school.

"Well, he's out of the science room," Brandy said mildly.

"We have to teach him a lesson," Nellie said. "He can't go around thinking he's better than us. It could ruin the entire year."

Brandy's eyes narrowed in thought as she gazed out the window. "We need to put that man in his place."

"Uh oh. Here he comes." Nellie leaned down, trying to see past the thick, leafy branches of the ancient oak that blocked her view of the stiff-legged man stalking angrily across the campus, fists clenched at his sides, heading straight for the girls' dormitories. "Is it just me, or does he look cranky to you?"

"What say we adjourn to someplace safe while we contemplate our revenge?"

"Crikey, I think he just saw me," Nellie said, and straightened back up.

Sure enough, Peter Newman broke into a run, coming straight for their building.

Brandy bent down to get a better look herself, then popped her head out the open window. She stuck her thumb on the end of her nose and waggled her fingers at him.

"You're out of your mind," Nellie commented, as Brandy pulled her head back inside.

When Peter disappeared through the dormitory's first-floor entrance, Brandy and Nellie threw the window fully open and

climbed out onto the nearest tree branch. They shimmied down the ancient oak, dropping the last few feet to the grass.

"Follow me," Brandy said, and they raced across the lawn, back past the dormitories and veered off through the parking lot, which faced the road. There were only a handful of cars present since, like the majority of the student body, most of the teachers had yet to arrive. But of those that had, Brandy recognized nearly all the vehicles.

"That's the Penguin's," she said, pointing at the small, white economy car. "Sister Robert's and Sister Agatha's. Nellie?" she asked, stopping by the only car she didn't know. "Who's is this, do you think?"

"You know, if you're going to be a snarky-ass science teacher at a private school, don't you think it's a dumb idea to have a personalized license plate?"

"New Man," Brandy read.

The car was a 1956 Austin-Healey 100M, candy-apple red with black coves and a matching black leather interior. There wasn't a single dent or scratch or imperfection in the paint. There was barely even a speck of dust anywhere on the body or the tires. The top was down, and it sparkled in the sun like it was somebody's baby.

Nellie walked up to the side, leaning over to look at the silver tag that dangled from the rearview mirror between to black fuzzy dice. "Happy Birthday, From Dad," she read and cast Brandy an eyebrow-arched, high-impressed look. "Daddy's got money."

Brandy looked at the car, then slowly began to smile.

* * * *

"Well," Sister Mary Magdalen said. "Did you get to see the school? Do you find the classroom acceptable?"

Back in the administration office, Peter had just finished filling out the rest of his new hire paperwork. His jaw clenched; he was not a happy camper, but he was doing his best not to let it show in front of the nuns.

"Yes, thank you," he said.

"I apologize about the door," she continued, a strangely guarded expression coming over her face as she said, "I can't imagine how it could have gotten stuck like that."

"I have no idea," he said flatly.

"Well, if you find you need anything, just let Sister Robert Claire know and she'll make sure you get it."

About a dozen rulers would do for starters, Peter thought, scowling darkly. Thick ones. Sturdy ones. He was going to wear them all out on Brandy Smith's pert, impetuous, incredibly disobedient backside.

Sister Robert passed him a set of keys. "We gave you a first-floor apartment, if that's all right. Twelve-B, wonderful view of the woods back there. But don't turn on the air conditioner. Someone's supposed to be out to fix it in the next week or so."

"Do you have a map of the campus so I won't get lost?" he asked.

"We still have to print them up for the new students," Sister Mary Magdalen said, and clasped her hands behind her back. "If you'd like, you can follow me and I'll show you where it is."

Having already spent an unsuccessful hour hunting through the girls' dormitories for hide or hair of that mischievous brat, Brandy, Peter was in no mood for another wild goose chase. So he accepted the principal's offer with a nod, and if she wondered at the terseness of such a response, she didn't comment on it. Instead, they simply walked out of the administration building together and headed towards the two red-brick structures that were the living apartments for the teachers and staff.

"She's quite a young lady," Sister Mary Magdalen finally said as he held open the door for her to enter first.

"Quite," he agreed grimly. "Does she do this every year, or am I special?"

"The door was Brandy, then?"

"Without a doubt."

"Don't take it personally, Mr. Newman," the principal said with a smile. "There isn't a teacher here that she hasn't got at least once." Her smile turned a little strained, "Some of us she's gotten more than that."

"I'm surprised she hasn't been expelled."

"I don't believe expulsion is the ideal response to all behavior problems," Sister Mary Magdalen said as they walked down the long hall way towards the right apartment. "Somewhere inside of Brandy there lurks a good and gentle soul just waiting for a chance to get out. Most of the time, it stays well hidden."

The sister's face softened slightly and she continued in quieter tones. "She's had a hard life. Her mother died when she was born, and it was more than obvious when I

interviewed him that her father blames her for it. He spends all his time traveling now so he won't have see or talk to his daughter. Brandy is stubborn, determined, intelligent and creative. She is also hurt and angry. If we can show her how to channel some of her irrepressible drives into something productive, well then," the nun shook her head once, "there's no telling what that girl could accomplish. Ah. Here we are: Twelve-B."

Peter stopped and looked up at the neatly stenciled gold numbers above the white door. No longer angry, he gave the sister an apologetic look. "Thanks."

"For what? The walk or the lecture?"

His smile was slightly sheepish. "Both," he admitted.

She bowed her head. "Any time, Mr. Newman."

As the nun turned and headed back down the hall, Peter fit his new key into the door of his new apartment and swung it open. He reached inside to flick on the light.

In the middle of the room, hanging by chains and manacles via an eyebolt in the ceiling was a young, dark-haired man. He was dressed in a red with black-trim corset, red silk lady's underpants, fishnet stockings, and there was a ball gag in his smiling mouth. A straight-backed chair had been set close by and was adorned by two crooked-handle canes and a wooden-backed hairbrush. There was a book '*The Joys of Submission*' on the coffee table, a tube of lube and an extremely prominent adult-oriented toy next to it. Fresh from the package. He could smell the latex in the air.

"Oh, and one more thing, Mr. Newman."

Peter grabbed the door, pulling it mostly closed as the nun came back to him. He offered her what he hoped was an unconcerned, politely inquisitive look. "Yes, Sister?"

"Don't feel you have to face the challenge of her all on your own. My door is always open if you need someone to talk to, and the Board of Education is always available if your arm needs the rest." She was quiet a moment, then gestured to his door, which he held as close to his body as he could. "Our bachelor apartments are a little small, but will it do? I could show you around, if you'd like."

"Thank you, Sister, but that won't be necessary." Peter tried to smile. His mouth felt tight and his face a little strained by the effort. "The room is fine. Perfect, in fact. Just what I've always wanted. Couldn't ask for better."

"Wonderful." If the nun noticed his unease, she didn't comment on it. "Well, then, welcome aboard," she said, and walked away.

If it was the last thing he did, Peter thought as he opened the door and looked at his grinning 'captive,' he was going to get Brandy Smith.

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CHAPTER THREE

"He's starting something he's not going to want to finish," Brandy hissed.

"We don't have time for an all-out war," Nellie hissed back.

They sat side-by-side, their desks separated only by the aisle that Peter would occasionally walk up and down as he gave them another of his stern 'teacher' looks. As he was doing now, except that he only came up the aisle about halfway and continued on uninterrupted with his Welcome to Newman's Science Room speech.

"I don't believe in bell curves," he was saying. "Each of your final grades will be determined by the merits of your work, your attendance—" he flashed another dark look directly at Brandy, "—and your participation and cooperation."

She shot him a brilliant smile in return, although it promptly transformed itself into another frown the minute he turned his back. "He's daring me with his eyes," she muttered darkly.

"Ignore him," Nellie whispered out of the side of her mouth. "He has to go away sometime."

"He'll never go away. He's going to stay here forever and ruin everything."

They were both quiet for a moment, and then Nellie whispered, "How many of those things do you suppose he has?"

"I don't know. Two dozen maybe."

They both gauged the pencil holder that stood in the center of his desk, a bundle of thick rulers sticking out of the top as though making a jokingly cruel attempt to poise themselves as flowers.

As if noticing the direction of their stares, at the front of the room, Peter Newman clapped his hands together and rubbed them briskly. "Take out your books," he said, flashing both girls another of his dashing smiles. "Let's get started, shall we?"

They looked from the rulers to him, and then to each other.

"Open up to page seven. Since you're all fresh from summer vacation and Nintendo has likely rotted your brains, we'll start with something easy to get us back in the educational swing: the circulatory system!"

Somebody groaned, others sighed, Brandy and Nellie pulled their books out from under their desks and thumped them down on the tabletops with the same unenthusiastic 'whump!'

"Do you think he means to use them?" Nellie asked, still looking at the rulers.

"Only if he catches us," Brandy said.

"Who wants to start?" Peter sat down at his desk. "If you look at the top of the page ... uh..."

Peter trailed off with a nonplussed expression as he ran first his eyes and then his hands over the desktop, rifling through papers and even checking under a pencil. He had begun to form a truly impressive frown when he snapped his fingers and swung the chair around so that he could see the

point where he had just been standing, and more specifically, the teacher's edition science textbook, which he'd left on top of the projector.

Instead of walking back to get it, Peter swivelled his seat and propelled himself in the roller chair across the floor to the projector. Taking the book, he then swivelled back around and scooted across the floor to his desk.

"To the top of the page," he cheerfully said again.

Nellie and Brandy slid sly glances to one another, and they smiled.

Just then the fire alarm went off.

Peter looked immediately to Brandy and Nellie, both of whom tipped their heads back to stare first up at the red bell clanging loudly above the door behind them, and then to each other.

"Are we starting early this year?" Nellie asked.

"I didn't do it," Brandy said, then noticed Peter frowning at her, his mouth tightening. "I swear, it wasn't me!" she protested, spreading her hands in an innocent shrug. "I've been sitting right here!"

"All right," he said heavily. "Everybody outside."

Not wanting to be caught in the room with him, Brandy and Nellie were one of the first students out the door. About halfway down the hall, Brandy glanced behind her to see Peter holding the classroom door for the other students. She grabbed Nellie's arm and hustled her into the girls' bathroom.

"What are we doing?" Nellie asked.

"Do you smell smoke?"

"Well," Nellie blinked twice. "No."

"Neither do I. Let's not waste the opportunity."

"Soooo, what are we doing?" Nellie asked again.

Waving her silent, Brandy cracked the bathroom door and waited patiently until she saw the rest of her classmates and Peter passing by. The hall quickly flooded with students and teachers from other classes, all strolling at an unconcerned pace towards the front of the school. The flow became a trickle until finally the last one walked past the door, and Brandy opened swung it open. She looked both ways.

"Come on," she whispered, and they darted back to the science room.

"...broken record," Nellie began, in her long-suffering way.

Brandy dived beneath her school desk to dig through her book bag. She came out with a Phillips head screwdriver.

Nellie's mouth dropped open. "You carry one of those with you?"

"Doesn't everybody?"

Screwdriver in hand, she jogged up to the front of the room and quickly flipped Peter's chair onto its side.

"What are you doing?" Nellie cried.

"What does it look like?"

"It looks like you're removing the wheels! If he sits in that, he'll fall over!" Her momentary shock gave way to admiration. "He's going to pitch right over onto his nose, in fact. Not bad."

"Exactly. Now make yourself useful."

"Oh. Oh right." While Brandy went to work on the screws, Nellie had a rare moment of foresight in which she grabbed the rulers off Peter's desk. She looked around, but with no

readily obvious place to put them, Nellie ended up running to the window and dumping them unceremoniously into the bushes. "Are you done yet?" she hissed.

"All-most," Brandy crooned, pulling the last screw out to within a hair's breadth of coming free altogether. "There!"

Finished, Brandy righted the chair, wheeled it back and forth to make sure it wasn't going to crash apart before the designated sittee was perched upon it, and rubbed her hands together with a satisfied cackle.

"All right," she said again, stuffing the screwdriver under her uniform shirt and into the waistband of her pleated school skirt. "Let's go."

They crawled out of the window and jogged around to join the rest of the students milling aimlessly in front of the school. They were almost there when Nellie grabbed Brandy's arm. "Hey!" They stopped, and she pointed to the window of another classroom. "Who's that?"

Shielding her eyes, Brandy stepped between the rhododendron bushes to peer inside. "Looks like a freshman."

"What's that in his hands?"

As they watched, the young boy snuck around the teacher's desk to slide open the center drawer. Opening the bag he carried, he withdrew a wobbly-legged rubber spider.

Brandy tsked. "Amateur." She tapped Nellie on the shoulder and gestured for them to go. "Come on."

"Well, he's hardly what I'd call adequate competition," Nellie said as they jogged around to the front. "He didn't even use a real spider."

It wasn't long before they saw the kid again, sneaking around the side of the building to slip unnoticed back into the crowd.

Brandy flashed her friend a grin. "It wasn't original, but I'll bet we hear Sister Agatha's scream all the way down the hall."

"There you are!"

Both girls jumped at the sound of Peter's voice, and the cluster of sophomore girls that he came through quickly tucked the cigarettes they'd been about to light into the folds of their skirts.

The irritated science teacher reached for Nellie and Brandy, taking them both by the ears and saying, as he led them off, "Our class is this way."

Brandy blushed as she heard the sophomores snickering behind her. Her eyes narrowed. It almost made her wish she had a camera; she was so going to get Peter Newman!

* * * *

It took the fire department seventeen minutes to drive out to St. Walburga's. It took another eleven for them to walk through the school and find the charred remains of the slow-burning wick and matchbook that had set off the smoke detector by the gym.

"This has got to be some kind of record for your school," Peter heard Gabriel Weiss, the old fire chief, saying to Sister Mary Magdalen as he filled out his report. "School's only been in session, what, three hours?"

Peter glared at Brandy, who was leaning sullenly against the front step railing as the principal said, "I do apologize. I'm fairly certain I know who the guilty party is, and I assure you, they will get a very stern talking-to."

Very stern, Peter thought. His palm was already itching to start the discussion.

But the old fire chief just tipped up his hat and grinned at her. "Are you sure it was a student that pulled that alarm? Mightn't it be you missed me a wee bit over summer vacation, and you just couldn't wait to feast yourself upon my dashing good looks again?"

The nun blinked at him, then blinked again. "Mister Weiss," she began primly. "Has the habit somehow escaped your notice for the last six years? I am a Sister of the Order of the Blessed Virgin Mary. I am a bride of Christ."

He winked at her and waggled his bushy white eyebrows. "You might convert." With a parting grin, he then turned and walked back to the idling trucks.

Sister Mary turned bright pink and, in a moment of uncharacteristic fluster, her hands darted up to smooth down her black veil. She quickly caught herself and, clearing her throat, clapped her hands and called out over the talking students, "All right, everybody, false alarm! Back to classes!"

"And that means you two," Peter said to Brandy and Nellie.

"Certainly," Nellie said perkily.

"Wouldn't want to miss your exciting lecture on the circulatory system," Brandy intoned drily. And side-by-side, they walked up the front steps of the school and down the hall towards the science room.

Peter's eyes narrowed as he watched them go. They had been sitting in his class when the fire alarm went off, but that didn't mean that they hadn't set the delay device to create a convenient distraction. Peter half shook his head at himself, falling into the old debate-team practice of Devil's Advocate as he reminded himself that he had no real proof the girls were involved and no evidence. If he wasn't positive he'd catch hell from a lynch-mob of parents, he'd be almost tempted to skip the circulatory system and instead hold an impromptu lesson on lifting fingerprints.

Most of the students had already resumed their seats by the time Peter tailed the last kid through the classroom door. He was just in time to see Brandy slipping something shiny into her book bag. He glanced around the room, but if something was missing, he didn't catch it right away. He must be getting paranoid, he finally decided as he headed up the rows of desks to the front of the class.

"All right," he sighed. "You." He pointed to one of the students in the front row and snapped his fingers twice. "Ah..."

The boy raised an eyebrow. "Henry?" he supplied.

"Right." Peter picked up his book. "Page seven, start with the first two paragraphs and read aloud."

"Out loud?" Henry echoed, and the other eyebrow darted up to join its twin.

"Yes," Peter said. "Out loud. As in, exhaling with the use of your vocal cords to emit patterned syllables that create words. We're studying the circulatory system. Let's go."

Clearing his throat, Henry up from his chair, lifted his book into his arms, and glanced back over one shoulder at his fellow students. With a slight grimace, he began to read just as Peter sat down.

Peter leaned back, and a heavy clunk echoed sharply through the room as the back two wheels fell out beneath him and the whole chair flipped over backwards. Peter made a wild grab for his desk, but missed and spilled out onto the floor behind him. He nearly did a full somersault before landing on his knees. And for about five stun-filled seconds, the room was consumed in silence. Then peels of laughter burst out among the rows.

Peter grit his teeth. He reached up to grab hold of the edge of his desk and slowly he stood up. He glared out across the class and his black look instantly silenced the laughter mid guffaw and wiped the smiles from the faces of his students. All except for Nellie and Brandy, who hadn't laughed at all. They started back at him with carefully neutral expressions.

He pointed to them. "You two." Then beckoned with one finger. "Up here. Right now."

The girls looked to one another. The careful neutrality slipped a little from Nellie's face, revealing a glimmer of concern as they each stood and reluctantly headed for the front of the room. Brandy, however, maintained a mask of blank indifference.

Peter came out from behind his desk and, the minute they were close enough, caught Nellie by one arm. Separating her from Brandy, he steered her into the closest corner. "You stay right here," he seethed. Claspings the back of her neck, he

pushed her so close to the wall that the tip of her nose touched the plasterboard. "Don't move. Don't even think about moving."

She squeaked, and he turned back to Brandy. Her mask of indifference had slipped, betraying a hint of nervousness.

"So we like public spectacles, hm?" he said as he stalked back to her.

She took a step back. The tip of her tongue darted out to wet her lips. "You don't know it was us."

"Don't I?" Peter held out his hand. "Give me the screws."

"I don't have them, and you can't prove that I do." Brandy hastily backed up a step when he reached for her, but didn't move near fast enough. He caught the front of her shirt and pulled her up nose-to-nose with him.

"Do you know what?" he seethed, so angry that he almost sounded calm.

Brandy gulped and, struggling for flippancy, shakily quipped, "Never met him."

"I think I'm going to give you what you want."

She blinked, then hesitantly glanced back at the students, who were all sitting as still and as silent as grave-side statues. Then she looked back at him. "What?"

"A public spectacle," he snarled, and raised one leg to sit on the corner of his desk. In one fluid movement, he jerked her across his upraised thigh.

Brandy let out an ear-piercing shriek as he yanked up the back of her skirt to reveal the skimpiest little black thong that he'd ever been privy to seeing. Being as he had once flipped

through the pages of a Victoria's Secrets catalog, he'd seen quite a few. "Still no regulation panties, I see."

Brandy gasped and made a mad grab for the hem of her grey uniform skirt. She tried to tug it back into place over her suddenly exposed bottom, but he caught hold of her wrist instead. She snapped her legs together, her face turning a brilliant shade of pink as she no doubt recalled the number of boys, both Juniors and Sophomores who sat in the first few rows.

"Jesus, Mary and Joseph!" Nellie exclaimed.

She had turned her head from the corner and was staring back at him in open-mouthed shock when he glanced up at her.

"Face the corner," he ordered, and she snapped back around, hugging the walls with both hands as she pushed her nose all the way up to the plaster again. "You can keep right on praying, too. I'll be with you soon enough."

Brandy let out another shriek when Peter grasped the inner slope of her thigh, lifting her feet clean off the floor and centering her bottom across his make-shift lap. "You—you—you can't do this!"

"Not quite so much fun now, is it?" Peter started to reach for his pencil-holder of rulers, then stopped as he noticed it was empty. Every single one of his rulers was gone. He grit his teeth, and glared down at Brandy. "I will give five dollars," he announced to the suddenly very attentive students before him, "to whomever can provide me with a sturdy, wooden ruler. If I break it, I'll make it ten."

There was a thunderclap as numerous book bags hit the desktops and a forest of ruler-waving hands shot up in the air.

"You," Peter pointed to a youth in the second row.

"Brian," the boy supplied as he jogged forward to hand Peter his ruler. A Junior, he looked down at Brandy's butt for a moment in total amazement.

"Take your seat, Brian," Peter said, and the look on the boy's face as he backed away from Brandy's trembling backside clearly stated that this was vision he'd be carrying with him for all the rest of his days.

"Benedict Arnold!" Brandy yelled after him. She jerked one foot in the slightest of kicks, fighting to keep her legs tightly together to preserve as much of her modesty as she could.

"Forget the circulatory system," Peter announced as he raised that ruler high. "Today we're going to learn about cause and effect."

He brought the ruler crashing down squarely across both cringing buttocks. A thick red stripe instantly suffused her skin, bisecting her bottom straight down the middle.

Brandy yelped, arching her back as she wiggled her hips from side to side as much as his restraining arm would allow. "Yeow!"

"I hope you enjoyed your little prank," he snapped, and with sharp flicks of his wrist he flattened her bottom under a flurry of hard swats. "Because this is going to be one spanking you never forget!"

"Ouch! Ow!"

Struggling to maintain her modesty, Brandy kept her legs locked together, but as the fury of the ruler began to turn her bottom from pink to red, she couldn't help but rock her hips from side to side. She covered her mouth with her free hand to keep back a sob of pain and in this way managed to suffer her way in silence through the first twenty swats.

Peter frowned. The last thing he wanted was for her to give the other students the impression that discipline from him was a walk in the park. Unless he wanted to become the popular target for every prank-playing student over the years to come, he had to make some sort of unfavorable impression. And not just on Brandy and Nellie, but on every student watching him deliver this spanking with expressions that bordered on horrified fascination.

He redoubled his efforts, and Brandy's bottom bounced under the impacts of the ruler. He spanked without scolding, laying one hard swat after another all over her bottom until the rosy flesh all but sizzled.

Her nether cheeks clenched under the assault, but she refused to kick. He honestly expected the ruler to snap, but Brandy broke down first, her silence giving way to desperate sobs and shrill begging, with promises of good behavior bellowed at the top of her voice until they almost drowned out the punishing cracks of wood meeting unprotected, bare skin.

Peter lay no less a hundred strong smacks across her scarlet fanny before he stopped. If there weren't a classroom full of students watching his every move, and if it weren't so morally reprehensible for a teacher to behave so towards his student, Peter wouldn't have minded holding her for a while.

Just long enough to calm some of her pain-induced distress, or to brush some of the tears from her cheeks.

But he was her teacher, and even if she was only a few years his junior, it wouldn't have been proper.

With no other options, he had to let her go. With a twinge of remorse for things that couldn't be, he watched her scramble from his lap, yank her skirt down over her well-spanked backside, and then simply hold it with one hand while she covered her equally red face with the other.

She looked absolutely adorable, but he forced himself to be firm. "Go stand in the corner," he told her. Head bowed, Brandy shuffled to obey, while he called out to her sister-in-crime, "All right, Nellie. Time to pay the piper."

Nellie Goodman walked to him as though she were approaching the hangman upon the gallows' steps. "Please, Mr. Newman," she quavered, her wide eyes already moist with tears. "I promise I won't cause any more trouble."

He rested his hand upon his sturdy thigh and leveled a hard look upon her. "You've already been a considerable amount of trouble, Nellie, and you are going to be spanked for it. Eventually, you and Brandy are both going to learn that your actions have consequences. Some of them, like this one—" he took her arm as she drew near and pulled her face down over his thigh, "—aren't going to be pleasant."

Nellie gasped noisily when he lifted her skirt, revealing another thong that perfectly segregated her slender, milk-white buttocks with a line of hot-pink nylon. She grabbed his leg, but made no other attempt to fight him. Staring dismally

down at the papers on his desk, she began to cry softly as she tearfully waited for him to get on with it.

Her bottom clenched once when he raised his arm, but Peter didn't leave her wallowing in dread for long. One smack at a time, he applied that ruler to her upturned bottom until it was a color that matched her panties.

Unlike Brandy, Nellie must not have held much stock in false bravado. She kicked and shouted and burst into lusty sobs before the first twenty hard swats had fallen. Leery of crocodile tears, he was determined to make a thorough impression and continued to paddle with the flat of that ruler until there wasn't a bit of white left anywhere in the squirming bottom before him.

There wasn't a student in his class who wasn't sitting in his or her chair as straight as a peg. Most of the girls had paled, and here or there, Peter thought he glimpsed a few of the boys watching with looks of near fascination as Nellie sobbed and writhed, her legs scissoring frantically as she struggled to get out of Peter's inflexible grasp. Before he was done, however, he had turned the summits of both blushing globes a deep, dark shade of scarlet, and he himself was breathing heavily from the exertion.

When he stood Nellie back on her feet, she jumped up and down in front of him, bouncing on the heels of her feet as she grabbed her aching bottom. Her tears tracked mascara all down her face as she sobbed woefully up at the ceiling.

"All right, young lady," he told her sternly, then called to her partner in penitence, "You may come out of the corner now."

The Great Prank
by Maren Smith

As they stood, blushing profusely and rubbing their tender rears, Peter gave them his sternest glare and said, "I want every last one of my rulers back on my desk by morning."

"Yes, sir," they meekly chorused.

He gave them an even sterner look. "This had also better be the last prank you play on me."

Brandy and Nellie looked at one another, then slowly lowered their eyes to the floor. One after another, they acknowledged, "Yes, Mr. Newman."

He didn't believe them for a second. Had the school bell not chosen that inopportune moment to signal for a change in classes, he'd have put them back across his knee.

"Dismissed," he said heavily.

They all but fled back down between the aisles of desks, past the slower-to-move students, and grabbed their books. Peter handed the ruler as well as the promised five dollars to Brian.

"Try not to embarrass them too much," he told the boy, who grinned.

"No, sir."

Shaking his head, Peter walked behind his desk to see if he couldn't put his chair back together again.

* * * *

"He used my ruler to spank Brandy Smith and Nellie Goodman!" they both heard as, heads down, their faces at least as red as their bottoms, they hurried to put as much distance between themselves and the science room as possible. They neither one of them cast so much as a glanced

to the crowd of boys gathering around Brian, the Benedict Arnold and Ruler Provider.

"What's it smell like?" a young freshman eagerly asked.

Brian inhaled a noisy sniff along the flat surface of the ruler and rolled his eyes as if in ecstasy. "As beautiful as they look," he told his envious audience.

"Man," several students said at once.

"Well," Nellie winced, as they turned the corner. She reached back with one hand to lightly touch her aching bottom. "That's sort of like fame. If everybody doesn't know about it now, they will be the end of the day."

Brandy scowled. She hugged her book bag to her chest, determined not to rub lest someone see her and laugh. If it was the last thing she ever did, she was going to get Peter Newman.

* * * *

It was half past midnight when Brandy climbed up the tree outside of Nellie's dorm room window. She shimmied along an outstretched branch and very lightly tapped upon the glass, but it wasn't Nellie who parted the curtain and drew up the white-washed sill. Instead, a carrot-top with short, red curls fumbled with her glasses and then sleepily peered out at Brandy.

Brandy almost groaned. Big Mouth Bianca.

Doing her best to paste a big smile on her face, Brandy whispered, "Is Nellie in?"

"Hang on, I'm almost ready," floated softly back out at her from somewhere in the dark room. Hopping on one foot while

she wrestled to get her foot in her sneaker, Nellie fell over by the window. "Let me get my bag," she whispered. "Then I'll be ready to go."

"Go?" Bianca said. "Go where?"

"Out," Nellie said shortly.

"You can't go out," her roommate protested. "It's after curfew! You'll get in trouble!"

"No, we won't," Brandy said. "It's impossible to get into trouble if nobody knows what you're doing."

"They'll know because I'll tell them," the red head hotly replied. She looked over at Nellie. "I didn't want you for a dorm mate anyway. You snore."

Nellie's jaw dropped and, affronted, she protested, "I do not!"

She did, but she was too dear a friend for Brandy to correct. And, anyway, that was beside the point.

"You're not going to say anything to anybody," Brandy told Bianca. "Because if you do, well, you'll just ruin it for the entire school."

"Ruin what?" Bianca said suspiciously.

"Don't tell her," Nellie said instantly. "Everything goes in her ears and out her flapping lips. They don't call her Big Mouth Bianca for nothing, you know."

"You're right," Brandy said. "If it got out, then Sister Magdalen would never trust us with another secret ever again."

Bianca was all ears. "What kind of secret?"

"Never mind," Brandy hedged. "Forget we said anything. We're trying to be trustworthy here."

"I won't tell anybody. Honest."

"No, you've got to swear!" Brandy told her. "Swear on your immortal soul that you'll never tell another living being for so long as you live!"

"Oh!" Bianca breathed, wide-eyed with sincerity and clutching the window sill with both hands. "Cross my heart and hope to die." And she actually did, kissing the backs of her solemn heart-crossing fingers for good measure.

"Well," Brandy said, and she, Nellie and Bianca leaned in together as though the best of conspiratory friends. Bianca was practically holding her breath; she wasn't privy to very many secrets. "Sister Magdalen told us that St. Walburga's has been nominated, along with ten other schools across the United States—"

"No, it was the world!" Nellie said.

"Oh yeah, the world," Brandy hastily amended herself, "that St. Walburga's is a finalist in a contest to pick the absolute best Catholic school of our generation."

"What did we win?"

"Well, we haven't won yet," Nellie said. "It was only a nomination."

"But if we do win," Brandy hastened, "we'll be getting a visit—" she looked from right to left, as though to assure herself that no one was eavesdropping from the dark windows that surrounded her, "—from Mr. Toodles."

Bianca squinted her eyes and her nose wrinkled. "Who?"

Nellie went from staring at Brandy as though she were crazy, to quickly joining her friend in turning that look on Bianca.

"Mr. Toodles," Brandy emphasized, as if repeating his name should explain all.

"Come on, Bianca," Nellie exclaimed. "He's like—like—the Pope, for crying out loud! They have breakfast together just about every morning! You know, Mr. Toodles!"

"Oh!" Bianca said, as though her memory had been jogged. "Oh, yeah! Yeah, right!"

"It would be the highest honor this school has ever had!" Brandy cried out as loudly as she could while still whispering. "Better even than Cardinal Stritch's visits. Everybody will want to come to St. Walburga's! We'll be—well, we'll be famous! You don't want to be known as the girl who ruined all that just because you don't like your dorm mate."

Bianca looked horrified. "I didn't say I didn't like her! I just don't like her snoring!"

"I don't snore," Nellie huffed.

"All right, all right! I won't say a word!"

"Good show," Brandy cheered and backed up on the branch as, with the straps of a small cloth bag thrown over her neck and one shoulder, Nellie draped her leg over the window sill and climbed into the tree beside her.

"Where are you going?" Bianca called after them.

"To make a welcome banner for Mr. Toodles," Brandy whispered and dropped back out of the tree onto the grass. "We want to be ready for when he comes."

"We can't exactly do it during the day," Nellie said. "Everybody would know the secret."

"Oh, right." Bianca leaned a little further out the window. "Hey, can I help?"

"No!" Brandy and Nellie hissed in unison. "Make your own!"

"Fine!" Bianca snapped back. "I will! And it'll be ten times better than yours!" And with that, she shut the window.

Brandy and Nellie both rolled their eyes and jogged quickly across the lawn. They didn't start giggling until they reached the road.

"Criminy, but she'll believe anything," Nellie said with a shake of her head. "Mr. Toodles? Brandy, you're slipping!"

"I thought it was pretty good spur-of-the-moment stuff. Did you get ahold of Gordon?"

"No, he's still on KP duty from our prank last week." Nellie made a face. "I still can't believe Peter made him walk all the way back to Oberst's in drag. Gordon says the Colonel almost blew a head gasket. If you want to go ahead, I'll run down and get him, and we'll meet you at the Eugene High School."

Brandy nodded once and grinned. "Okay, but hurry. This is going to be the best prank ever!"

They extended their hands, twiddling their fingertips together, and then turned and jogged down the road in opposite directions. Already Brandy could feel the mantle of greatness settling about her shoulders. Famous or infamous, it didn't matter. She was about to become legendary.

And then—she thought about Peter and her eyes narrowed. She would have her revenge.

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CHAPTER FOUR

Brandy waited outside the North Trenton school for almost forty minutes before she decided something must have happened to Nellie and her boyfriend, Gordon. A less devoted prankster might have taken that as a bad sign and given up on the venture, at least for the night, gone home to see what went wrong, and made plans to try again some other time. But not Brandy. She followed her nose and the sound of a clanking livestock bell, around the side of the gym where she found the pen that housed the unanimous pride and joy of all Trenton sports enthusiasts. Particularly the football team, Sprocket's Rockets.

Brandy hadn't met many pygmy goats in her life, but she had to admit that Sprocket must have been about the friendliest one. The black and white goat came trotting up to the fence to greet her with a bleating hello as Brandy crawled into the pen and only butted her leg one time before she managed to get a hold of his collar.

He'd been put to bed for the night wearing a goat-sized blanket in the standard school colors of blue and gold, with his name written on both sides. Eugene, Oregon, must not suffer many mascot thieves, Brandy chortled. Why, they had even left Sprocket's leash hanging on the side of his pen, albeit coiled high enough up that the resourceful goat couldn't chew it to pieces. There was also a big sack of Purina goat chow, located in the unlocked shed around the side. How utterly convenient.

Sprocket virtually pranced as she filled her backpack full of Purina pellets and led him from the pen and off the football field. The prance seemed to fade into a walk of hesitant confusion as they left school grounds, though, and started down the road.

"Come on," Brandy said, tugging lightly on the leash, and the goat bleated a series of concerns as it trip-trapped along beside her. Fortunately, it wasn't very loud and nearly all the houses they passed were dark.

It was a seven mile back-roads walk to St. Walburga's, and it wasn't until she was almost there that she ran into Nellie and Gordon. She heard them before she saw them, shushing one another as they grunted and laughed together, struggling to roll a heavy wheelbarrow down the middle of the road. When Nellie saw Brandy, she waved.

"Where have you been?" she said, as they drew near enough.

"What the hell is that?" Brandy countered, gesturing at the wheelbarrow.

"What do you mean, what's that? We waited for you outside Trenton's for nearly half an hour. We had to break into the school by ourselves. What's with the goat?"

Brandy came up to the wheelbarrow, peering at the huge round lump that—in the darkness of night—seemed to be a thick burlap sack, with a very suspicious bulge inside it. "You went to South Trenton's, didn't you?"

Nellie's smile slowly faded. "Were we supposed to go to North?"

"Jesus, Mary, and Joseph," Brandy groaned.

"Well, you didn't say North!" Nellie protested.

"Tell me there isn't a snake in that sack."

Gordon grinned and said proudly, "All fifteen feet and three hundred pounds of her."

"You stole a snake!" Brandy cried.

"You told me to! You said go to Trenton, get the mascot. I'll meet you there, you said!"

"I was there! I was at North, where you should have been!" Brandy slapped a hand to her forehead, staring at the bulge in the wheelbarrow, and took a healthy step backwards. She ran her fingers through her hair. "What are we going to do with a fifteen foot anaconda?"

"What the hell are we supposed to do with Sprocket the Goat?" Nellie replied.

"What's the big deal?" Gordon said. "The way I see it, you've got two mascots for the price of one."

Brandy gestured towards the sack. "It's a snake! What's more, it's a big-ass snake. What's more, it's a big-ass python snake."

"Annie Put-A-Squeeze-On-'Em Anaconda," Gordon said fondly. "You know, I've always wanted a snake."

Both Nellie and Brandy ignored him.

"Well, look," Nellie said. "It really doesn't change anything, does it? It's still a good prank. In fact, it's even better, because we've got two mascots."

"Hell, yeah," Gordon said, rubbing his hands together. "The night's still young. Let's stash the snake and goat and go back out there. We could be back with the Sheffield Skunk,

the Freeburg Falcon, and the Klammath Cougar well before dawn."

Nellie and Brandy both gave him the same look, then Nellie patted his shoulder. "No, I, uh ... I think we've done enough for one night."

"Thanks anyway," Brandy said dryly. She glared at the sack, but her friends were right. They already had Annie and Sprocket, and it was still a good prank. Reluctantly, she said, "All right. We'll take them to your dorm."

"My dorm?" Nellie protested. "Why is it always my dorm?"

"Because there's no way in hell I'm sharing my building with a snake."

"You're such a girl." Nellie made a sound of disgust in the back of her throat, but capitulated. "Fine." She waved a hand at Sprocket. "Better get rid of that cow bell though, or you'll wake the entire campus."

"Right." Brandy pocketed the bell.

They stashed Sprocket on the roof of Nellie's dorm, with a five gallon bucket of water and a pan of goat chow in case it got hungry.

"Welcome to your new home, Sprocket," Nellie said, patting it on the head between the short stubs of its horns.

Hoping it wouldn't eat through its leash, that's where they left it, with poor Sprocket bleating a fond if confused farewell as it looked around the rooftop.

In contrast to the easy maneuverability of a pygmy goat, it took all three of them to muscle three hundred pounds of Annie, safely contained in her burlap sack, down into the basement. There were two toilets and a tub in the very back

behind the furnace. They put the snake, sack and all, into the tub along with two dead rats that Nellie fished out of her backpack.

"I wasn't sure how long we'd have her for, so I brought her plenty to eat," Nellie said.

"Oh gross!" Brandy cried, when she saw the rats. She jumped backwards, letting Gordon cover the tub with a sheet of plywood and balance a toilet bowl over the top to reduce the risks of a great escape happening sometime before dawn. "This is going to be the quickest prank in St. Walburga's history. Annie goes home tomorrow!"

"What's the rush?" Nellie argued. "I've fifteen more rats."

"Ugh!" Brandy did a heebie-geebe dance all the way back to the basement stairs. "I hate snakes! I hate 'em! She goes back tomorrow!"

"Then the two of you will have to muscle her back there all by yourselves," Gordon told them. "I've got a test on Friday I need to study for. And I'm going to be gone all weekend. We're playing the Wombats on their own turf on Saturday. Hey!" he brightened. "Maybe I could—"

Both Nellie and Brandy held up their hands. "No!"

"That's okay," Brandy told him.

Nellie kissed him. "Thanks for your help."

He wiggled his eyebrows at her. "Anytime."

* * * *

The next morning, Brandy was leaned against the tree in front of Nellie's dorm, patiently waiting for her friend. The epitome of casual innocence, she smoked a cigarette and

eyed the roof of the building every time she heard a faint goat-like bleating rising above the soft breeze that rustled the leaves in the branches above her. When Nellie finally emerged, she rolled lazily off the tree trunk and the two fell into step together, heading for breakfast.

"The goat's still tied and the snake's still contained," Nellie said under her breath, her eyes darting to check the distances between herself and the other students they passed.

"Bianca's got a twenty-foot stretch of paper in our room. She was stenciling six feet of 'Welcome' on it when I got in last night. Now what?"

"Before we do anything else, we have to wait for the schools to notice their mascots are missing."

"Mm," Nellie grunted.

"What's the matter?"

"I'm worried about Annie. She hasn't touched her food. Either the basement's too cold for her or we should try jiggling the rats. You know, make them look more alive."

Brandy snorted. "That snake's big enough to take me down. I'm not jiggling nothing."

"Oh, come on," Nellie coaxed. "It might make them look more appealing to her. We're the ones who took her. That makes it our obligation to make sure she stays happy and healthy."

"Then you jiggle them."

"Do you have a pair of tongs in that bag of yours?"

"I have a pair of tweezers, does that count?"

"Not unless you want my hand taken off at the shoulder," Nellie said. "We could maybe tie a rat to a piece of string and dangle it from a stick."

"Jesus, Mary, and Joseph," Brandy said, shaking her head.

As they walked up the school's front steps, they nearly ran into another student coming out the door.

"Hey," the girl said, "did you hear? Someone broke into the Trenton schools last night. Annie the Anaconda and Sprocket the Goat have been kidnapped! They've got the police and the FBI and everybody investigating."

As the girl ran off, Brandy muttered, "That didn't take long."

"FBI?" Nellie said.

"Don't worry." Brandy held the door open for her. "I'm sure that's an exaggeration."

The cafeteria was crowded and breakfast well underway when they arrived, which meant there weren't very many places where the two of them could sit together, but that was tempered by the fact that there wasn't a long chow line, either. They each got a tray and some silverware, and headed in towards the cold cereal selection.

"Excuse me," a boy said from behind them. Brandy and Nellie both turned around and looked at the junior, who stuck out his hand to shake theirs. "My name is Adam. You probably don't know me, but I sit a couple rows in front of you in Mr. Newman's science room. And I was just wondering, do you prefer old-fashioned," he held up a long wooden ruler, and then an even longer and impossibly thick, clear plastic one, "or new age in your corrective measures?"

He arched his eyebrows as though making a serious inquiry, but then his grin destroyed the illusion. He took off running, but not before Brandy pegged him with a box of frosted Cheerios.

"Creep!" she yelled.

"We should have asked if he had one with cotton padding," Nellie said.

From across the cafeteria, above the cacophony of more than a hundred laughing and talking students, they heard Sister Agatha call out, "Ms. Smith! Ms. Goodman! Come here please!"

Brandy grabbed another box of Cheerios and pegged the boy again as they made their way across the room. Adam's friends roared with laughter, while at the head of the table sat Brian, the Ruler Provider. He was wearing his on a string around his neck.

"So it'll be close to my heart," he said as he tucked it into his shirt and patted the concealed length of wood.

"I wonder if the administration computer's password is still 'virtue'," Brandy muttered under her breath.

"I can find out," Nellie said. "Why?"

"I think it's time St. Walburga's joins the Foreign Student Exchange Program." Brandy cast Brian an over-the-shoulder glare. "That kid is just itching to get sent to Russia."

As they drew near enough, Sister Agatha leveled a stern look on them and said, "Sister Mary would like a word with you both."

Brandy and Nellie exchanged identical 'oh hell' expressions. They had just been caught.

* * * *

Nellie and Brandy made their way to Sister Mary Magdalen's office without looking at one another.

"We're dead meat," Nellie said fatalistically.

Taking a last few quick puffs off her cigarette, Brandy said, "We don't know that yet."

"Hm," Nellie said. "We were out half the night robbing our neighboring schools of their beloved mascots. There's a goat on the roof of my dormitory and a fifteen-foot snake in a tub in the basement. And the first thing in the morning, even before breakfast, we get called to the Penguin's office. No, you're right. Silly me," she said. "I don't know why it ever would have crossed my mind that we might have gotten caught."

"Now you're being melodramatic," Brandy said as she tossed her cigarette aside. She popped a breathmint, spritzed herself with a covering perfume scent and followed the butt out into the grass, stepping on it and swivelling her foot from side to side just to make sure it was out.

Because she was the first to reach the administration building, she held the door for Nellie. "Let's not do something stupid, like confess, before we find out what exactly we're being accused of."

"Agreed."

It was too early in the day for Sister Roberta to be at her desk, but the door to the Penguin's office was open about a foot. Sure enough, as they approached it, they spied the principal sitting at her desk.

"Come in," she told them, wearing her I-Know-You-Did-It look.

That did not bode well, and Brandy felt an odd sinking sensation in the pit of her stomach as she crossed through threshold and cast a glance at the Devil's Toy Chest, where the Board of Education was still safely ensconced. Nellie softly shut the door behind them and, ignoring the comfortable chairs set out for guests, parents, and well-behaved students, the girls went straight to the bench. They sat, while they still could, and each offered the nun what they hoped was a suitably innocent, wide-eyed blink.

"You wanted to see us?" Nellie asked.

"Don't give me those looks," the nun snapped. Folding her hands over her desk, she leaned towards them. "I know what you were up to last night."

Brandy swallowed her breathmint. "You do?"

"Apparently, my warning must have gone straight through one ear and immediately out the other! Did you honestly think I wouldn't find out?"

Nellie began to jiggle her leg up and down, rapidly and nervously. Brandy cleared her throat and asked, "What—"

"Don't you dare deny it!" Sister Mary told them sternly. "How inept do you think I am not to notice that you both broke curfew last night and left your rooms? I know for a fact that you were holed up together, no doubt plotting some form of mischief-making. This is exactly why I didn't let you room together this year. Did you think I was joking when I said I wouldn't tolerate another year like the last one?"

They looked at one another again, before Nellie managed a partially strangled, "I-I told you we got caught. Bad Brandy."

"Naughty Nellie," Brandy returned, a little relieved.

"I mean it, girls," the sister said, unamused. "Your senior year will be a quiet and uneventful one. I'll not look the other way while you flaunt the rules just so things can be business as usual between the two of you."

"Yes, sister," Brandy said, and she even made herself sound somewhat resigned, as though submitting without question to a less than desirable fate. "You're absolutely right. I don't know what we were thinking."

The nun frowned, but if she thought the conversation had gone too easily in her favor, her expression betrayed no hints of reservation. Instead, the principal stood up and sighed heavily, her hands clapping upon the desk top with what sounded like a note of finality. "Stand up," she told them. "You know the position."

Nellie's shoulders slumped and they stared at one another. As her friend fidgeted with the hem of her skirt, Brandy just made a slight face, and then they both stood up. As they approached the Penguin's desk, she passed them on her way to fetch the Board of Education from the Devil's Toy Chest.

"Skirts up," Sister Mary said briskly.

At least they wouldn't be forced to take their panties down in a roomful of people, Brandy thought. She raised the back of her skirt up to her waist and then bent well over the Penguin's desk, stretching her arms out the grip the other side. Nellie followed suit, and they lay there, side-by-side with

very tense bottoms, staring straight ahead at the window. The skies were blue, the air was crisp and clear.

"It's going to be a nice day," Nellie commented.

"Mm hm," was all Brandy could make herself say.

And from behind them, they heard the Penguin say, "Brace yourselves, girls, because I'm not going to go easy on either one of you."

Nellie muffled a sound, and though Brandy didn't look back to check, it was probably because Sister Mary had grabbed the back of her panties and pulled them up taut, baring the summits of each buttock as the fabric of her underwear wedged itself into the crevice between. It was the principal's favorite punishment hold, and both Brandy and Nellie knew it well.

"One," the nun said firmly, and followed it promptly with a cannon-shot crack that jolted Nellie straight up over the desk and left her sucking a deep breath through her nose. She blew it out slowly through her mouth, her eyes squeezing tightly shut, her mouth spreading into a grimace of pain as she jiggled slightly up and down on her tiptoes.

"Two," Sister Mary said, and the paddle fell again.

"Oh!" Nellie's knuckles turned white as she gripped the edge of the desk, fighting not to let go. She bounced again, stomping one foot in pain.

"Three."

Nellie grunted in tandem with the paddle, arching her back stiffly as her feet drummed the floor.

"Four."

"Oh please, Sister!" Nellie squeaked and the impact of the paddle knocked her well up over the desk.

"Owww!" She cried out, and then her voice dropped to a soft mew. "Oh, ow, ow, ow, ow!"

"Hold still," the Penguin admonished.

Nellie struggled to comply, groaning, "I'm sorry ... I'm trying ... I'm sorry..."

"Five."

"HA-OW!" Nellie threw her head back, grunting loudly through gritted teeth, while the sixth and last one made her scream. She knew better than to snap backwards up off the desk, to grab her fiery bottom in both hands and rub frantically to sooth away the sting. Instead, she wiggled and writhed in place, sniffing as she blinked back tears and tried her best not to let go of the desk just yet.

It was Brandy's turn now, and without preamble she felt the sister take hold of the back of her white, cotton panties—regulation panties, in fact and thank the heavens, she thought as she buried her face between her outstretched arms. The Penguin pulled them tightly up over her cringing bottom until the fabric had no choice but to disappear in the crack, baring the majority of her buttocks to the Board. Brandy swallowed hard.

"One," the sister said behind her.

The Board of Education flattened both her bottom cheeks at once and ignited the stretch of impacted skin with a stinging smart that was akin to sitting on a hornet's nest while a thousand angry bees exacted a simultaneous revenge. It knocked her pelvis up against the hard edge of the desk.

Brandy sucked a startled breath. Her hand was almost behind her before she caught herself. With twin, hard slaps, she grabbed onto the desk again and gripped the edge as tightly as she knew how.

"Two."

The hornets' sting became an all-out intense pain as the Board caught her in nearly the same exact place as the last. Brandy grunted loudly at the third and shouted at the fourth. Her knees cracked into the back of the desk and her feet scrambled, pushing ineffectively at the floor as she struggled against the instinctive need to waggle her bottom up and down and back and forth, anything to cool the relentless burning pain.

"Five," the Sister said relentlessly.

Brandy shouted as it cracked into her, then buried her face once more in her outstretched arms, blinking rapidly to keep back the tears. She panted. Only one more to go. Just one more.

"Six," Sister Mary said.

It was unlikely that the Penguin struck significantly harder on the final stroke than all the previous ones combined, but it sure felt that way to Brandy's scorched and aching bottom. The Board drove her right up onto her toes, and she yowled, a raspy shriek of a sound. She writhed expressively for a long time afterward, pressing her knees one into the back of the other, twisting her hips from side to side as though she could throw off the hurt.

"You may rise," Sister Mary said and returned to the Devil's Toy Chest to put the Board away.

Both girls groaned as they pushed backwards off the desk and slowly stood upright. They cupped their bottoms beneath the sagging hems of their uniform skirts. Nellie bounced, doing a strange bobbing dance as she winced and rubbed her wounded backside. But Brandy was much more sedate. She knew from experience that the first time she tried to move, that burning ravaging pain would sink through her well-spanked bottom cheeks, intensifying the hurt. That made moving the very last thing she wanted to do.

"From now on," Sister Mary said, "I'll be performing nightly bed checks at completely random hours to make sure the two of you stay where you're supposed to be."

"Yes, Sister," they chorused meekly.

"You may go." The Penguin went back to her desk. "Oh, and girls?"

Brandy and Nellie both paused in the middle of easing themselves around.

"I sincerely hope this is the last I see of either of you, this quarter at the very least."

"Yes, Sister," Brandy said.

Nellie just nodded, ruefully rubbing her bottom through her skirt.

Sister Roberta was sitting at her desk by the time they shuffled from the Penguin's office. There was a small black and white tv set up in the middle of her desk calendar, turned on and tuned to the news.

"Starting a little early this year, aren't you?" she called over one shoulder, not taking her eyes off the tv. It was easy to see why, too.

Brandy barely recognized North Trenton just beyond the female reporter's shoulder, past all the police tape and the armed officers that were directing parents and students away from Sprocket's pen and the scene of the crime.

"I have with me," the reporter said, "FBI agent Keaton Wills, who, although visiting Eugene on vacation, has graciously agreed to donate his time and expertise into helping the police track down the nefarious villain who committed this crime."

Aching bottom forgotten, Brandy stared at the TV. "Nefarious villain?"

"Once more," the reporter recapped. "Sprocket the Goat, the beloved mascot for North Trenton's Sprocket's Rockets, was taken from his home last night by persons unknown. Mr. Wills," the reporter said, turning her attention from the camera, which panned back to include a view of the agent standing stiffly beside her, his mouth grim and unsmiling. "Thank you so much for being with us."

"Not at all," the FBI agent said. "Although my days at this school were well before that of Sprocket the Eleventh's, the old alma mater still sings within my breast." He lay a hand over his heart, glaring into the camera with all solemnity. "An attack against this school is an attack against me. I won't rest until the perpetrator or perpetrators of this crime are put away for the rest of their lives."

Sister Roberta tsked, clucking like a hen as she shook her head. "They're going to catch whoever did this and string them up by their big toes. Well," she shut the tv off. "I guess

you'd better get on your way. Classes will be starting any minute now."

The girls stood staring at the dark TV for several long seconds.

"Girls?"

"Right," Brandy said, reaching out to take Nellie's arm. "Classes."

They were barely out of the administration building before Nellie exploded with a loud, "Oh crap!"

Brandy looked up to check, but thankfully the Penguin's window was closed. "Keep your voice down," she hissed anyway.

"Oh, crap!" Nellie repeated in a whisper.

"Don't freak out." Brandy bowed her head, glaring at the sidewalk as they hurried back towards the school. "I'll think of something."

"Before or after we both go to jail! My God! Where's their perspective? It's a goat! It's not like we killed anybody!"

"Don't worry, we're not going to get caught."

"You always say that, and we always get caught. Why the hell do I listen to you? Every year I go through this! I need a new best friend!"

Brandy made a face. "Just give me time to think."

"I left my fingerprints all over South Trenton," Nellie moaned. "Fingerprints, hair and fiber samples ... I watch Discovery! By lunch time, there's going to be SWAT teams running across the campus lawn. I need a coat. If they parade my face in front of news cameras, it's absolutely going to kill my parents."

"Don't be silly. Unless the police already have your fingerprints on file..."

"I stole a candy bar when I was four," Nellie confessed as they reached the school's front steps.

"They don't fingerprint four-year-olds!" Brandy snapped. "Get a grip on yourself."

"You're right," Nellie said. "I'm being silly. I think I was five, anyway."

Brandy opened her mouth, but whatever she'd been about to say was abruptly stifled when one of the twin front doors to the school suddenly swung open and a senior came jogging down to them.

"Hey!" he said excitedly. "Have you heard the news?"

"Yeah," Brandy irritably. "It's all over the news. Poor Annie and Sprocket."

"Sprocket?" the kid said. "Who cares about a dumb ol' goat! I meant, have you heard the good news?"

"There's good news?" Nellie asked.

"St. Walburga's has been picked to represent every Catholic school in America in some huge international contest. Do you know what that means?" the kid asked with an ecstatic grin. "We're going to get visited by his Eminence's only non-cleric Man of Affairs: Mr. Toodles!"

Both Brandy and Nellie watched as the kid ran across the campus to share his good news with Sisters Roberta and Mary Magdalen.

"He's the Pope's Man of Affairs now?" Brandy said. "Damn, she's good. I didn't think even Bianca could get it spread around that fast."

The Great Prank
by Maren Smith

"See you in Science," Nellie said glumly.

They twiddled their fingers together in their special handshake, then trudged off in different directions.

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CHAPTER FIVE

By the time Brandy got to the science room, Nellie was already there and at her desk. She was, in fact, sitting way up at the very front of the class, slouched down in her chair with arms folded across her chest, and seeming anything but pleased.

"Hello, Miss Smith," Peter said. As he smiled at her, he gestured to the desk next to Nellie's, which was, more importantly, right smack in front of his own. "Take a seat."

Brandy glanced once to her customary chair of choice, the one at the very back of the class, but without a whole lot of choices she reluctantly made her way to the desk he indicated.

"I've resolved to keep a closer eye on the two of you," he said, quite cheerfully. "From now on, you can consider these your assigned seats."

As Brandy sat down, she and Nellie exchanged identical looks.

"He is soooo pushing me," Brandy leaned over to whisper when Peter retreated to the projector to get his lesson ready.

"After this it'll be a pleasure to go to jail," Nellie agreed, and dropped a copy of the school newspaper on Brandy's desk. In bold black ink, across the front page was: Mr. Toodles Pays Walburga Highest Honor.

Brandy picked up the paper. "I don't believe this. 'The students of St. Walburga's have long maintained a level of such moral and scholastic excellence,' says Henry West,

secretary to William Toodles, Pope John Paul II's man of affairs. 'That even to honor their achievements with an award of excellence hardly seems worthy of their efforts.' How can they get a direct quote from the secretary of a figment of my imagination." She shook her head. "This school is so full of liars. And my father doesn't understand how I could end up like this."

"Have you come up with a solution to our roof-bound and tub-bound problems?" Nellie asked.

"Yeah." The bell rang the start of class and Brandy leaned down to stuff the newspaper into her backpack so she could finish reading it later. "We're going to return them."

"Good morning, ladies and gentlemen," Peter greeted the rest of the classroom, bringing the students to order.

"When?" Nellie whispered.

"As soon as the heat dies off," Brandy whispered back.

"I'd like to get started," Peter said.

He glanced sideways at the girls when Nellie leaned over even further and hotly whispered, "When the hell will that be?"

"That is, of course," he said, "if it's all right with the two of you. Brandy, Nellie?"

The girls snapped to attention in their chairs as every other student in the classroom turned to look at them.

Raising his eyebrow at them, Peter glanced meaningfully to the bouquet of rulers, which once more decorated the center of his desk. With a final look of warning, he resumed his address to the rest of the class, "We're going to start the day with a pop quiz on what we learned yesterday, but first,"

he said over the chorus of groans that filled the room, "pass your homework to the front of the class."

As the shuffling of many papers filled the room, Peter walked over to first Nellie's desk, taking her assignment before strolling on to stand in front of Brandy. He reached down to take hold of her chin and, slowly, bent to breathe in the air before her. He gave her a very knowing look. The stomach melting kind, and Brandy felt her cheeks flush hot.

Looking very smug and schoolteacher-ly in his tan suit and tie, he said, "Miss Smith, have you been smoking again?"

There was dead silence from the rest of the class, which made her cheeks blush even hotter.

"No, Mr. Newman," Brandy said, as innocently as she knew how. "After all, wasn't it you who just the other day told me you didn't want me doing that anymore?"

"The smell is unmistakable."

"I could just have really bad breath," Brandy pointed out.

"From licking ash trays?" he asked.

"What I do on my own personal time is my business, sir."

He arched his brow at her comment, giving her a hard and quelling look. It had her shifting uncomfortably in her chair before he was satisfied. Holding out his hand, he said, "Where's your homework?"

Brandy handed it to him and sat back in her chair, folding her arms across her chest as he looked it over.

"It's amazing how similar your answers are to Miss Goodman's."

"Are you accusing me of cheating?" she asked, indignantly.

"I'm saying if you took half the energy you waste on your pranks and put it into your school work, then you could very well be one of the finest students to ever walk these halls. Think about it." He tapped her desk with two fingers before he continued on down the line of desks to collect the rest of the papers being held out to him.

Brandy slouched in her seat, glaring straight ahead at the blackboard as she muttered under her breath, "Great. Just what I've always wanted to be known as: the girl who did exceptional homework."

* * * *

"It's been two weeks. I thought you said the heat was going to die down," Nellie complained, setting her lunch tray on the table across from Brandy. "We don't have to worry about anyone forgetting about us; we're going to go down in the history books as the only two girls ever to be lynched for stealing a goat. And at a school no less. They'll probably string us up on the flag pole."

"Here." As she sat down, underneath the table, Brandy slid her backpack across the floor.

Nellie looked down when she felt a bump against her legs. "What is that?"

"A head and an audio cassette."

Nellie's startled expression quickly eased into curiosity. "Who'd you decapitate?" She suddenly closed her eyes and crossed her fingers on both hands. She lifted her head as if in prayer, murmuring softly under her breath, "Please let it be Mister Newman. Please let it be Mister Newman. Please..."

"It's a mannequin's head," Brandy specified dryly. "And don't laugh, I had to pay twenty dollars extra to get one with hair like yours."

"Oh, that was nice of you." Popping the top off her can of Diet Coke, Nellie then reached under the table to peek discretely into the backpack. "Not that I haven't always wanted a mannequin's head of my very own, what am I supposed to do with it?"

"What's the greatest escape in the history of the world?" Brandy asked, but then answered her own question before Nellie could make a guess. "I'll tell you: it was Alcatraz. A bunch of guys make heads of themselves and escape an island prison on a raft made of life jackets. I saved time and got our heads off eBay, and we don't exactly have to paddle our way across shark-infested waters, but the rest of the idea's sound. Tonight, we'll sneak out and put the goat and snake back. And the Penguin will never know we're gone because we'll have left these in our places and we'll be playing the cassettes—"

"A Symphony of Snores," Nellie read off the tape.

"She'll see lumps in our beds and hear snoring. She'll never suspect a thing."

"I don't snore."

"Fine, you don't snore. But for the sake of argument, turn your volume knob up a bit or Magdalen will never be convinced it's you." At Nellie's sour look, Brandy said. "I dare you to come up with something better. Come on, this plan is fool proof!"

"Great, we're sure to get caught then." Stuffing the tape back into her bag, Nellie sighed and leaned over her lunch tray.

"Do you have any better ideas?"

"No." She poked an unenthusiastic fork at her lasagna. "Besides, we're almost out of goat chow and I ran out of rats three days ago."

"Did Bianca bring her guinea pig again this year?" Brandy asked.

Nellie's jaw dropped and for a moment she stared at Brandy in shocked silence. "I am not feeding Mister Nibbles to Annie! That's cruel! And besides, Big-Mouth takes the time to braid Nibbles's hair. She's not going to sell him to you."

"I wasn't exactly going to ask her to buy it." But Brandy obligingly dropped the subject altogether at Nellie's horrified gasp. "Look, that's neither here nor there anyway. We don't have to worry about feeding anyone anymore; they're both going back."

"Good. I don't know how much longer I can stand the suspense of waiting to get caught. And the roof is starting to smell seriously goaty. Whoever thought a little animal could poop so much!"

"I shoveled the last time," Brandy quickly said.

"You did not. You had a history test to study for, you said. I've shoveled the last two times in a row!"

"I could've sworn I've shoveled."

"Yeah, sure you did," Nellie said skeptically. She opened her mouth to say more when, three tables over, a fight broke out.

"We've won state championship three years running," Susan Wright, the debate team president declared, jacking straight up on her feet and pressing toe-to-toe with Arnold Green, president of the chess club.

"Thirty years ago doesn't count," he scoffed. "If Mister Toodles is looking for examples of Walburga excellence, he's not going to be much impressed by a bunch of has-beens!"

"Yeah, well the only people who play chess anymore are geeks and losers!"

"At least we're winning losers!"

"Yeah, well, you're both geeks," Harvey Grant chimed in, and was immediately seconded by a chorus of affirmative grunting by nine huge boys in letter jackets. Harvey glanced at them smugly and said, "As captain of Oregon's reigning High School football team, I hereby volunteer the Walburga Wallabies to show Mr. Toodles around the school. A man of his distinction deserves an entourage in uniform."

"We could write cheers!" Staci Epps said spritely, and a dozen or so girls with big hair promptly leapt up and started hopping in place and plotting rhymes.

"Football is the sport of thugs and hoodlums," Susan snapped back. "Everyone who plays it goes straight to hell!"

Their own disagreement temporarily forgotten, Arnold muscled in to stand shoulder to shoulder with her, and toe to toe with the Jock's table. "Given the reputation of organized sports in the media right now, I think we should downplay the fact that Walburga has a football team at all. We want Mr. Toodles to think of us as students who don't do drugs or have prison records ... not to mention students who can read."

Harvey's jaw dropped, and then snapped shut as he and the entire football team stood up. They were an impressive bunch, even without their gear on, as they stepped over benches and around the table to take formation. They advanced on the debater's table, looking every bit as thug-ish as Susan had accused, and Arnold evidently remembered a chess match he was scheduled for and slipped away.

Susan didn't appear to realize that she was now alone, so to speak, on the playing field. "Yeah, bring it on," she challenged, lifting her chin. "On the count of three, if you can count that high. Right, Arn? Arn?"

"This is getting way out of hand," Nellie commented over another bite of her lasagna.

"I know," Brandy said. "It's really pissing me off, too. This would be the perfect prank, and I can't even acknowledge it."

"Why not?"

"Because it wasn't deliberate. That means it doesn't count. And besides, I'd sooner confess to the Sprocket and Annie mob than to tell these people I made the Toodles thing up."

Harvey grabbed the front of Susan's uniform shirt and pulled her right up onto her toes. And while the cheerleaders enthusiastically chanted, "One, two, three, four! Kick her butt right out the door!" Harvey brought her nose-to-nose with him and growled, "Woman, do you want to do your debating through a wired jaw, or do you want to shut your yap?"

Which brought the woman's libbers snarling into the fray, with Letta Jordan leading the salivating pack. "Woman?! How dare you say that with such derision! You—you—" she curled her lip, "Man!"

"Twenty bucks says Letta can take him," Nellie said. "She hasn't shaved her legs or her armpits in five years. A woman like that's just got to be tough."

Turning in her chair, Brandy glanced back toward the kitchen as the cafeteria sisters came hurrying out to break up the argument. "Do you suppose Mr. Newman's air conditioner has been fixed yet?"

"I don't know," Nellie said with an offhanded shrug. "Why?"

Downing the last swallow of her pop, Brandy stood up. "Wait here."

"Where are you going?"

"Be right back." Brandy walked back toward the chow line, glancing back once to make sure the sisters hadn't noticed her. But she needn't have worried. All their attention was centered on stopping the altercation before it became a physical one. Busy writing up reprimands for everyone involved and detention slips for the main contenders, no one noticed as Brandy opened the Staff-Only door and slipped inside the kitchen.

After one quick glance around to make sure she truly was alone, Brandy quickly cut herself a sheet of aluminum foil and filled the center of it with two cups worth of flour. She ducked down to check on the progress of the sisters through the food displays that overlooked the cafeteria, and then carefully folded the edges of the tin foil up over the powder to make a spill-proof pouch. Tucking it into her pocket, she quietly slipped back out of the kitchen and made her way back to her table.

Nellie leaned towards her, softly asking, "What did you do?"

"Nothing," Brandy replied. "Yet. You know, I never did get him back for that swat he gave me in class the other day."

"You should be grateful it wasn't a full blown spanking. Mr. Newman doesn't seem to take being lipped off to very well."

"He's just asking to get put back into place," Brandy smiled mischievously. "I think it's about time we obliged him.."

"Leave me out of it," Nellie said automatically. "He spansks too darn hard."

"Wuss."

"It's not cowardice," Nellie protested. "It's self-preservation. He's going to know it was us, anyway. Nobody else gives him grief. I'm perfectly willing to do the car, since he's not likely to be more than merely annoyed over that. But any pranks that risk my getting turned bottom-up I'm not doing. He's not breaking another ruler on my bare fanny. Once was more than enough for that, thank you very much."

"That's fine, I'll do it myself. Sooner or later, someone's got to back down, and it's not going to be me!" Brandy reached down and patted her pocket with the flour tucked safely inside it. "Poor Peter. He won't even know what hit him!"

* * * *

Peter could hear his phone ringing halfway down the hall from his apartment door. He broke into a run, fishing his keys from his pocket before he even reached the door. He got it

open on the third ring and dashed over to the kitchen counter to pick up the receiver before it could shrill out a fourth one. As he raised the phone to his ear, he happened to glance down at the answering machine. He blinked in surprise at the flashing red digital display that showed twenty-seven missed calls. "Hello?"

"Hi, I'm calling about the car," a young man's voice came back. "Is it still for sale?"

"I think you've got the wrong number," Peter said, turning in preparation of hanging the phone back up again.

"Is this seven-four-seven-five-five-five-one?" the young man asked.

Still looking at the flashing digital light, Peter felt a tell-tale sinking feeling enter his gut. Taking two steps towards the window, he peeked through the blinds. Sure enough, there on the windshield of his car, facing the busy highway, was painted, "For Sale, \$250.00. Call anytime, 747-5551."

"Damn it!" Peter dropped the phone.

Grabbing some wash clothes and a bottle of Windex from under the kitchen sink, he stormed from his apartment and jogged out to the staff parking lot to rescue his car. It didn't take a genius to know who was responsible for this. Two hundred and fifty dollars? The hubcaps cost more than that!

"Brandy, my girl, you are playing with fire," he muttered under his breath as he scrubbed the paint from his windshield.

At one point, he thought he heard giggling, but when he looked around, he saw neither hide nor hair of either Brandy or her ever-present shadow, Nellie. Once his windows were

again back to normal, he popped the trunk and lovingly covered the car in a protective tarp.

He paused on the way back to his apartment to glance around him, but, again, there was no sign of the two mischievous girls. It wasn't until he got back inside that he realized in his haste to get to the parking lot, he'd left his front door unlocked as well as wide open.

Peter Newman entered his apartment cautiously. Straight off the bat, he saw nothing out of place. The phone was beeping off the hook where he'd left it in such a hurry. The answering machine still flashed twenty-seven messages. It was a little warm, but such could be expected this time of year, especially since he'd not left a single window open. There wasn't much of a breeze outside anyway.

Still it took a full tour of his living quarters before Peter could finally assure himself that he was being ridiculous. Nothing at all seemed out of place. He shook his head at himself and went to flip on the newly repaired air conditioner. If he wasn't careful, by the end of the school year Brandy Smith was going to turn him into a nervous wreck.

The minute he turned the knob, the window unit hummed instantly to life and a cloud of flour burst from the vent ducts to douse him from head to waist in a thick covering of white powder. It went literally everywhere. For a good ten feet all around him, the floor was blanketed by it, as were the table, phone and tv.

Peter shut the A/C immediately off again. For a moment, he didn't dare move or breathe, lest he choke on the fine powder. There wasn't enough room in his chest for both air

and the hot, bubbling anger that was building to a roiling boil inside him anyway.

His hands began to shake. He exhaled slowly and a roar built up from deep within him, spilling out in a vocalization of the only word he could think, "BRANDY!"

* * * *

"You can't come in here!" Sister Kathryn Mary declared the minute she saw Peter, still covered in flour, marching past her open apartment door. Being the resident dorm mother, she took her responsibilities very seriously and her door was nearly always left open so she could monitor everyone who came or went from D-dorm. Each girl under her care was a closely guarded charge, both against the threats of physical harm as well as the moral and spiritual ones. Boys were no more allowed within these halls than were cigarettes, alcohol, or insertable menstrual devices.

At the moment, however, Peter was too damn mad to care about her objections.

"Wait!" she shrieked, and dropped her sewing to pursue him in his long-legged stalk to the stairs. "You can't come in here!"

"Is Nellie Goodman here?" he asked, taking the steps up two at a time without bothering to wait for an answer. Having already chased Brandy here once before, he knew the way to Nellie's room.

"What's she done?" the sister demanded.

"Is Brandy with her?" Just mere mention of her name put fire into his stride and all but propelled him down the second-

floor hall to Nellie's door. He opened it without knocking, ignoring Bianca's shriek, and barely in time to see Brandy wriggling to crawl head-first out of a window Nellie was struggling to push open wider.

Peter dove for Brandy, grabbing her by one leg and the waist of her uniform skirt and hauling her back into the room.

"Let go of me!" Brandy flailed for a secure hold on the thickest branch of her escape tree, and then at the sill of the window in a last ditch effort to keep from being dragged back into the dorm room. Peter was stronger and more determined, however, and she couldn't hold onto either for very long.

"Mr. Newman, please!" Sister Kathryn declared when he dragged a wildly kicking and struggling Brandy over to the nearest bed.

"What did she do?" Nellie protested.

"Get your meat hooks off me!" Brandy shouted.

And Bianca squeaked and covered her mouth with both hands when he sat down on the foot of her mattress and dumped Brandy face-down over one knee. Peter quickly scissored her kicking legs between his own and grabbed at her swinging fists until he'd caught both her wrists, and pinned them smartly behind her back.

Flour rained all around him as his palm began a furious tattoo all over her skirted backside. He ignored the chorus of indignant gasps from the females in the room and concentrated instead of delivering a volley of the soundest swats to Brandy's very deserving bottom. Her nether cheeks tensed so tightly that he could almost have spanned the

surface of both round summits with each stroke, but he settled instead for paddling one side at a time, letting the vigorous impacts tell the disobedient young woman in no uncertain terms just exactly how displeased he was.

The loud smacking sounds reverberated through the close room, and Brandy responded each time his hand flattened the pert young globes of her buttocks by bucking and shouting and gyrating her hips in place in an effort to relieve the stinging already beginning to build beneath her smarting skin. After only a dozen or so spanks, she was already twisting her hips and grunting muffled yelps through gritted teeth.

"You," Peter said, and pointed to Bianca, who's eyes grew to dinner-plate sizes. She paled to the same ghostly shade that he was and quickly covered her bottom with both hands. "Do you have a wooden-backed hairbrush?"

Already starting to tremble, Bianca shook her head, but hesitantly said, "M-Maggie d-does ... down the hall..."

"Get it."

Nellie tried to block the door, but Bianca scampered past her anyway and fled to complete her errand, lest she be next.

"Mr. Newman!" Sister Kathryn tried again. "This is most irregular! It's entirely improper! It's—"

"It's about to become even more improper," Peter growled, grabbing the back of Brandy's skirt and hauling it up over her squirming hips. Catching a glimpse of Nellie backing out the door, he stopped her escape with a hard and angry stare and a finger that pointed at her and rooted her feet to the floor. "You move from that spot and I will chase you down."

She froze where she was, as stiff as a statue, her hands fisted in the cloth of her skirt until the fabric was pulled tight around her own cringing backside. "I-I-I didn't d-do anything," she stammered.

"You're going to wash my car every Wednesday and Saturday for a month," he told her. He was pretty darn sure she was responsible for that much, whether Nellie admitted to it or not.

Nellie swallowed and nodded, and her eyes flicked down in embarrassed dismay as he took hold of the elastic band of Brandy's regulation white cotton underwear and shoved them all the way off her bottom. Stretched across her tense thighs, he worked the thin fabric down until it ran parallel to his leg, which kept hers from being able to freely kick.

"You can't do this!" Brandy shouted, her toes scraping the floor, and Peter responded with another even more furious volley of swats that had her bottom dancing, bouncing, and quaking in time with the rapid-fire spanking. The paleness of her flesh was quickly giving way to a blushing shade of pink and, as one minute dragged into two without the slightest of pauses to help cool the painful fire building in her cringing backside, a note of desperation was creeping past the anger in Brandy's yelps.

"It was just a joke!" she cried, her hands clawing and grabbing at the air as she tried to wrest them out of his iron grip.

"Do you hear me laughing?" Peter shifted his aim from the summits of her buttocks to the sensitive strip of tender flesh where her bottom melded into her thighs.

"OooOOOwww!" Brandy wailed. Her thrashing began to turn frantic just as Bianca came back through the door, clutching the wooden hairbrush in her hand. She froze when she saw Brandy's bare-bottomed state. The blushing hillocks yawned and then clenched again, trembling in the brief pause as Peter held out his hand for the hairbrush.

Brandy twisted her head back when she felt Peter reaching, and she stared in horror at the implement exchanging hands. "Don't you dare give that to him!"

But Bianca surrendered the hairbrush without so much as a murmur of protest, and Brandy twisted her head the other way to give the newly armed Peter an almost frightened look. At last he had her undivided attention.

"I'm all through being the butt of your pranks," he told her, and that was it. In hard but measured strokes, he let the hairbrush finish his lecture for him.

Brandy sucked a hissing breath when the flat wooden head slapped the first fiery spank across her unprotected right bottom cheek. "Oh my god!" she gasped as two more agonizing kisses flatted her buttocks from side to side, and with dervish intensity she fought to get away.

She could barely kick. Her squirming to break free dissolved into something nearly out of control and she tossed her head, shouting out in pain as the hairbrush paddled her without the slightest mercy.

Peter turned her pale bottom to the crimson shade of a blood-red sunset. He neglected not an inch of her from the now swollen summits to the crease that joined her bottom and legs, and he even spanked down the backs of her thighs

to drive the point home and give her no way to sit without suffering at least for a day, and quite possibly two or three.

With single minded determination, he broke through Brandy's anger and spanked his way to meet the remorseful young lady within. She was drooped and sobbing over his knee before he lay the hairbrush aside and both the sight and the sound of it was very, very satisfying.

Mindless of her cries and her writhing protests, Peter pulled Brandy's panties back up into place and set her on her feet. If the disapproving sister and the near-to-tears themselves Nellie and Bianca weren't standing there, he would have preferred to pull Brandy into his arms and let her know the slate was now wiped clean, if she'd only just try to be good. But there was no way he could think of to do it without that comforting affection being misconstrued. So he merely let her go and allowed her skirt to fall back into place.

"Get a bucket and some wash rags," he told her. "You are going to clean up every inch of my apartment before supper tonight. And if you ever pull another stunt like that again, you won't be able to sit down comfortably for the rest of your life. Do I make myself clear?"

Sobbing and holding her raw and swollen bottom, Brandy only nodded.

He handed the hairbrush back to Bianca.

"I apologize for the intrusion," he told Sister Kathryn.

"Sister Mary will hear about this," the nun told his stiffly in return.

The Great Prank
by Maren Smith

"Of that, I have little doubt," he said. Taking hold of the back of Brandy's neck and beckoning to Nellie, he led the recalcitrant pranksters from the room.

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CHAPTER SIX

"All right," the Penguin solemnly said from behind them. "Bend over, and I suggest you hold on tight. Certainly, the two of you are going to need to hold onto something for this one."

Standing side by side in the principal's office, Brandy and Nellie exchanged quick glances back and forth before, with stifled sighs, they leaned down over Sister Mary's desk. They stretched out their arms, reaching past their respective mannequin heads to take hold of the opposite side, their skirt-clad pelvises nestling up against the hard wood. With a whimper of remorse, Nellie rested her forehead on her Symphony of Snores tape and then she shook it slowly back and forth, as if unable to believe she was here and facing another round with the Board.

Brandy just sighed and closed her eyes. She heard the Sister open the Devil's Toy Chest. The dry rattle as the nun withdrew the Board of Education made Brandy's hot bottom crawl and mentally she added the name of Big-Mouth Bianca to her list of people to get before the end of the year. Big-mouthed and nosy Bianca, who had waited until Peter had dragged them off before rifling through Brandy's bookbag. She wondered if Big-Mouth had broke the sound barrier in her rush to rat them out to Sister Mary.

Her thighs clenched when the nun drew up her skirt, and Brandy winced as the movement made the muscles of her bottom tighten. She pressed her lips tight together as her

already hot and aching backside was exposed to the significantly cooler air of the nun's office. The effects of the hairbrush, not to mention Peter's handy work, were still vividly felt, and Brandy sniffled with no small amount of self-pity. How in the world was she ever going to bear another spanking? She couldn't sit down as it was!

"Why is it," the nun said, "that I seem to spend all of my time lecturing and paddling the two of you, and it never seems to do any good? Within a week, you're both right back here in my office, in this position, waiting to be paddled again! Well, this time I've had it!"

Nellie made a slight, muffled sound in the back of her throat as the Penguin lifted her skirt as well.

"This time," Sister Mary said, "I'm not going to stop until I know the two of you have been taught a proper lesson."

And in the next instant, Brandy understood the reason for Nellie's mew of dismay. This time, instead of grabbing the legs of her underwear and tugging them up into the crease of her buttocks, like some sort of ecclesiastical wedgie, Brandy felt the sister's fingers, like shocks of ice against her hot skin, sliding into the waist of her panties and scraping them down. The normally soft cotton felt as rough as sandpaper as her bottom was completely bared. And Sister Mary didn't just take her panties down a little bit, either. She took them all the way down, past her knees until Brandy felt the folds of her underpants falling lightly around her ankles.

To Brandy's livid bottom flesh, the Sister showed absolutely no propensity towards pity or mercy. Instead, all

she said was, "You really are going to feel this one, aren't you, young lady?"

Then, pushing up her habit sleeves, the Sister took firm hold of the paddle in one hand, lay her other in the small of Brandy's back, and in the next instant sent her dancing up onto her tiptoes as the plank of hard wood connected solidly with the underside of her throbbing cheeks. Brandy screeched at the top of her lungs as she felt her flesh flatted under the force of the blow. It all but knocked her up over the top of the principal's desk.

There was no counting the strokes. There was no thinking at all. Her whole world became the hew and bite of the Board as it smacked into her again and again and again. And before the end of it, Brandy was sobbing and writhing upon the desk, her whole body hot and pulsing with the pain that radiated out from her bottom and laved through her in waves.

Beside her, Nellie was crying sympathy and fear tears just as hard and just as breathlessly as Brandy was, and that was before the Board ceased to fall and the Penguin finally let go of Brandy.

"Keep your hands on the desk," Sister Mary said as she took up a position behind Nellie. She lay her hand to the small of the cringing girl's back, and then went mercilessly to work.

Having to hear each thunderclap whap burrowing into Nellie's backside was almost worse than Brandy's having to suffer under the instant sting of each impact herself. Although to listen to Nellie, her high-pitched wails escalating nearly beyond the realm of human hearing, nothing could possibly

have come close to comparing with the punishing jolts of the Board as it knocked her up against the edge of the desk.

And what was worse, the sound of it seemed to go on forever before Sister Mary finally declared, "There!" She delivered one last hard wallop that had Nellie both shrieking and dancing on her tiptoes, bent as she was across the desk. "Let that be a lesson to you both! I'm all done tolerating these childish shenanigans!"

Frantic to rub away the hurt, her knees bumping against the desk as she wiggled her hips from side to side, Nellie sobbed out, "YesSisteryessisteryesyesyes!"

The nun let go of Nellie and backed from the desk to survey her handiwork. She gave the bright red bottoms before her a satisfied nod. "All right, ladies. You may rise."

The girls crawled backwards off the desk until they once more stood under their own power, albeit upon badly shaking legs. Nellie caught hold of her bottom in both hands, exploring the hot, swollen globes of her buttocks, with tightly closed eyes and gritted teeth. Brandy pulled her skirt up, craning her head around in an attempt to see the damage she couldn't bear to touch, it hurt so much.

"Panties up," the Sister said implacably.

They bent down with sobbed out groans to pull their underwear back up into place, each wincing expressively as the elastic scrapped across her sore bottom.

"Now," Sister Mary announced as she rounded her desk to sit down again. She set the paddle down on her desk calendar and folded her hands over the top of it. "Dare I hope that we have, hereafter, a dull and uneventful semester?"

"Yes, Sister," Brandy sniffled, hiccuping as she wiped her eyes.

Nellie just held her bottom and bounced in place. It was several seconds before she could get hold of herself enough to offer the waiting nun a shaking nod. "Y-yes, Si-i-ister."

"Then you may be excused," the Penguin said. "And this time, try to keep yourselves out of trouble."

They turned to go, limping from the office with their tender bottoms cupped in equally gentle hands. Neither girl moved very quickly. Each step was accompanied by a pang of heat and hurt that echoed the strength behind Sister Mary's arm.

"Oh ow!" Nellie whispered as Brandy closed the door behind them. "My panties feel like they're made out of sandpaper!"

"Mine, too. I can't wait to get them off."

They turned around and froze when they spied Brian, the Ruler Provider, sitting in one of the chairs, waiting for his turn with Sister Mary. His face was pale and his leg was doing a rapid, tell-tale jigging up and down.

Nellie blushed a bright red and quickly snatched her hands off her bottom.

Brandy didn't bother. "What are you in for?" she asked him.

"I got caught smoking," he admitted. "What about you?"

"Smoking," Brandy instantly lied.

"And she's in a really bad mood, too," Nellie vindictively added when his face paled three shades whiter than it had previously been. "Good luck."

As they limped from the room, they heard him swallow hard.

"Oh, sweet Mary, mother of God," he groaned. "I'll never smoke again!"

* * * *

Sister Mary Magdalen was turning out the lights and getting ready to retire to her own living quarters for the night, when the phone on her desk lit up with an incoming call. Since Sister Robert had long since gone home for the night, she answered it herself.

"St. Walburga's Catholic School," she greeted. "How may I help you?"

"Yes," a man's voice replied through the receiver. "I realize I'm calling awfully late, but I was hoping that I might be able to leave a message for the principal there, Sister Mary, I believe her name is."

"This is she," Sister Mary replied. "How may I help you?"

"Ah!" the man said. "Wonderful! I caught you! My name is William Toodles—"

Everything else said immediately following that statement Sister Mary completely blocked out. In a sudden panic of unpreparedness, she quickly sat back down behind her desk and whipped out a notepad and pen. She wrote Toodles in big, block letters across the top of the first blank page she flipped to, and then underlined the word twice.

"Mr. Toodles!" she half-laughed, and then had to work hard to swallow the sudden schoolgirl giddiness that had her

wanting to jump up and down and shout in excitement. "What a surprise!"

"You've heard of me?" he asked.

"Oh," she laughed again. "I think just about everyone here has heard of you by now."

"Well, then you probably know what this call is in reference to."

"Something about our humble school and some international contest." She began to draw a halo over the 'T' in his name.

"It is. It's a relatively new sort of thing we're doing. It's only the third time that we'll be issuing this award of excellence, but the search is on for the best Catholic school in existence. A morally and spiritually uplifting place where our young students can exercise their minds as well as their faith. A pillar of the local community. A shining example of award-winning achievement for all other schools to model themselves."

"That certainly does sound like St. Walburga's," Sister Mary gushed, blushing.

"That's my feeling on the matter as well. Still, the decision is hardly finalized. We've narrowed the choices down to three schools, one of course being Walburga's."

Dancing in her seat, Sister Mary drew another halo over the first one and added dashes all around it to simulate points of radiating light. "Thank you, Mr. Toodles! I can't tell you what an honor this has been!"

"Now," he continued, "the usual ceremony would be for me to pay the school a visit, tour the facilities, meet some of the

students, and present the award. However, this year is proving a bit busy."

Sister Mary stopped doodling and sat up a little straighter. "Oh no."

"...uh, I'm sorry? What was that?"

"Oh please don't tell me you won't be able to come here!" When euphoria died, it died hard, and Sister Mary stared around her office as if an iron-clad excuse for why he should drop everything and pay his visit to them right now lay somewhere among the books and shelves and the portraits that decorated the walls. "I mean the students, they are so looking forward to seeing you. To dash their hopes all to pieces—if we should even win the contest that is—why that would be cruel!"

The man was quiet for a moment, before reluctantly hedging, "You're right. It's just that with everything that's been scheduled for me this year as it is, I just don't know if we'll—"

"Don't plan your trip around our convenience," Sister Mary told him. "We can be ready at the drop of a hat to receive you. You could stay a day, if you wanted. Or only just an hour. Whatever you can manage, we'll gladly accept, only please don't let my students down. They are already making banners and signs to welcome you."

"They are?"

"Even if you can do nothing more than fly through the airport, I'll load up a bus-full of our best students and run them out to meet you as you change planes. That would give them such a thrill. Just please, please don't cry off your visit

entirely!" She waited, wide-eyed and blinking as she listened to the perfect silence coming down through the telephone line.

In an almost meek sounding voice, he asked, "January nineteenth? Would you be available for a few hours on that day?"

Sister Mary quickly checked her desk calendar and circled the date. "That would be the absolute perfect date for you to come!"

"Now," he hedged. "That's only if you win, mind you."

"Absolutely."

"This isn't guaranteed—although you're school is a fine one, I'm sure. And were it left up to me, I'd vote for it in a heartbeat, but there is a deciding council..."

"Oh, I understand! I know we'll have to take our chances. And please let me know when they've decided, even if they decide in another school's favor. You've been so an inspiration to my students, I'd like to fly out and meet with you even if we don't win."

"Uh ... okay ... I—I look forward to meeting you," he said, and it was probably just her imagination that he sounded so subdued.

With a beaming smile of pride and accomplishment, Sister Mary hung up the phone and stood up. She smiled the entire way home, despite the fact that now she had a busy night ahead of her. Not to mention the most celebrated visit of the year to plan for, just in case it really did happen and St. Walburga's won the contest. She'd probably have to hog-tie Brandy and Nellie, but no matter what, she was determined

that this visit with Mr. Toodles was going to go perfectly and without a single prank to dampen the glow of what, she was sure, was destined to be the honor of a lifetime.

* * * *

Gordon's face was solemn as he hung up his cell phone. "Well," he hedged as he faced both Brandy's and Nellie's incredulous stares, "I don't think that worked quite as well as we were hoping."

"You doofus!" Brandy slugged his shoulder. "What did you have to go and say that for? We wanted you to call off coming, not set a date! January nineteenth? You're supposed to be helping us, not making things worse!"

"Hey!" Gordon grabbed his shoulder and ducked out of her reach. "If I'd known I was going to have to lie to a nun I wouldn't have come! Isn't that one of the seven deadly sins? You burn in hell for that, Brandy! And nobody said anything about signs and banners! If you're going to walk me into the middle of a guilt trip, at the very least you should warn me so I can prepare a decent come-back. What was I supposed to say? Oh, well, tough nuggies to you and your students?"

"But you gave her a date! Why January nineteenth?"

"My brother's going to be in town for a visit then."

"James?! You want James to play Mr. Toodles?!"

"Hey, I found a joint in his luggage his last trip home. He'd pretend to be the Pope right now to keep mom from finding out." Gordon shook his head at Nellie. "He does drugs; I get sent to military school. Go figure."

"But *James*? He'll never make a convincing Toodles!"

"He'll clean up," Gordon protested. "A little soap, a little water ... we'll cut a couple feet off his hair ... make him run a million or so laps on the treadmill ... sober him up ... maybe..."

"We are never going to get out of trouble," Nellie moaned, flopping down on the edge of her bed. Instantly, she sucked a started breath and rolled onto her hip. Her hand darted behind her and, wincing, she rubbed her still hot and aching bottom.

"Not the way your boyfriend keeps screwing up his lines, we won't!" Brandy flopped face-down on her bed and hugged her pillow, scowling at the wall.

"Hey," Gordon protested.

"She's just cranky 'cause she got spanked," Nellie told him.

"You got spanked, too!" Brandy snapped.

Nellie's cheeks turned hot when he glanced at her with a raised eyebrow. "Yeah, but she got spanked twice."

Glaring down at the back of Brandy's head, Gordon said, "Unless she wants to go for broke and make it three times, I suggest she starts appreciating my efforts."

Brandy rolled halfway onto her side and stared back at him, partly mutinous, partly disbelieving. "You wouldn't dare!"

Nellie quickly threw her arms around Gordon's neck as his ominous step towards the bed sent Brandy scrambling up onto her knees. She thrust her pillow up like a shield between them while Nellie cooed, "*I appreciate your efforts. I'm very grateful for everything you've done to help us out. Thank you, Gordon.*" She smooched his neck. "Thank you."

He still growled at Brandy, although as Nellie continued to kiss her way up to his mouth, he visibly weakened. "I ought to leave you both to get out of your mess yourselves. I promised my mom she wouldn't get so much as a single call from Colonel Oberst this year and you've got me leaving campus, stealing mascots, and making prank calls to nuns."

It was amazing how quickly Nellie's eyes turned bambi-ish with innocent alarm. "Please don't. We really do appreciate all that you've done for us. We're just a little cranky." She lay her head upon his chest. "We've been under a lot of stress." Her lower lip poked out and, in a soft, pouty voice that all but pleaded for sympathy, she added, "And our bottoms hurt."

"Well," Gordon allowed himself to be grudgingly mollified by her cuddling. "From the pranks I've seen you pulling so far, you probably deserved to have your bottoms smacked just a little bit." But as his arms came around her, a corner of his mouth tilted upward in a grin that was positively wolfish. "You know, Nellie. A kiss might make it feel better."

"Unmarried mouths cannot come in contact with unmarried waists or lower, it's a cardinal sin," she said primly. "Do you want to spend the next thousand years roasting in the fiery pits of Hell?"

He tilted his head to one side, mentally weighing the pros and cons of such a fate with his desire to get his mouth below her waist.

"Gordon," she warned.

Dutifully, he said, "No."

"No lips on butts then," she said, then added, "Of course, hands are only a venial sin. You can rub all you want to."

"Ooo." Gordon reached down to cup her bottom in both hands.

Nellie made a muffled sound in the back of her throat. "Gently," she whispered throatily.

The imminence of another spanking having obviously passed, Brandy threw down her pillow shield and flopped back onto her stomach. She glared at them, before turning to face the wall. "God, you two. Get a room."

* * * *

Bright and early the next morning, Brandy met up with Nellie halfway across the campus lawn from the dorm rooms to the main school building. It had rained the previous night and her sneakers were thoroughly soaked and squishing as she walked. "Morning."

"Happy belated birthday," Nellie said back, handing Brandy a Hershey bar wrapped with a green bow. "You're eighteen now. How's it feel to be an adult?"

"Uncomfortable. I've got bruises the size of frisbees on both butt cheeks, but thanks for the candy bar. This'll help."

"That's what I think too," Nellie said spritely. "Chocolate just makes everything seem better."

"How are you?"

"The same as you, but underage and with smaller bruises."

Brandy unwrapped the candy bar and handed her friend half, and that was their breakfast as they walked across the dewy grass towards the main school building.

Sister Robert stood by the doors greeting the students as Brandy and Nellie neared the top of the front steps. It was

the most excited looking that they'd ever seen the old nun. Her cheeks were pink, her eyes were bright, and she was all but dancing on her toes. As each student neared her, she caught them by the arm and said, "There's a surprise assembly in the gym first thing this morning." And breathlessly on the heels of that announcement, she declared, "Mr. Toodles is coming for a visit!"

"Kinda takes the surprise right out of it, doesn't it?" Nellie muttered as they followed the line of fellow classmates down the hall and into the gym.

Walking through those heavy double-doors, their waterlogged shoes squeaking on the painted basketball court floor, was like stepping into a surreal wonderland of enthusiasm. There were banners and balloons everywhere. A hundred cheering students climbed all over the grandstands, laughing and talking excitedly, and all along the back two bleacher rows, the especially rambunctious were tromping out that familiar three-stomp beat of Queen's *'We Will Rock You'*.

Brandy and Nellie looked at one another, and then headed for the bleachers. They found a place to sit way up on the top row, at the very left of the stand.

"You know," Brandy said as they gingerly lowered themselves onto the hard bench. "Ten years from now I'll probably have forgotten everything I learned in science, every equation from math, and history will be nothing but a blur of dates and names. But the one lesson I bet I'll carry with me from the day I graduate high school until I'm a dottering old woman with grey hair, will be this one right here: people are crazy."

"No kidding," Nellie agreed, staring down the bleachers at Jeremy Schroder, dressed in full mascot uniform, the St. Walburga Wallaby. His limp blue tail had been patched so many times that it now hung crooked off his drooping backside, like a floppy blue jump rope that slapped the floor as he bounced and skipped sideways down the length of the bleachers. He waved his arms wildly above his head and elicited from the crowd of kids a roar of cheers as they obligingly stood up enmasse to perform a rippling 'wave' as he passed by. It was a fine display of school spirit, far more suited to a sporting event than for an assembly.

"This is insane," Nellie said. "I'm taking this whole Toodles thing to the grave with me. There's no way I'll ever confess to this."

"Nope," Brandy agreed. "Considering how our luck's been running here lately, I just hope we don't get caught."

"Boy, if you're worried, we must really be in trouble."

Jeremy the Wallaby skipped down to the end of the bleachers, and the girls obligingly rose with the rest of their section to do the 'Wave', throwing their arms up into the air and whooping loudly.

"I want a donut," Nellie said, as they sat back down.

"Maybe we'll have time to grab one from the cafeteria before we go to class," Brandy told her.

"I didn't mean that kind of donut."

Having just winced herself when her sore butt made contact with the bench, Brandy couldn't help but snicker.

All around them, students erupted into cheers and clapping as Sister Mary walked into the gym. She headed for the

microphone that had been set up in the middle of the basketball court, motioning for silence before she even reached it.

The assembled students accommodated her in record time. Brandy could all but hear them holding their collective breaths. Had Christ himself walked up the mic, he'd have been booed from the gym so that Sister Mary could make her much more important Toodles announcement.

Brandy shook her head, whispering under her breath. "This is insane."

"Good morning, ladies and gentlemen," the Penguin greeted with a smile, clasping her hands before her as though about to pray. "I will make this brief, since I know many of you have yet to eat breakfast. Last night in my office, I received a phone call from none other than Mr. Toodles, himself."

At the mere mention of his name, students erupted up out of their seats, jumping and cheering in the stands. Not to seem out of place Nellie and Brandy both added to the noise by clapping, but they looked at one another as they did so.

Beaming, Sister Mary stood back from the microphone until the students' enthusiasm finally waned. Then she once more waved them into silence. When it finally grew quiet enough that, with the aid of the speaker system, she could be heard again, she said, "He informed me that St. Walburga's has placed among the top three schools selected to represent all the best Catholic schools in the world!"

That set the students off again, and this time Nellie and Brandy actually had to stand up while they clapped.

"My God, I've created Elvis," Brandy said, staring in wonder at her fellow classmates.

"The Beatles," Nellie agreed. "Or Marilyn Manson even."

"Marilyn Manson? Hell, he's Charlie Manson! Look at these people!" Brandy gestured at the jumping and shouting students below and around them. "They would do anything for a guy who's nothing more than a—" she lowered her voice to a whisper, "—figment of our imaginations!"

"Mark January the nineteenth on your calenders," the Penguin exclaimed. "Mr. Toodles is coming here for a visit!"

At that point it was a wonder that the bleachers didn't collapse. The cheering became almost deafening, which covered up Brandy's cried out, "Maybe! He'll maybe be coming!" She turned to Nellie, exclaiming, "She didn't say maybe!"

"Maybe they won't notice."

Two rows down, Georgia Sommersby collapsed to the bleachers, red faced and shaking, panting hard as she waved her hand in front of her flushed face and reached into her pocket for her asthma inhaler.

"Let's get out of here," Brandy shouted to Nellie, and they both stood up.

"Yeah, I really don't want to watch someone die because of us."

* * * *

Compared to the gym, the cafeteria was tomb-like it was so quiet. Even the cooks were at the assembly, and so the

girls turned on the lights and helped themselves to cold cereal and milk. They sat down to eat at a table by the window.

After about three bites, Nellie said, "I don't know why we're worrying about this. If the nineteenth comes and goes, and Mr. Toodles never shows, they'll be disappointed, they'll grumble a bit, but life will go on and eventually they'll forget about all this."

"I'll bet you ten to one someone calls the Pope to log a formal complaint." Brandy morosely chewed her cereal. "Eventually, it would get back to us. It'd probably get back to us before graduation. We'll be tarred and feathered, then expelled."

"Maybe St. Walburga's could be disqualified. We could hint that someone did something immoral..."

"Then they'll get tarred and feathered and expelled," Brandy said, just as listlessly.

Nellie thought for a moment. "We'll invent someone. Remember the year we added sixty fictional kids to the school computer and deleted sixty real ones? It took weeks for the sisters to get everyone straightened out."

"And the minute it started over again, the Penguin would be onto us. Which puts us back in the limelight for tar and feathering and expulsion. I don't know about you, but I really have no desire to be a fry-flipper at McDonald's for the rest of my life."

"Well, we can't come clean."

Brandy shook her head in agreement. "Nope."

They ate another few bites in silence before Nellie raised her head. "We're screwed. We can't pull this off with James."

That goof-ball can barely dress himself, how can he possibly play Toodles."

"Excuse me?" a man's voice cut in.

Brandy and Nellie both started, jerking around in their seats to stare at the door. Brandy almost clutched her chest as, in a moment that spanned no more than a heartbeat, she felt shocks of both panic and relief shoot through her chest. Relief that it wasn't a fellow student or teacher standing there in the doorway, having quite possibly overheard that last comment. And utter panic because even though it had been two weeks since she'd watched the news, she had no problem recognizing the man staring back at her. It was Keaton Wills, the FBI agent, hot on the trail of the Sprocket's Rockets goat-napper.

Nellie squeaked.

"Can you tell me where to find Sister..." the FBI man looked down at the scrap of paper in his hand. "Mary Magdalen."

Brandy couldn't make herself move. It was Nellie who pointed the direction out to him and said, "There's an assembly in the gym."

"If it's an assembly, shouldn't you be there too?" he asked.

Nellie squeaked again. "We're cutting."

He looked from one to the other, then said, "You shouldn't do that."

"No, sir," they both squeaked in unison, then he nodded again and turned go.

The door hadn't quite closed, when he pushed it open again. "Oh, before I forget. Have either of you ladies seen a goat, maybe wandering around somewhere close by here?"

"Goat?" Brandy echoed weakly.

"About this high," Wills held his hand up against his thigh. "It's a white goat, wearing a blue coat with gold letters that spell out Sprocket on the sides. I don't suppose you've seen one like that, have you?"

Wordlessly, Brandy and Nellie both shook their heads.

"Okay." The FBI man nodded. "Just thought I'd ask." He looked at them a moment longer, then thumbed back over his shoulder. "The gym's down this way?"

They nodded.

Wills half smiled. "Well then, I guess I'll see the two of you later." He looked from one to the other again, and then walked out of the cafeteria.

Brandy and Nellie stared at the gently closing door and then to one another.

"Oh man, we really are screwed," Nellie said, shoving her chair back from the table..

"I'll scoop the roof," Brandy hurriedly told her. "You grab the goat and take him to the basement."

They walked out of the school, doing their best not to look suspicious, but the minute they cleared the doors, they ran all the way to Nellie's dorm.

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CHAPTER SEVEN

Brandy sat through her classes for the rest of the day, halfway expecting to be caught at any minute. Every time she heard a door open, she turned, fully expecting to see the federal agent, Wills, coming to arrest her. He'd probably slap her in handcuffs right there in the middle of class, she thought. For all she knew, the front lawn was swarming with camera-laden reporters eager to catch her picture and air it on the five o'clock news. 'Mascot Napper Nabbed!' the headlines would say. She could practically see it now. Just her luck, this would probably be the one time her father deigned to notice her. And promptly on the heels of that she couldn't help but wonder if he'd even care. She'd probably get another postcard, like the one she'd received for her birthday.

Brandy. Am in Malaysia. How's school? Bill.

She couldn't even remember the last time he'd referred to himself as her father, and since there was no return address, she assumed he really wasn't all that interested in keeping up to date on the whole school issue anyway.

Maybe he'd look on her getting arrested as though it were his long-awaited golden opportunity for freedom and disown her. Either way, she supposed, it would be putting her out of her misery.

And in the meantime, anxious as she was for the other shoe to drop smack on her head, life insisted on continuing, and the monotony of her routine made the day drag on even worse than normal.

All throughout her test in English, she sat tapping her pencil and staring at the same stupid question. Question number three, in fact. At this point, she was just hoping she got the right name on the top of the page.

In Peter Newman's class, she barely heard his announcement that the day would be spent studying their text books for the next day's experiment in frog dissection, and she and Nellie not only sat on opposite ends of the classroom, but they neither one looked at the other even once.

History was a fuzzy conglomeration of barely recalled words and phrases, as the adventures of Poccahontis took a backseat to nervous leg-jiggling and aimless stares cast out the nearest window.

"Pranks used to be fun," Nellie said when they met up for lunch by the sandwich display in the cafeteria. "So why do I feel like throwing up?"

"Is the FBI guy still around?" Brandy asked.

"I haven't seen him since the Penguin gave him a tour of the grounds this morning."

"Maybe he went home," Brandy said hopefully.

"We're caught this time for sure," Nellie said. "I can feel it."

And for once, Brandy didn't argue. She could feel that gloomy possibility like a niggling ray of certainty at the back of her mind, and it refused to be banished, regardless of how hard she tried to ignore it.

"Toodles' Visit Eminent!" Toby Wainwright cried, holding aloft the latest edition of the school paper. Both Brandy and

Nellie actually cringed away from him as they walked past him on their way to turn in their lunch tickets at the check out counter. But once lunch was paid for, Brandy gave in and held up her hand.

Toby passed her a paper. "Yeah, I could see you trying to hold back your Toodles' excitement, but it's pretty well useless to resist. He's a powerfully magnetic man. The article on page two," he thumbed to himself smugly, and bobbed smartly up and down on his heels, "I wrong that. It's particularly informative, too, I might add."

"Actually," Brandy said. "I was looking for information on the Sprocket and Annie investigation."

"Who the hell cares," Toby pishawed. "Yesterday's news, babe. Now if you want to find out the good stuff about Mr. Toodles and how he came to be the great man he is today, just turn to page two and—"

"Toodles, smoodles," Brandy snapped crankily. She turned around and walked off to find a table, muttering under her breath, "Didn't he fall in a lake and drown? That's what I heard."

Toby's jaw dropped and he stared after her in nothing short of sacrilegious horror.

Nellie smiled weakly and took a paper herself. "She's having a bad day."

Toby could obviously have cared less. Morally affronted, he bellowed after Brandy, "Heartless wench! You won't live forever you know! Fall in a lake? You just remember you said that when Saint Peter and Mr. Toodles stand with you at the

pearly Gates, judging you lacking and denying you entrance into that celestial paradise. You Jezebel, you!"

Nellie turned and hurried after Brandy, her ears burning as she felt the incredulous stares of those students that had been close enough to hear Brandy's treacherous remarks.

They found an empty table by the window and ate their lunch without speaking, each focused on her own paper. Toodles news took up the first eight pages. To find anything on the missing mascots, they had to turn to page twelve.

"Holly cow," Nellie said, sipping on her soda. "They've upped the reward to a thousand dollars. Maybe we can take them down and turn them in. You know, say we found them in a field or something."

"The FBI guy's seen us. He'll be suspicious." Brandy folded her paper backwards and halved it length wise to better read the article that had caught her attention. "Listen to this: A command center has been established at the Sheraton Hotel and Volunteers from all over the state, as well as past graduates from as far away as Sand Diego and Chicago, have been arriving by the dozens to look for the missing mascots. 'Sprocket was more than just a goat,' says old Sacred Heart graduate, Donald Rothe, with tears in his yes. 'I just won't be able to rest until he's back in his pen, safe and sound.'" Brandy shook her head. "People are absolutely crazy."

"We are so going to get caught," Nellie predicted glumly.

"I refuse to get caught," Brandy said, switching to a different article.

"They're going to line us up in front of the Sheraton and stone us. They'll carve, 'It was a only a prank' on our headstones."

"Don't be silly," Brandy said, turning the page. She sighed as she continued to read, but after a few seconds raised her head. She cocked an ear. "Do you hear that?"

Nellie raised her head. "What?"

"Listen."

They sat as still as statues, trying to listen above and beyond the constant buzz of the cafeteria conversation all around them, until gradually growing loud, a low, rhythmic whomping noise began to be heard. The talking ceased all around them as the beating noise grew steadily louder, and the tables began to shake with the vibration that accompanied the increasing sound.

Brandy and Nellie looked at one another, and then turned their heads towards the window. They ducked down in their seats, staring skyward just as the clearly marked police helicopter passed overhead. It flew to the end of the school grounds, then turned back around to make another pass. As it vanished over the building's roof and the sound gradually receded into nothing, Brandy and Nellie sat back up again. All was quiet in the cafeteria for almost a minute, before excitement burst through the room on a loud wave of chatter.

"I hear crucifixion is still relatively popular in some third world countries," Brandy finally said.

"We did get the roof totally cleaned off again, didn't we?" Nellie asked her.

"It's too late now, if we didn't." Brandy blinked at her twice.

"There's no way we'll ever be able to return Sprocket now," Nellie moaned. "We're busted. We may as well give ourselves up and hope nobody from Sacred Heart sits on the jury."

"There's no way we'll ever be able to return Sprocket now," Nellie moaned. "We're busted. We may as well give ourselves up."

"Don't be so pessimistic," Brandy said, still reading the article. "I'll think of something."

"No. Forget it. We're busted. We're going to jail for sure."

"Maybe. But look on the bright side. Jail's probably the safest place for us, once this Toodles thing blows up in our faces."

Nellie groaned and flopped her head down on her arms beside her lunch.

Brandy put the paper down. "Look. Don't worry, I'll come up with something. In the meantime, I know what will make you feel better."

Nellie lifted her head, unenthusiastically. "What?"

Brandy made herself smile. She even managed to make it look a little devious, too.

"What?" Nellie said again, even more guardedly than before.

"Do you think Gordon could help us out one more time?"

"No," Nellie said. "No more pranks."

"Just one last one," Brandy assured her. "This is it; the Big One."

"You've lost your mind!" Nellie whispered and yet shouted at once. "The last two are on the verge of exploding wide open—right in our faces, I might add—and you want to pull another one?"

"This one is foolproof."

"Don't say that to me."

"We won't get caught."

"Don't say that either! You jinx us every time you do!"

"It'll make our names for all eternity," Brandy told her.

"So will the reporters and the thousands of Sprocket volunteer searchers waiting to crucify us the instant we're found out! Oh, sweet Mary and Jospeh!" Nellie flopped her head down on her arms, shook it and then reluctantly pushed herself upright again. "Okay. But this is the absolute last prank I'm playing this year. What's the plan?"

* * * *

Nellie was waiting for Brandy the next morning standing just outside of Peter Newman's science class. "Ready?" she asked.

"Oh, yeah," Brandy answered, popping a couple of No-Doze pills into her mouth. She then passed the bottle along with some Visine to Nellie. "Can't go in there looking like we were awake all night and up to no good."

"Nope," her friend agreed, and pulled a t-shirt and cap out of her bookbag, handing them to Brandy. "Here you go."

"What's this?" "I was waylaid this morning by the first meeting of the official 'I Love Toodles' fan club."

"You're kidding?" Brandy looked down at Nellie's chest when the other girl opened her jacket to show off the 'I Love Mr. Toodles' T shirt she was wearing, complete with a bright red heart situated right smack between her breasts.. Brandy's jaw dropped and she stared before her head fell back on drooping shoulders and she half-groaned and half-wailed a long, drawn-out, "Noooooooo!"

"The t-shirts come with the economically priced membership fee of nine dollars and ninety-five cents. It's two bucks more if you want the matching ball cap. Here."

Brandy bounced. "I don't want to wear it!"

"Stop whining and put it on," Nellie said, unsympathetically. "We can't very well be the only two people on campus, who don't anxiously desire to sell our first born children for the privilege of wearing Toodles paraphernalia on our bodies."

Tsking with disgust, Brandy put the ball cap on, but the t-shirt she wadded up and stuffed way down into the bottom of her book bag. "This is getting way out of control."

"And whose fault is that," Nellie countered, taking a couple of the No-Doze pills herself. "I'll let you in on a secret. It wasn't me, Miss We've-Got-To-Do-Something-So-Our-Names-Don't-Pass-Into-The-Halls-Of-Obscurity."

"That's not what I said."

"Close enough." Nellie pushed open the science room door and they went in to take their seats.

"Good morning," Peter greeted them, barely glancing up from the stack of papers he was shuffling on his desk.

"Morning," Nellie replied.

Peter raised his head to look at Brandy when she didn't return his greeting. "You look tired," he said, as she took her seat directly in front of him.

"I'm sure you're not so old that you can't recall your own school days," Brandy told him. "Up all night."

"Raising hell," he supplied.

"Studying," she corrected, blinking her eyes with Bambi-like innocence.

His eyes narrowed; both she and Nellie smiled back. Reaching down, he opened his bottom desk drawer and took out the jar of rulers. He set it down again on the middle of his day planner. "Just in case," he told them.

Both girls stopped smiling.

"I have never met a more spank-happy teacher," Brandy grumbled.

"A pity, too," Peter told her. "Since I'm certain you'd be a much more well-behaved student right now if you had."

The girls slouched down into their seats, eyeing the rulers with equal expressions of dislike.

"He's going to get his," Brandy muttered, low enough so only Nellie could hear.

"Wait for it," Nellie muttered back, and they both surreptitiously checked their watches.

They waited with the patience of saints as the other students filed into the room and class finally started. They continued to wait while Peter began the day's lesson by outlining the proper methods of frog dissection using the projector and blackboard, and one minute slowly ticked into the next until a full fifteen had passed.

Brandy discretely tipped her wrist to study her watch again, the slightest of smiles tilting up the corners of her mouth. In the softest of whispers, she counted down, "Five ... four ... three ... two ... one..."

They waited, and nothing happened.

"One..." Brandy whispered again, stubbornly resisting the urge to look back over her shoulder at the classroom door, which hadn't opened. A few seconds later, she mouthed, "Ooonnnneeeee..."

"He doesn't wear a watch," Nellie finally whispered back.

The classroom door opened and Gordon, dressed in a three piece suit and a slate grey overcoat, poked his head inside. Both girls joined the rest of the students in looking back at him. Even Peter glanced up from his projector, his brows quirked slightly at the interruption.

"Excuse me," Gordon said. It must have taken all week, but he'd managed to grow a mustache and beard, which were both neatly trimmed into a goatee that framed his handsome mouth. Together with the suit, it made him look at least twenty-five. "I'm looking for a—" he glanced down at a card in his hand, "—a Peter Newman."

Peter stood up off his stool, shutting the projector off. "That's me. How can I help you?"

"Ah!" Smiling, Gordon came into the room. He strolled down the aisle of students and stuck out his hand to shake Peter's. "Trevor Walsh. I'm with Fish and Game."

"Fish and Game?" Peter echoed.

"Yes." Gordon whipped out his wallet and flashed his badge, snapping his wallet closed again even as Peter leaned

in for a closer look. "I'm here to see the frogs you're planning to dissect."

Peter straightened up again, arching both eyebrows in surprise. "Uh ... okay."

He stared for a moment, then turned and pulled his keys out of his pocket to unlock the supplies cabinet. He stepped back as he opened the doors and Gordon took his place. He picked up one of the jars and held it up to the light. And then he swore.

"What?" Peter asked.

Gordon swore again, even louder than before. "I was hoping my information was wrong."

"Mister Walsh, please. This is a Catholic school."

"And this," Gordon stated, turning around and holding the jar out to Peter, "is a Blue-Tipped Three-Toed Spiny Sugar-Leaf-Eating Amphibious from South Brazil."

Peter blinked at the jar. "A what?"

In an increasingly irate tone, Gordon slowly repeated, "A Blue-Tipped, Three-Toed, Spiny, Sugar-Leaf-Eating Amphibious hailing from South Brazil. Or, as we in the business like to call it, the BTTTSSLEASB, for short. It's one of the most endangered species of amphibian this side of extinction. There are, in fact, only sixty specimens still living in all the known world." He spun around to glare into the supplies cabinet, gesturing to the rows of jars stacked on the shelves, each with a blue-tipped frog floating lifelessly in formaldehyde. "Congratulations," he said tonelessly. "Fifty-seven of them seem to be here in this room."

It was all Brandy and Nellie could do not to burst into peals of laughter as Peter paled and he swallowed hard. "I-I-I'm sorry. I-I didn't know. I-I-I—"

"Where did you get the frogs?"

"They were delivered."

Under her desk, Brandy began pinching her legs with both hands just to keep a betraying smile from crossing her face. By the motion of Nellie's jaw, she could tell her friend was struggling to do the same by biting down on her tongue.

"By who?" Gordon demanded.

"A small operation—"

"So you admit it was an operation!"

"No, no! It's a small business! I found it on the Internet: Better Living Through Science, or something like that!"

"Dot com?" Gordon snapped.

"I don't know! I don't remember! Carlos, I think that was the name on the receipt."

"I should have known!" Gordon began to pace up and down between Peter and the class. "Carlos the Frog Jackal. I've long suspected he was back in the States."

"Frog Jackal?"

Gordon abruptly stopped pacing. "I'm going to have to call this in." He held up the jar and its frog as he said, "I'll be taking this one with me. An agent will have to come back for the rest."

Gordon's performance deserved a standing ovation. And as he headed for the door, if only it didn't stand to give her away, Brandy would have loved to have given him one. But

instead, Nellie's boyfriend disappeared out into the hall, leaving behind a totally silent class.

Peter sank into his chair behind his desk. "Oh my God," he said under his breath and buried his face in his hands.

The classroom door swung back open and Gordon poked his head inside. "Oh and, Mr. Newman?"

Looking up, Peter blinked at him. "Yes?"

"If I were you, I wouldn't make any travel plans any time soon." Gordon nodded once, and then he was gone.

For the longest time, the classroom was dead quiet and nobody moved. Then, as the whispers began in the very back of the room, Peter crossed his arms on his desk and lay his head down on them. Nellie leaned over and very softly whispered in Brandy's ear, "God, I love my boyfriend."

Peter covered his head with both arms and Brandy lost her composure to a truly wicked smile.

* * * *

Meeting up at the flag pole after school, Brandy and Nellie looked at one another with matching smiles before each burst into peals of laughter.

"You have the genius of a master criminal mind," Nellie said, holding up her hand. They twiddled their fingers in a victorious version of their special handshake and then started back towards their dorms.

"I'll do you one better," Brandy told her. "I know how we can return Sprocket and Annie without getting caught."

Nellie looked at her hopefully. "Yeah? How?"

"We've been trying to go about it the wrong way. Our mind set has been to return them to their pens, where everybody's been focusing their attention."

"And where we'd surely be caught," Nellie added.

"Exactly. What we need to do is return them where nobody is looking."

Nellie quirked an eyebrow. "Which is where?"

"We'll leave them on the doorstep of the Green Hill Humane Society."

"They've got security cameras."

"Ah," Brandy smiled, holding one finger aloft meaningfully. "But they don't have a security guard. In the morning, the volunteers will find Sprocket and Annie on their doorstep, and be in possession of nothing more incriminating—and more importantly, nothing for identifying—than a tape of two mysterious figures dressed all in black and wearing ski masks. It's foolproof."

"Then I'm your fool," Nellie said cheerfully.

"Synchronize your watches," Brandy said, checking her own. "At exactly Oh-hours and one minute, Operation Drop-Off will be underway."

"Cool." Nellie checked her watch. "That'll give me time to study for my history test tomorrow."

They said goodbye and started to go their separate ways, but Brandy stopped. "Would you look at that?"

"What?" Nellie followed the direction Brandy pointed, in time to see, along the far and secluded side of the main school building, three reams of paper being chucked out an open window. "Isn't that the school news room?"

"Well, well," Brandy murmured, as a familiar looking boy climbed out the window and into the bushes.

"Hey, isn't that the kid who put a spider in Sister Agatha's desk?"

"Yup."

"Wonder what he's up to."

Brandy watched as the boy gathered the reams into his book bag, slung it over his shoulder and, looking furtively around, headed off for the boys' dormitories. "So long as he's not still sneaking around at midnight, I really don't care."

They continued to stare after him until he rounded the side of the school and vanished from sight.

Brandy shook her head. "Amateur."

"In broad daylight, too," Nellie agreed. "Reminds me of us when we were young."

Smirking, Brandy extended her hand and they twiddled their fingers together again. "I'll have some Diet Coke's ready in my dorm for afterwards. We'll drink to getting out of trouble."

"It's a date," Nellie said, and they went their separate ways.

* * * *

Brandy was lying on her stomach and working on her homework when Nellie flung open the door without knocking. She spilled, panting into the room.

"I hate math," Brandy said, without looking up. "Who the hell cares what 'a' and 'y' are? I mean, if both vowels were trains and they were headed on a collision course straight for

one another, and if one was chalk full of orphans, I might be able to dredge up a smidgen of concern. But as it is ... do I care how fast they're going? Mm, I think not. I don't know why we have to know this stuff anyway. It's not like I ever plan to get a job working for Nasa."

"We are utterly screwed," Nellie interrupted.

Brandy looked up from her books, took in Nellie's pale face and wide panicked eyes and sat up on the bed. "What's wrong?"

Nellie held up both hands, patting at the air. "What do you want first: the good news, the sorta good news, or the really bad, oh my God, we are so dead news?"

Brandy sighed. "I could use some good news. Lay it on me."

"We don't have to panic anymore. I found the snake."

Brandy blinked twice. "I didn't know Anne got out of her bathtub." Cautiously, she asked, "What's the sorta good news?"

"We won't need to buy any more goat food or scoop the roof ever again. In fact, I'm pretty sure we're off the hook now about the whole Sprocket thing entirely."

Without expression, Brandy got out of bed. "What's the bad news?"

"We won't need to buy any more snake food, either. At least not for a while. Annie had Sprocket for supper, and I don't mean they were sitting at the same table. She ate him all the way up to the leash!"

"Oh my God!" Scrambling for her shoes, Brandy cried, "Are you sure?"

"Hm," Nellie said. "Annie's out of her tub, I can't find Sprocket anywhere, and the snake has a leash hanging out of her mouth and a really, really big lump in the middle of her. To me, that says the anaconda helped herself to dinner."

"We've got to get Sprocket out of there!" Brandy darted past her friend and headed for the stairs.

"What?!" Nellie hurried after her. "How are we supposed to do that? Wrap our arms around a fifteen foot anaconda and give it a snaky version of the Heimlich?"

"You grab the tail. I'll grab the leash and we'll both pull in opposite directions."

Nellie caught Brandy's arm, drawing her up short at the dormitory's entrance. "Have you lost your mind?"

"How can we return Sprocket if he's being slowly digested?" Brandy snapped back.

"Hey, guys!" came from the stairs and the girls turned to see Big Mouth Bianca jogging down to meet them. "Are you going to the Midnight Meeting, too?"

"What Midnight Meeting?" Brandy asked.

"Linda's going to tell us how Mr. Toodles took her virginity." Bianca sighed dreamily. "He's such a man's man. Linda says he's hung like a—"

Her eyebrows came crashing down over her eyes and Brandy snapped, "Linda needs help!" She slammed out of the dormitory.

Nellie looked from Brandy's retreating back to where Bianca stood in shocked disgruntlement. She thumbed after Brandy. "Mr. Toodles envy," she said. "Give me all the juicy details when I get back, okay?"

The Great Prank
by Maren Smith

Bianca grinned and saluted, and Nellie hurried after Brandy.

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CHAPTER EIGHT

"Uh, yes, hello?" Brandy sat cross-legged on her bed, the phone book open in her lap, tapping the eraser end of her pencil rapidly against the yellow pages. "Is this Yancey's Goat Farm? ... Great, you wouldn't happen to have any pygmy goats for sale, would you?" She sat up a little straighter and threw her pencil at Nellie's hunched back.

Nellie promptly threw it back at her. "Don't bother me, I'm making out my last will."

"Really? You've got pygmies?" Brandy said, waving Nellie over. "Do you have any males you could sell me? ... Are any of them white ones, with little horns about an inch or so long? ... Oh man, you're saving my bacon! ... Uh, why? ... Uh, n-no reason ... I really like white pygmy goats, I mean is that such a crime? ... No, I'm not in high school." She crossed her fingers against the lie. "Yeah, I, uh, graduated from college, uh, two, three years ago. Why do you ask? ... Sprocket? ... Oh yeah, that Sprocket ... No, no, I sort of forgot that's all ... You're certainly right there, sir. Stealing goats is a definitely a crime ... Well, but that doesn't really pertain to me, though ... Well, I know you don't know that, but ... Yeah, but you've got to trust somebody sometime, don't you?" Her shoulders drooped again. "You won't sell me the goat? ... I promise he'll be well taken care of. He'll never want for anything in all his goaty life ... Hello? ... H-hello? He hung up on me," she said, dropping the phone into her lap. "He hung up! I can't believe that! People are so rude these days."

"So, do you want my X-Men comic book collection or my Everquest CDs?" Nellie asked, turning her attention back to her will.

"Neither, there is a ray of light at the end of our bleak little tunnel. Let's go!" Brandy tore the page out of the phone book, folding it several times before shoving it into her back jean's pocket. She climbed off the bed.

"Where are we going?" Nellie asked, and stood up as well.

"To get a goat. How much money do you have on you?"

"Ten bucks. I thought he wasn't going to sell us one."

"Sometimes it's better to ask forgiveness, than to get permission. Certain it's a heck of a lot easier. This," Brandy said, laying a hand on her best friend's shoulder. "This is one of those times." She went to her desk to fish her wallet out of the top drawer. "How much do goats go for? Is twenty going to be enough? Thirty maybe?" She pulled out two crumpled bills and looked at them. "Better make it forty, just in case."

"We really are going to go to jail over this, aren't we?"

"Do you still remember how to hot-wire a car?"

Groaning, Nellie's head flopped back on her shoulders.

"Whose car?"

"Well, the goat farm is clear out on the McKenzie Highway. That's a little too far to walk. We could take the bus, but I'm not sure if it runs all the way out there, especially not at this time of night. And I'm pretty sure people will notice us if we bring a goat onboard a public transport anyway."

"Whose car?" Nellie asked again, deadpan.

Brandy straightened a little and grinned. "Who else's? Hey, if we're going to steal a goat, we may as well do it in style!"

Nellie groaned again, but she fell into step behind Brandy and walked with her to the door.

"You know, you could leave me your Orlando Bloom poster," Brandy said, as they left the room.

"Keep your grubby mitts off my Legolas. When they kill us over this, I have every intention of being buried with him."

* * * *

Peter was slouched on his sofa, his feet propped up on the coffee table, staring at a brand new and freshly opened bottle of tequila. He didn't drink, but this was starting to seem like a good time to start.

He reached over to pick up that morning's copy of the Register Guard. He took a deep breath, gearing himself up to look at the front page. Closing his eyes first, Peter then looked. "Oh God," he groaned again, and immediately dropped the paper to cover his face with both hands. His picture was there, plastered under the huge bold print of the leading story: Local Teacher Wipes Out Rare Frog Species.

Not only did the newspaper list his full name and the name of the school—an act that was paramount to signing his death warrant, especially here in Eugene, the Nazi Environmentalist's Capital of the World, the only place on Earth where tree huggers were so rabid that they would chain themselves to dead trees in order to keep the state from cutting them down, and then, when one tree had the unmitigated gall to fall over and crush an erstwhile protector, turn around and sue the local government for not having

removed it earlier—but at the end of the article were the dreaded words, 'Officials are still investigating.'

There were a hundred and forty-seven messages blinking on his answering machine, and not a one of them was from his mom, just calling to see how he was doing. Or at least he assumed she hadn't. Admittedly, he'd only listened to the first fifteen before shutting his answering machine off and unplugging his phone. But if she had called, he wasn't in the mood to wade through the expletives and death threats just to hear the sweet sound of her motherly voice.

Drawing a deep breath, Peter rubbed his face and stared at the tequila again. "I'm going to get fired," he muttered under his breath. So much for his dreams of pursuing a life-fulling occupation as a teacher. There wasn't a school anywhere in the country that would be willing to touch him now. With or without the proverbial ten-foot cattle prod.

He sighed again. Maybe McDonald's was hiring.

Reaching over to pick up the bottle, he poured himself a small shot. He shook his head forlornly. "I'm totally screwed."

Raising the glass, he was about to take his first sip towards a good, mind-numbing career in alcoholism when he heard a sound coming from the staff parking lot. He got up and went to the window, parting the blinds with two fingers to discretely peek out into the darkness. Although difficult to see, he could just barely make out two shadowy shapes weaving through the teachers' cars until they came to his.

Please no sugar in the gas tank, he barely had time to think, but the two shapes didn't linger at the back of the car. Instead they tiptoed to the driver's door. No angry

environmentalists tonight. Instead, he was being paid a visit by a couple of common, everyday car thieves.

"Ha!" he muttered under his breath. "It's locked, and I've got the boot on the steering wheel!"

A split second later, they had the door open and in the glow of the courtesy light, he recognized Nellie and Brandy. He might have known.

Brandy crawled in first, tossing the length of coat hanger that she'd used to jimmy the lock into the backseat before scooting over to the passenger side. While she began to energetically saw through the anti-theft device, Nellie ducked under the dash to check out the wiring.

"Why those devious little hoydens!" Peter stared in opened mouthed shock as Nellie commenced to hot-wiring his car. "Oh no you don't!"

He bolted for his front door, throwing it open with a bang and racing down the long hall. Tearing out of the teachers' apartment building, he leapt over a small shrub and promptly tripped over a concrete parking space buffer, spilling himself into a heap on the asphalt.

"Oh shit!" he heard Brandy say as he picked himself up again. "Drive!"

His hands and knees both stung, and his first few steps were taken with a Quasimodo-ish limp, but he kept going. His arms and legs began to pump as he picked up speed.

"Drive!" Brandy shrieked, louder.

"I'm driving! I'm driving!" Nellie shouted back, and the engine of his beloved car thundered to life.

Peter broke through the row of cars that separated him from them and barely missed being hit by his own as Nellie peeled out of his parking space as if she were a racer in the Indy Five Hundred try-outs. Wheels spinning and squealing at ear-piercing decibels, his car lurched for the exit as if the ghost of Dale Earnhart were behind the steering column.

Because the layout of the parking lot required St. Walburga's teachers to drive through the visitors' section, his junior grand felony auto thieves had to take the long way around to the main road, their only avenue of escape. Peter didn't have that same handicap.

With hands and knees both smarting from his fall, he dodged back through the rows of cars and cut across the manicured lawn. Shoes pounding through the wet grass, he ran for the road, hopped over St. Walburga's welcome sign and beat his own car to the end of the driveway by mere seconds.

Nellie slammed on the brakes when he planted himself directly in the middle of their escape path. She stared at him.

Panting, he glared heavily back at her.

"Don't stop!" Brandy said from the passenger seat. "He'll move out of the way!"

"What if he won't?"

"Hit him!"

Nellie jerked around in her seat to stare at her; Peter's eyes narrowed. Brandy narrowed hers right back at him.

Pointing a warning finger at Nellie, Peter threatened her without words not to dare moving so much as an inch. Slowly, he stalked his car.

"Uh oh," Nellie quavered. "He's coming over here."

"I can see that," Brandy frowned.

"He's getting on the hood!" Nellie squeaked.

"I don't need a narrative play-by-play!"

Crawling up to the windshield, Peter glared at them through the glass. "Put the top down," he ordered.

Brandy and Nellie looked at one another.

"You should have hit him," Brandy muttered under her breath, and the two girls reluctantly lowered the convertible's top.

Climbing over the top, Peter stepped into the backseat and sat down. He commended himself on not losing his temper. He didn't yell or turn them across his knee, blistering their mischievous hides the way he so badly wanted to—first Brandy and then Nellie and then Brandy again, since he was pretty sure this was all her idea. He didn't even threaten them. Instead, all he did was lay his arms across the shoulder-rests of their seats, bringing them closer together and closer to him.

"Where," he asked, still commending himself on his outward calm, "are we going?"

They looked at one another again.

"We promise to be back in about an hour," Brandy told him. "You can wait for us by the girls' dorms if you want to."

"We'll take really good care of your car," Nellie added hopefully. "I'm a very conscientious driver. I only had six speeding tickets last year."

"If I don't go," Peter said, "neither does my car."

Brandy snorted, turning her head to look out the window.
"You have to sleep some time."

"So do you. How would you like to do your sleeping on your stomach because a certain aspect of your anatomy can't bear to be touched, not even by the sheets?"

She frowned and squirmed slightly in the seat, but she didn't say thing.

"Where," Peter said again, "are we going?"

"The McKenzie Highway," Nellie finally offered.

"Why?" When the girls only exchanged another calculating look, he sighed. "You may as well tell me now. I'm sitting behind you both, so the likelihood of my being clubbed over the head and stuffed into the trunk are higher than either of you can calculate. And I should know, I've seen your math grades."

"All right, fine." Brandy reluctantly glanced back at him over one shoulder. "What do you know about goats?"

Peter blinked at her. "Please tell me that the two of you are sneaking out in the middle of the night because you want to help in the search for Sprocket the goat."

They looked at one another again.

"Yeah, okay," Brandy finally said. "We can do that."

"That's almost even true," Nellie added.

Groaning, Peter let go of them and leaned back against the seat. He covered his face with both hands. "I should have known. When the goat turned up missing, I should have known the two of you would have had something to do with it."

"Yes, you should have," Brandy readily agreed. "Which makes all of this your fault. But don't worry. Just to show you that we don't have any hard feelings, Nellie and I are going to help get you out of trouble."

Parting his fingers, he glared at the back of her head, and his palm began to itch.

* * * *

"Watch this," Brandy said as she climbed over the wooden rail fence. "This is funnier than hell."

She stood on the second to the highest rail, put one foot on the bar that crossed the chain-link fence, which kept the goats securely penned, crouched and then spread her arms as she jumped down into the middle of the herd, yelling, "Budda budda budda!"

Thirty goats panicked one to two steps in every direction before at least twenty of the animals suddenly stiffened and fell over onto their sides.

"Oh my God!" Nellie exclaimed. "You've killed half the herd!"

"Nah," Brandy laughed. "They just fainted."

"Well, hell! So would I if somebody did that to me!"

Standing in a semi-circle of fallen white goats, Brandy gestured to them. "Which one do you think I should grab?"

Nellie climbed to the top of the wooden fence and then hopped over the chain-link fence as well. "I don't know. Do any look more Sprocket-ish than the rest?"

Avoiding a pile of goat poop, Brandy stepped over one animal that looked smaller than the rest and reached down to

grab another by the rear hoof. She checked the sex. "This one's male. I say we take him."

"Works for me," Nellie said.

Waiting on the other side of the fence, not far from his idling car, Peter growled. "I can't believe I'm doing this."

"Yeah well, neither can we," Brandy muttered under her breath. She reached down to lift the frozen-in-fear goat by its back hooves.

"Fainting them first does make them easier to kid-nap," Nellie offered with a wry grin that made Brandy wince.

"Was that a pun?"

Her grin widened.

Unimpressed, Brandy snapped her fingers and pointed to the animal's head. "Just grab your end, Miss Punster. One ... two ... three ... heave!" With Nellie on the front legs and Brandy on the rear, they struggled to get the pygmy goat off the ground.

"Heavy little bugger, isn't he?" Nellie huffed as they shuffled him towards the fence, stepping over goat bodies as they went.

"Neither of you is going to sit for a year," Peter grumbled, and reached over the fence rails to take the animal from them. "You've made me into a thief. I can't believe I'm stealing a goat. I've never stolen anything before in my life. What the hell am I doing here?"

"Relax," Brandy said, pulling forty dollars from her pocket. "Here, see? I'm pinning the money to the fence right here. It's not really stealing if you pay for it."

Peter gave her a withering look. "It is stealing," he corrected, "whether you pay for it or not, unless the goat farmer says you can have the goat."

"I'll write him a thank you note."

He frowned even more fiercely. "Did you just deliberately miss the point?"

"Are you out of your mind?" Nellie countered, just as hotly. "Forensics, remember? Sending a note will leave all sorts of DNA evidence for that creepy FBI guy to follow: finger prints, a stray hair, saliva from licking the envelope or stamp, hand writing samples. They can sniff the paper and ink and tell exactly which store you bought it from. I saw '*Hannibal*'. I know how it works!"

"Relax," Brandy said as she climbed back over the two fences. "I was going to write it in gravel by the road. I'd like to see them fingerprint a stick."

"They might still be able to do it," Nellie said skeptically. Behind her, the goats were beginning to get back to their feet, none of them seeming any worse for their hair-raising experience. Some had even lowered their tiny-horned heads and were making threatening two and three step charges at the fence. She quickly scaled the chain-link and hopped safely down on the other side of it.

Hands on her slender hips, shaking her head, Brandy asked, "Will it make you feel better if I take the stick with me?"

"Yes."

"You're hopeless."

"Not for a year," Peter growled at them again. "I'm going to more than make sure that neither of you sits for a year!"

He turned around and carried the goat to the car. Two steps shy of the rear door, however, he stopped. "Do you two have any idea what sharp, little goat hooves can do to a genuine leather seat?"

"Oh, quit your whining and stick him in the silly car," Brandy said unsympathetically.

He gave her another dirty look and juggled the weight of the goat into one arm so he could wrestle the door open. Climbing into the back, he held the newly appointed Sprocket on his lap to keep his upholstery from being ruined. "If he pees in my car or leaves any little presents, I'm holding you personally responsible."

Nellie closed the door for him, and the two girls smirked at one another before she slipped into the driver's seat again.

Finding a suitable stick, Brandy wrote, "Thanks for the goat!" in the roadside gravel. When she too climbed into the car, she still had the stick with her.

"A memento of the night's work?" Nellie asked.

"Good idea," Peter grumbled from behind them. "To get spanked with your own implement in crime ought to make a long and lasting impression on you both."

The leather seats creaked as they turned to glance back at him. Inside the dark interior of the Austin-Healey, what moonlight there was only served to illuminate his scowling visage with ghostly paleness.

"Actually," Brandy said, "I planned to throw this out once we get down the road away. Forensics or not, nobody's going to comb the woods for a stick."

Blinking at Peter, Nellie swivelled back around to face forward again. "Good idea," she said meekly.

"Suit yourselves," he said. "The willow by the corner of the teachers' apartments will have more slender, whippier branches anyway. You can each cut your own." It became very, very quiet between them, which made his ominously growled, "Not for a year," nerve-wrackingly easy to hear.

Brandy turned to Nellie, who had her hand on the parking brake, but hadn't yet lowered it. "Let's go," she said softly.

"Yes," Peter intoned dryly. "The sooner we get the goat back to North Trenton High School, the faster we can get resolve more important matters to my satisfaction."

Nellie dropped the parking brake and obligingly shifted into first gear. "We're not taking the goat back just yet."

"Why not?" The question came out sharper than Peter really intended, but the goat was beginning to wake up in his lap. No sooner did it raise its head, than it lipped the button off the front of Peter's white work shirt and swallowed it. "Oh for the love of—"

"We have to go back to the Dorms and get Sprocket's blankets and Annie," Brandy said.

"Annie?" Peter repeated slowly. "As in, Annie the anaconda, Annie?" His tone began to rise. "You took both mascots?!"

Brandy turned to look out the window. "What can I say? We were on a roll."

"I'll roll you," Peter muttered, grabbing the goat's neck and hugging it to his chest to keep the best from chewing on the back of the driver's head guard. "Tell me, are you planning any other great kidnappings before the end of the year? The President. The Pope? Or Mr. Toodles, perchance?"

Brandy snorted. "Don't be silly. While we could probably get away with the Pope," a corner of her mouth turned wryly upward, "Mr. Toodles is too high of a media figure."

"I'm not kidding," Peter said hotly. "I swear, if one thing—just one—goes wrong with that man's visit, you can bet I'll know who to hold responsible!"

"Yeah. I know."

Peter looked on suspiciously, but when neither girl said anything more, he kept his own mouth shut. All the way back to St. Walburga's, where he walked down into the basement of Nellie's dorm and got his first look at the three hundred pound relative of the python family.

"Good night, nurse!" he exclaimed. "How sure are you that that's Sprocket in there? Maybe the school's missing a student. Has anyone seen Bianca lately?"

"Just grab the snake." Brandy held the sack while he and Nellie muscled the anaconda into it. But it took all three of them to get it back up the stairs and into the backseat of the car.

The goat took one sniff at the burlap sack, and it tried to make his escape over the driver's seat and out one of the front doors.

Nellie jumped in front of him, clapping her hands hard together and shouting a deep, "Boo!"

The goat obligingly stiffened and fell onto its side again. She grinned. "You're right. That was fun."

Peter got into the backseat, settling uneasily against the slightly shifting burlap sack. As the girls passed the goat back to him, he asked, "Annie can't bite me through the burlap, can she?"

Brandy smiled. "Just try not to touch her."

"She takes up nearly the entire seat!" Peter snapped. "How can I not touch her?"

"Sucks to be you, doesn't it?" Still smiling, she closed the door. He could hear her chuckling under her breath as she rounded the back of the car and got into the passenger seat.

After a moment of stunned silence, Peter began to laugh. The sound of it, however, was a good deal less cheerful than hers was.

They tied Annie the anaconda, as well as the newly acquired and attired Sprocket the Goat, decked out in all his blue and gold school-spirit finery, inside the front gate of the Greene Hill Humane Society.

"I smell like a goat," Peter grumbled as they climbed back in his car. He leaned over and sniffed at the leather of the seat beside him. "Ugh! And the car smells like snake! Are we done yet?"

"Yes," Brandy said. She heaved a satisfied sigh. "Finally, we are done."

"Thank God," Nellie added.

Brandy grinned at her. "Yeah, I'm a little surprised that we lived through this prank myself."

"Only because I haven't got you both home yet," Peter stated darkly. Settling into the backseat, he addressed the driver, "Nellie, let's go."

All the way back to St. Walburga's Peter sat glaring at the backs of their heads, and nobody said a word. Brandy and Nellie didn't even talk amongst themselves. Considering how Nellie would occasionally squirm in place, even when she wasn't shifting gears, it made him wonder if maybe her bottom wasn't tingling with dreaded anticipation over the punishment to come.

Brandy, on the other hand, remained slumped in the passenger seat, her arms folded across her chest, a very defiant set to her shoulders as she stared outside.

Peter shook his head. He was fairly sure he knew at least one surefire way to cure her of all that angry defiance ... even if only temporarily. His palm began to itch. Oh yeah, he was going to take care of it all right.

Or at least so he thought, right up until they drove into St. Walburga's entrance way for the second time that night and caught sight of the half-dozen police cars that were clogging the teachers' parking lot. Uniformed officers had the staff apartments completely surrounded. And more specifically, they had Peter's apartment completely surrounded.

"What the—" At the last minute, he remembered the girls and somehow managed to censor himself.

Naturally, Brandy had no such restraint. "Fuck."

Frowning, Peter quickly reached over the seat and gently rapped the back of her head with two knuckles. "If I can refrain from saying that, so can you!"

Nellie stopped the car in the mouth of the driveway, and they all three sat staring at the flashing red and blue lights.

"What's going on?"

"I expect they're here to arrest the nefarious frog slayer of Eugene, Oregon," Peter muttered.

Both Brandy and Nellie whipped around in their seats and stared at him open-mouthed. "What?"

"Why?" Nellie added. "I-I mean, how do they even know about it?"

"I expect they either read about the incident in the newspaper—"

"The newspaper?" the girls gasped simultaneously.

"Or," he continued doggedly, "their friend at Fish and Game probably told them."

"He wouldn't dare!" Nellie said hotly, and then blanched when his eyes snapped back to her, first with surprise and then suspicion.

"And why is that exactly?"

"I ... ba ... uh..." Nellie stammered, blinking rapidly. "W-wouldn't he, uh, want t-to keep all of that information classified ... or, or in house?" She gave Brandy a pleading look.

"Yeah," Brandy dutifully added. "You figure he'd want the credit of busting you himself."

Nellie surreptitiously smacked her arm, but Peter heard the crisp slap of the exchange and saw both girls flinch slightly. His eyes narrowed even more.

"Why would they want you anyway?" Brandy said.

"Wouldn't they go after Carlos the Frog Jackal? He's the one who sold you the frogs in the first place."

"Ignorance is not an excuse in the eyes of the law," Peter said.

"Yes, but," Brandy spread her hands helplessly. "Who's to say you're being arrested at all? Maybe they only want to ask you some standard questions."

"They don't send six police squad cars with lights flashing to ask you anything."

"There's a SWAT truck by the flag pole," Nellie suddenly noted.

"There sure don't send them to ask questions," Peter said, ducking down in the seat to see the vehicle for himself.

"They woke up the Penguin," Nellie said softly, watching as a group of men in blue and the principal in her long white nightgown came out of the apartments.

"I think they just saw us," Brandy added.

Peter sighed, and then he got out of the car.

"Mr. Newman," Nellie called out after him, and he paused at the driver's side window. She bit her bottom lip as she met his gaze. "We could make a run for it. This is an Austin-Healey 100M, and I honestly am a good driver. We can outdistance the police. It's only six hours or so to the border."

Brandy brightened. "Yeah! We'll take you to Mexico. You could live like a king on what our allowances would bring you in pesos!"

"Canada would be quicker," Nellie told her.

"But not as lucrative."

Peter bent down to stare at them both through the driver's side window, a pained expression on his face. Then his mouth twisted into a wry half-smile. "I know this is a foreign alien concept for the two of you to try wrapping your devious minds around, but, please, just this once, be good."

He patted the car door with his hand and then turned and walked across the lawn. He met the officers halfway, raising his hands into the air and dropping down to lie in the grass on his stomach when the SWAT team came out him with guns raised. He was taken into custody and his hands cuffed behind him.

Sister Mary Magdalene trailed behind the officers as they led Peter away, calling out, "Don't worry, Mr. Newman. The Church has some very good lawyers. I'll place a call first thing in the morning!"

She stood in the dewy grass, wringing her wrinkled hands as he was helped into the back of a police car. Then, lifting her eyes to the starry heavens and with a slight steepling of her fingers, she said, "Please, Lord, don't let Mr. Toodles hear about any of this!"

"This isn't right," Brandy said under her breath.

"We've got to stop this," Nellie added. "But how?"

Finishing her prayer, the Penguin then leveled a very stern glare at the two girls. "Nellie, Brandy! You put that vehicle back wherever you found it and get back to your dormitories! Lights' Out was over an hour ago!" Frowning, she shook her finger at them both. "And don't think for a second that you've gotten away with whatever you've gotten away with! I'll see

you both in my office bright and early tomorrow morning! We have quite a few things to discuss!"

And no doubt it would be done with the Board of Education.

"Yes, ma'am," they sang out in flat unison.

But neither of them moved and the Austin-Healey was still idling in the driveway when the line of SWAT and police vehicles drove out past them. Peter's silhouette took up the backseat of the second to last car.

"That wasn't supposed to happen," Brandy said, folding her arms across her chest and cupping her chin.

"We've just ruined a man's life," Nellie declared. "We have to fix this!"

"Yeah? How?"

Nellie swivelled in her seat to look at Brandy, her eyes wide as she, with a great deal of reluctance, said, "We'll tell the truth."

"Ha, ha. No, really. How?" Brandy began to bite her nails. "What do you think the police are going to do when they find out they arrested the man for killing a fictitious frog? They brought out SWAT, all right? Somebody is going to jail!"

"But not Mr. Newman! I can't be responsible for that, Brandy! I'll never be able to live with myself. It'll come out in confession, I just know it! How many Hail Marys, Our Fathers and Hail, Holy Queens do you have to say for sending an innocent man to prison?"

"We didn't mean for that to happen! It was an accident!"

"No one's going to believe that! Everyone knows we've been after him since the day we met him, and now look!"

Nellie turned to point back through the rear window at the distantly retreating convoy of police vehicles, disappear down the road beyond the tree lines. "We've got our science teacher arrested!" She suddenly gasped and clasped a hand over her mouth. "What if they give him the chair?"

"You don't get executed for killing frogs," Brandy said hastily.

"Maybe not ordinary frogs, but if you wipe out an entire species of endangered ones? What then?"

"It was a fake frog!" Brandy exclaimed. "Surely that's got to come up in court somewhere, don't you think?"

"But what if it doesn't?" Nellie insisted. "We can't take that kind of chance. We just can't!"

"It was a mistake," Brandy said again. "Something went wrong somewhere. Maybe Gordon talked. I don't know, but we'd better figure it out."

"Something went wrong?" Nellie echoed disbelievingly. She stared at her friend. "You're joking, right? Not something; try everything! Nothing has gone right this year! Not one single, solitary Prank!"

From the teachers' apartments, they heard a faint, "I said put that car back where you found it!"

Grabbing the steering wheel, Nellie shifted the car into gear and started towards the teacher's parking area. They neither one said a word until the Austin-Healey had glided into Peter's empty parking space and Nellie unhooked the wires and shut the car off.

They sat there for a moment in silence.

"Of course," Nellie finally said, in a slightly calmer tone. "There's always a bright side to every misfortune. He can't exactly spank us from jail."

Brandy cracked only the barest half smile. Staring straight through the windshield at Peter's dark apartment windows, she began to chew on her fingernails in earnest.

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CHAPTER NINE

"Happy birthday," Brandy greeted Nellie the next morning as her friend came out of the dorm building and stepped off the sidewalk into the wet grass. Her white sneakers were completely saturated by dew within the first dozen steps that carried her to Brandy's customary waiting spot beneath the sprawling branches of the old elm. Reaching into her duffel bag, Brandy pulled out a chocolate bar. "How does it feel to be all grown up?"

"Guilt-laden," Nellie said flatly. "I didn't sleep a wink last night. I kept trying to come up with a way to get Peter out of jail without landing ourselves in his place." She broke the candy bar in half and passed one piece back to Brandy. "And on the plus side, we can both be tried as adults."

Little comments like that could only make an already drizzly morning that much grayer, and the two girls didn't say anything more as they fell into step and side-by-side made their way to the administration building. But as they reached the front door, Brandy pulled ahead to open the door for Nellie.

"Did you call him?" she asked.

Nellie stepped past Brandy and went inside. "He should be talking to her right now."

"It's for the best, you know."

"Save comments like that for after the Board of Education," Nellie told her. "I'll be in so much pain, I'll probably believe you then."

The phone in the reception area was ringing off its hook when they walked into the main office. And once more Sister Mary was already waiting for them. Seated at her desk, she was staring forlornly down at the newspaper on her desk in front of her and talking to Gordon on the phone. Ignoring the comfortable chairs, Brandy and Nellie went straight for the Bad Girl Bench. Heads downcast, they sat with eyes glued to their hands, which were meekly clasped in their laps, as they waited for the Penguin to finish with her phone call.

"I understand," Sister Mary was saying. "Naturally, the children will be quite disappointed ... Yes ... Yes, I appreciate that ... You see, this is a very hard time for us at the moment. Nothing like this has ever happened at St. Walburgas ... Yes, I understand ... Thank you so much for calling ... Good bye."

She hung up the phone and sat for a moment, taking a deep breath and not moving for a long time. Then, taking another deep breath, she lay her hands flat on the desk to either side of the newspaper and, most specifically, the orange-colored advertising flyer that was resting on top of it. She picked it up and, without taking her eyes off of it, said, "Assume the position. Both of you."

Her voice sounded thin, strained almost, like something beyond anger and disappointment, like a woman on the edge of cracking and falling completely apart. Brandy and Nellie looked at one another, and then back at the nun, but neither girl argued. Instead, standing up, they approached her desk and did as they were told. Bending over the edge, they raised

their own skirts, braced their feet apart, and then reached for the opposite side of the desk.

Still without looking at them, Sister Mary pushed back her chair and stood up. She picked up the orange flier and walked around behind them, sidling in between them long enough to lay the paper on the desk where they could see it. At first, her bottom already quivering and tingle in dreaded anticipation of what was coming, Brandy didn't spare the flier any attention. It wasn't until she heard Nellie's muffled, "Oh my God!" that she glanced down at the paper.

Her eyes bulged at she read, 'One-Nine Hundred-NUN-CHAT' was the number splashed across the top of the advertisement, with St. Walburga's phone number in smaller letters underneath. 'Rip off my habit and make me pray! Brides of Christ looking for a real man! House of God turned house of sin! These sexy nuns are praying that you call! And for those into penitence for your sins of the flesh, ask for Mary Magdalen and get Whipping in Wimples!'

"Is—is that the school's number?" Brandy asked, in stunned disbelief.

"Jesus, Mary, and Joseph," Nellie groaned.

"It certainly is," the principal said. Stepping back behind the girls, she took hold of their underwear, one in each hand, and yanked the white cotton garments all the way down to their knees.

"Jesus, Mary, and Joseph!" Nellie repeated, louder and with a touch of panic trembling in her tone.

Brandy just squeaked, her eyes as large as dinner plates as she stared at the flyer in shock. Sister Mary never took

their underwear down. Accustomed to the Penguin's preferred wedgie, never in all her years of coming to this office, never had Brandy had her panties removed and her bottom bared to the board.

A dry rattle from the Devil's Toy Chest and Brandy didn't need to turn around to know the Penguin had retrieved the Board of Education. She swallowed hard. "Sister Mary, I swear, it wasn't us."

"It wasn't us! It wasn't us!" Nellie babbled, hugging her side of the desk. Already she had her head down and her teeth gritted to endure the first mighty wallop of the Board. "We swear on everything holy it wasn't!"

"We would never do something like this!"

"If even one of you let's go of the desk," the nun said implacably, "then both of you will endure this procedure all over again from the very beginning."

"But we didn't do this!" Brandy protested.

"We swear!" Nellie cried.

THWHACK!

Brandy felt Nellie jolt almost before she heard the sound of the impact. Nellie arched her back sharply, her mouth opening wide in a soundless shriek.

"Jesus, Mary, and Joseph!" It took Brandy a minute to realize that her best friend's favorite mantra had fallen from her lips instead, while the only sound that Nellie made was a high-pitched squeak of absolute pain.

There was a second crack of the paddle and Brandy nearly vaulted back up off the desk. The sharpest, stinging pain exploded all through her backside, chewing into her as though

her bottom were covered by hundreds of stinging hornets. At first, she was surprised it didn't hurt more. A minute later, however, as she grit her teeth and clenched her eyes tightly shut, she wished she could disassociate herself from her bottom.

Sister Mary showed absolute no mercy as she paddled first Nellie and then Brandy, back and forth, stroke after agonizing stroke. Brandy lost count after the first three swats. Her mind simply shut down; she couldn't bear the pain. And by the time that it was over, not only were Nellie and Brandy in tears, but so was the nun.

Sister Mary dropped the Board on her desk and flopped down into her chair, holding her head in her hands as she wept. "Just go," she told them.

With tears running down their faces, the girls looked at her, and then at each other. Brandy took her underwear off rather than to have to bear the scrape of cloth against her swollen and blistered nether cheeks. Giving the Penguin one last look, she and Nellie hobbled out into the outer office.

The phones were still ringing off the hooks, and Sister Roberta, who had come into work sometime during their paddling, gave them both very accusing looks as the limped past her desk.

"We didn't do it," Nellie sniffled, but the old nun simply turned her head away.

Lowering their heads, Brandy and Nellie shuffled outside.

Students were starting to trickle from the dorms to the cafeteria for breakfast. Hovering in the administration building's covered entryway, the girls wiped their eyes and

tried to look as normal as possible so they wouldn't attract any unwanted attention. That meant no rubbing, something that was infinitely easier said than done. It simply hurt too much to pretend like nothing had happened.

"I feel like I sat on a stove," Nellie muttered.

Her eyes swollen and raw from crying, Brandy knew they weren't going to fool anybody anyway. Fortunately, most of the students were already at breakfast or still in their dorms trying to get ready for the day.

"How do I look?" Nellie asked, blowing her nose on her handkerchief and then trying to comb her hair back over her shoulders with her fingers.

"Like you've been bawling your eyes out," Brandy told her.

"We deserved to be spanked like that. Even if we didn't do what we got nailed for, we still deserved it for getting Mr. Newman arrested."

Although part of Brandy couldn't help but agree, it still rankled to have to admit it. "Eat your chocolate bar," she said.

Nellie ignored the order. "We have to make things right."

"Don't you think I know that?" Brandy snapped. "It's not like I planned for this to happen."

Scrubbing at her nose and swiping the last tears from her cheeks, Nellie said, "I don't think the pranks are worth it. Not when they get people arrested. I'd rather be an obscure name in a yearbook than to be responsible for getting someone sent to prison." She met Brandy's eyes unwaveringly. "And that's where we're headed too, you know. Prison. This has got to stop."

Brandy blinked several times, and then her shoulders drooped. "You're right. I know you're right. Just—" she sighed. "Just give me a minute to think. Just so you know, I may cut the last half of school today so I can see Mr. Newman." She took a deep breath and held it. "I think I'm going to tell him everything. He's not such a bad guy ... for a teacher. Maybe he can help us out of this mess."

"He did help us return the goat."

"Eat your chocolate bar," Brandy said again.

As they stood in the doorway, eating the only meal they'd likely imbibe that day without having to first sit down, Brandy spied their prankster competitor walking across the lawn. Hands in his back pockets and whistling, the young man stopped in front of the newspaper box next to the flag pole and fed it a quarter in exchange for the morning paper.

Brandy's eyes narrowed when he flipped open straight to the orange flyer and then grinned as he admired it.

"That weasel," Nellie said, narrowing her eyes.

Brandy simply glared, at least until the boy pulled some tape from his pocket and stuck the flyer to the flag pole for all the other students to enjoy. Jogging down the steps to the administration building, she ran across the lawn just as he was walking away to school. When she reached the flagpole, she wasted no time in ripping that offensive flyer down.

"Do you have a quarter?" she asked when Nellie caught up with her.

Nellie fished into her book bag and handed her the requested coin.

Opening up the newspaper box, Brandy dug through the stack of papers and pulled out every one of the scandalous flyers. The paper box slammed shut as she turned to stuff the offending advertisements into the nearest garbage can, as far down under the rest of the trash as she could reach. When she turned around, the headline on one of the newspapers caught her attention.

'Local Teacher Arrested, But At What Cost To The Frogs?' Just beneath the picture of Peter Newman being hauled off to the jail in handcuffs, his coat over his head to hide his face, read the caption, 'Scandal Rocks St. Walburga's Standing In Worldwide Contest.'

Brandy squatted down to read the front page story through the glass of the paper box.

"Have the students of Eugene's local private Catholic school, St. Walburga's, lost their chance to take first place at the International Best Catholic School Contest? 'Absolutely not,' says Dr. Daniel Howard, the Archbishop of York. 'St. Walburga's has always been, and still remains today, one of the best Catholic schools in the nation. It is the role model to which all other schools seek to pattern themselves, and it is shameful that the actions of one man should throw into question all the hard work those students have put forth. I have personally petitioned the offices of Mr. Toodles, and have verified that he shall not withdraw his support.'"

Brandy turned to stare at Nellie, who groaned, "If an Archbishop lies because of something we started, who goes to hell? Him or us?"

"The whole world has gone crazy," Brandy said flatly.

"Oh my dear God." Nellie pressed a hand to her forehead. "I can already feel the flames licking at my skin. We are going to fry for all eternity."

With a grimace of disgust, Brandy threw the paper back into the box, but Nellie snatched it out again before she could slam the door shut.

Turning on her heels, Brandy started walking back to her dorm. "I can't. I just can't deal with this now."

"Where are you going?" Nellie called after her.

"To confession," Brandy yelled back, then muttered under her breath, "They say it's good for the soul."

* * * *

Brandy took a bus to the Lane County Jail and waited in the lobby for almost two hours until visiting time rolled around. Because she wasn't on the reservation list, she had to wait again until a little room came free.

It looked like something in the movies. There was a partition of bullet-proof glass on top of a desk that ran down the middle of the room, with a phone on each side of the glass. Brandy was the first one there. Nervously, she eased down to sit on the hard chair provided, wincing just a little as her bottom made contact with the hard plastic seat, and resigned herself to wait for Peter to arrive. Two guards eventually brought him into the room and then took up positions at the door.

Dressed in an orange jumpsuit with shackles on both his wrists and ankles, he didn't look particularly surprised to see her when he finally did arrive. He shuffled over to his chair

and sat, looked at her grimly through the partition and then sighed and picked up the phone.

"Why aren't you in school?" he asked.

The man was a teacher, through and through.

Brandy shrugged with half a shoulder. "I just wanted to see you. Make sure you were okay. You know, check to see if you needed anything. I've never known anyone in the pokey before, but I understand they trade cigarettes and pictures of naked women like money in there. Do you want me to get you some?"

"No thank you," he said dryly.

"I'm eighteen now," she protested. "So don't feel like you're contributing to the delinquency of a minor. If you need these things, I promise, all you have to do is ask. Toothbrush, toothpaste ... Penthouse ... I understand you can use those pictures like currency in these places."

"No," he said again. "Thank you, but no."

She sat back in her chair, tapping one finger nervously on the desktop and chewing on her bottom lip. "You look good," she finally said. "A little pale, maybe..."

"Why are you here?" Peter interrupted. "Not that I don't appreciate the visit, but is there a reason for it?"

Brandy glanced over each of her shoulders to make sure no one could overhear her, and then scooted her chair right up to the desk and leaned towards him again. "I wanted to talk to you about ... about the frog."

Peter blinked once, but other than that the look on his face didn't alter. "What about it?"

"It's ... it's..." Brandy shrugged, searching for a good way to just come out and say it, but her mind went completely blank. Finally, she thumped her hands back down on the table between them, saying, "It's like the bible. Just because someone wrote it down, doesn't exactly make it true."

He stared at her. "What does the bible have to do with Blue-Tipped, Three-Toed, Spiny, Sugar-Leaf-Eating Amphibians from South Brazil? And how did you ever get into Catholic School when you don't believe in the bible?"

"I didn't say I didn't believe in it. I just said I don't believe it's entirely truthful. It's like the Brothers' Grimm fairy tales. Good stories, some of which probably have a kernel of truth in them somewhere, and each one carries a moral for people to follow to attain a better way of living. Like ... like, Joseph and the coat of many colors. The morals in that one are very distinctive: Always follow your gut instincts. Don't wuss out and sell your siblings as slaves. And for God's sake, if you're going to be an insufferable braggart, then don't be surprised when your family chucks you down a well."

He stared at her, shaking his head in mild disbelief. "What does any of this have to do with my being sent to jail?"

Brandy went for broke. What did she have to lose anyway? She had a partition of bullet proof glass to protect her. If ever there was a safe place for her to confess anything to Peter, this was it.

Folding her hands before her, she nevertheless winced as she said, "There's no such thing as a Blue-Tipped, Three-Toed, Spiny, Sugar-Leaf-Eating Amphibian. Not from South Brazil or anywhere else."

They both stared at one another and neither one blinked. Peter leaned forward, resting his elbows on the narrow shelf in front of the glass partition. He held the phone in one handcuffed hand and scratched just under his nose with the other. He sniffed. "Come again, please."

"Nellie and I painted blue toes on the frogs the night before dissection day. We got her boyfriend, Gordon, to play the fish and game warden. We made the whole thing up."

He glared at her in piercing silence, until she began to fidget.

"I wish you'd say something," she hedged.

Peter exploded out of his chair. "What the hell am I doing in jail then?"

"I don't know!" Brandy protested.

"This was another of your pranks?!" he thundered, and then glanced back over his shoulder at the supervising guard who was starting towards him. Peter quickly sat down again. The way he wrung the receiver in both hands before putting it back to his ear had Brandy touching her own neck and swallowing hard. His voice lower, struggling for calm, through gritted teeth, Peter asked, "Was it your intent to get me arrested for wiping out an endangered species of fictitious toad?"

"No! We didn't call the Feds! I don't know who did that! Hey, I'm just as upset as you are about this whole incarceration thing. You'd figure the Feds would know there's no such frog. Our tax dollars hard at work. Kind of scary, if you ask me."

Peter erupted out of his chair again and jabbed his finger at her angrily. "You get me out of here!"

"That's what I've been trying to do," Brandy said, cringing a little. "But I can't just come out and confess, or they'll put me in jail, too!"

A guard appeared at his right side. "Settle down right now, Mr. Jackal, or I'll put you back in your cell."

"Did you hear what she just said?" Peter snapped back at him. He turned around and yelled out behind him, "Is someone recording this conversation?"

"Okay," the guard said. "This visitation is over."

"No!" Peter grabbed his arm and tried to hand him the phone. "Tell him!" he bellowed at Brandy, but another guard appeared at his arm and they started to drag him off.

Peter tore free of both men and came running back to grab the phone. He pinned her furiously into her chair with his hard and angry eyes. "Pray," he growled into the receiver. "Pray I never get out of here. Because the day I do—" the guards grabbed him again, struggling to wrest him back from the glass, but Peter stubbornly clung to the phone. "That will be the last day you ever sit down again! Ever!" he shouted as they finally pried the phone out of his hand and began to drag him back to his cell. "Ever!"

It was the angriest she'd ever seen him. Brandy sat in the facilities hard plastic chair, trying not to squirm. Her heart was pounding, her pulse was racing, she felt just a little bit scared. She winced when she saw him furiously shout another sound-stifled, "Ever!" just before the guards pulled him through the door and out of sight.

That probably could have gone a little better.

* * * *

Nellie opened her bedroom window and reached out a hand to help Brandy climb inside. "How's he holding up?"

"Uh ... good," Brandy lied. She glanced at Bianca's empty bed. "Where's Big-Mouth?"

"Toodles' fan club." Nellie stuck her head back out the window, looking right and then left, and then closed it and drew down the blinds. "Okay, I think I know how to get Peter out of the pokey."

"They don't call it that anymore," Brandy informed her sagely, but followed her friend to her desk anyway.

"Here." Nellie shoved a note into her hands. "Read this."

"Dear Mr. FBI Agent," Brandy read, then looked at Nellie, who was smiling and nodding.

"Go on."

Brandy sighed. She cleared her throat, holding the letter up to continue reading. "'There is no such thing as a Blue-Tipped, Three-Toed, Spiny, Sugar-Leaf-Eating Amphibian from South Brazil. We made it up. If you don't believe us, talk to the frog supplier. Here is a copy of the receipt for the frogs. I stole it out of Mr. Newman's desk.'" Brandy look up at Nellie again, who was still smiling. "We can't send this."

The smile faded slightly. "Why not?"

"Because they'll release Peter and put us in his place. Thou shalt not play pranks on the FBI, Nellie. If they hadn't run out of room in the Bible, that would be the eleventh commandment."

Nellie's smile returned. "No, we'll be fine. See how I signed it?" She pointed to the bottom of the page.

"Anonymous is spelled with a 'y', not an 'i'."

Frowning, Nellie snatched the letter back from Brandy. "Well, fine! If you're going to poke holes in all of my best efforts..."

Shoulders drooping, Brandy watched as Nellie flopped down on her bed and sighed. The problem was that she hadn't thought of anything better, and she'd been racking her brain the entire bus ride home again for just such a plan. "All right," Brandy conceded. "We'll send your note."

Nellie grinned once more.

"In fact," Brandy added. "Let's not wait. We should go talk to him ourselves. The Eugene police haven't exactly proved themselves to be the smartest officers in the world. I think it would be a colossal mistake if we simply trusted them to talk to Carlos without first making sure that Carlos had something significant to tell them. You know, like 'What do you mean Blue-Tipped, Three-Toed, yadda-yadda Frogs? I sold him thirty regular pond frogs and here's my receipt from my supplier.' If he can't at least do that, then it's a waste of everyone's time to question him. We can take the last bus down the McKenzie River and hitchhike back in time for Lights Out. That way, we'll be able to send some credible and corroborating evidence along with your letter and get Peter out of jail all the faster."

"Oh, uh..." Nellie cleared her throat and scratched her eyebrow. "...Okay."

Brandy looked at her, her eyes narrowing. "You already sent it, didn't you?"

"This morning during shop class," her friend confessed. "Benny tried to get out of building his birdhouse by faking a skill saw injury with ketchup. So I faked hysterics and got sent to the nurse's office. Benny got sent to the Penguin. The Board of Education is working overtime today."

"Poor Benny," Brandy said, reaching her hand back in commiseration to touch her tender bottom. The burning and stinging had long since vanished from this morning session, but the experience had left behind a lingering pain whenever she walked and particularly when she sat. Not to mention a few very dark and unenviable bruises.

But, as Nellie had pointed out earlier, it was a small price to pay for causing Peter's incarceration with their horribly backfired prank.

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CHAPTER TEN

Brandy and Nellie arrived just after the police. Apparently, they had got Nellie's memo. The yard to Carlos's rural home was full of flashing police cars and animal control vans.

"Oh great," Brandy said, flapping her hands helpless. "Now they're going to arrest him and we'll never convince anyone that we made up that stupid frog."

"Those are big frog cages," Nellie said, watching as two animal control officers struggled to carry a huge dog kennel through the front door.

The girls looked at one another, and then by unspoken agreement, moved off the road and into the bushes. They crept up to the house. When the animal control officers went back into the house, Brandy slipped from the bushes and jogged up to the back of the truck. She looked inside and her jaw dropped.

"What the hell is that?"

Nellie appeared beside her. She squinted her eyes and leaned into the back of the truck.

"Careful," Brandy warned. "What is it?"

"A big damn cat," Nellie said.

A sound from the house made them jump and they quickly dove back into the bushes just as FBI Agent Wills walked out of the house, two officers following close behind them with a handcuffed frog distributor between them.

"Do you understand your rights as I've explained them to you?" Wills asked.

"I want my lawyer," the man in cuffs replied sourly.

Nellie and Brandy looked at one another. Shaking her head, Brandy nudged her companion and they both turned around and headed for home. It was a long walk back to town and since the buses were no longer running, they got to see the police and animal control cars whiz past them as they ferried the big cats and Carlos the frog distributor off to jail. Both were far too depressed to discuss the problem that still lay insurmountably ahead of them: Peter was still in jail, and now the only man who could possibly free him had just been arrested.

* * * *

"Carlos the Frog Jackal was apprehended late last night in his local Springfield home," Nellie read, munching on a blueberry muffin as Brandy took a seat next to her in the cafeteria. "Thirteen illegally held ocelots were found in his possession—ocelots? Is that what those big cats were?"

"I guess so," Brandy muttered.

"And were taken to the Portland Zoo to be temporarily housed until they can be rehabilitated and released back into the wild." Sighing, Nellie turned the page in the newspaper she was reading. "Oh, well look here. The Register Guard has printed an official apology and Mr. Newman's release from jail is scheduled for later today, when all charges against him are expected to be dropped."

Holding a half peeled banana in her hands, Brandy sat up a little straighter in her chair. "They're going to release him?"

"In very tiny print here at the bottom it says: there is no such thing as a Blue-Tipped, Three-Toed, Spiny, Sugar-Leaf-Eating Amphibian in South Brazil." Nellie lowered the newspaper. "That's good, though. Right? That means even though we never got a chance to talk to Carlos the Frog Jackal, everyone knows Mr. Newman was innocent. We win no matter what, and he goes free."

Brandy snorted and took a bite of her banana. "Do we still have copies of the storm cellar keys?"

"Ooo," Nellie sat back in her chair, chewing on her bottom lip. "You think we should hide? I was thinking we could go pick him up from jail. After all, he doesn't know it was us that got him incarcerated." She stopped at Brandy's look. "He knows?"

Brandy nodded.

Nellie's jaw dropped. "You told him?!"

Dropping her banana and folding her arms on the table, Brandy dropped her forehead onto her wrists. She nodded again.

"Why?!"

"It seemed like the thing to do. He was safely behind bars at the time. Besides, how was I to know they'd really let him out?"

Flinging her hands up in the air, Nellie rolled her eyes. "Well, that's it. We're all done. We can't go pick him up now. He'll kill us before we get out of the police station."

"I don't think I want to be here when he gets out," Brandy muttered into her wrists.

"Where else can we go?"

Sighing, she sat up. "Well ... the cellar, if we had a key." She picked up her banana and took another bite. It tasted like wood in her mouth, and she chewed unenthusiastically. "We are all done," she agreed with Nellie's evaluation of the situation. "The year is almost over, and we haven't pulled off a single prank yet."

"Man, it sucks to be old," Nellie sighed, and Brandy couldn't help but agree.

* * * *

"Forgiveness is a marvelous thing," Sister Mary Magdalene said, as she eased her car into the parking space in front of the teacher's barracks. "Those girls can drive one to almost want to drink. I think when this year is done," the nun leaned over to give the newly released Peter Newman a waning smile. "I may request a transfer. After Brandy and Nellie have gone, this job will be way too easy. Converting cannibals in the Amazon would be a piece of cake in comparison."

Peter didn't echo her smile. "All I want to do is get my hands on her and shake her until her teeth rattle."

"I've felt that way many times myself." The Sister grinned and shut off the car. "It helps if you pray, believe it or not. It really does."

"I'd much rather hear her praying ... pleading, begging and sobbing, too, the whole time she's across my knee getting her fanny roasted by my hand." He scowled through the windshield at his home. As if suddenly remembering to whom he was speaking, his eyes slid towards the nun and then away. "Very unchristian of me, I suppose."

"Yes, but human." Removing her seatbelt, the old nun got out of the car. "Go and teach her a lesson, if it'll make you feel better. But if I know those girls, they truly are good at heart and will likely have suffered far worse at the thought of your imprisonment than you could make them suffer by setting fire to their uniform skirts."

He doubted that. Peter glared after her, and then glared at his Saint Walburga home. Frowning, he got out of the car. He started to go inside, but he was still too angry. Snapping around mid-pace, he headed for the girls' dorms. Nellie he'd take care of in the morning, when he could think straight and keep his temper in check. Brandy, however, the mastermind behind the scheme that had put him in prison, was not going to get away with what she'd done without at the very least a really good scolding!

Sister Kathryn Mary had her door open as if in anticipation of his arrival, and when he stormed past it, taking the stairs up to the second floor two at a time, she came barreling out of her room after him dressed in only her white nightgown and pulling a light blue dressing robe around her.

"You cannot go up there!" she screeched after him. "Mr. Newman, please! This is the ladies dorm!"

"The ladies here have nothing to fear from me," he growled, swinging around the second floor landing and stalking down the hall toward Brandy's room.

She opened the door while he was still too far away to knock and left the door wide open for him to enter. Without a word, she walked over to her bed, dropped her own pants and bent over the foot of it.

"Whale away," she said without emotion.

Peter stood in the doorway, looking at her panty-clad backside in surprise until Sister Kathryn Mary rushed up beside him. The site stunned her for a moment into silence as well, and then she exclaimed, "Mr. Newman, you cannot be here! Please, leave!"

Peter walked into Brandy's room and closed the door, shutting her out. Then he really surprised himself. "Put your pants back on. I'm not going to spank you."

She looked back at him over her shoulder, her eyes flashing combatively.

He held up a hand before she could do more than open her mouth. "I mean it. Don't push me. I'm too angry."

Very slowly, Brandy eased back up off the bed. Without looking away, she pulled her pants up over her hips and refastened them. "Then why are you here?"

"I want to know why?" Peter ran a hand through his hair, frustrated to the point of grinding his teeth. "Do you ever stop and think about what you're doing? About how what you do affects those around you?" She only stared back at him and, in a flustered effort to get through to her, he said, "What about your father? What would he say if he knew about all of this?"

It was entirely the wrong track to take with her. As he stood watching, her eyes grew hard and shuttered against him. "Mr. Newman, I killed my mother the day I was born and that's something my father has never forgiven me for. I was nine years old the last time I saw him. Do you want to know what happened? I snuck out of bed when I heard his car drive

up in the driveway. I ran out to the living room as he came through the front door. He walked straight past me, went into his study and shut the door. That was the last time. Coincidentally, it was also the first, but I knew it was my father because I recognized him from a picture my nanny gave me. So feel free to tell him whatever you want to. The man hates me. He won't care."

"Brandy—"

"Don't!" she said harshly. "Don't you even look at me like that. I don't need your pity, and I don't want it! After all, it's not like I don't hear from the man. Once or twice a year, he sends me a post card. Do you want to see?"

She snapped around as stiff as any soldier and marched over to her desk. Grabbing her book bag, she upended the contents on the floor, before digging through the mess to fling a postcard at him.

"See?" she demanded. Her eyes were still hard, but her face was slowly turning red. "He's in Malaysia, wherever the hell that is. I'm not quite sure; I've been sleeping through geography."

Peter picked the postcard up off the floor. He looked at it, his shoulders drooping. "Brandy," he tried again.

"Go on and tell him what I've done, if you think it'll make you feel better. Go on, I dare you. I double dog dare you. See if I fucking care."

His head snapped up. "Watch your mouth! You're nowhere near out of trouble enough for me to put up with that!"

"My mouth," she snarled, stepped towards him, "is the least of my fucking worries."

Peter dropped the postcard and grabbed her arm. "That's what you think!"

He dragged her back to the bed and sat down, wrestling her over his knee. He could just as easily have been battling a seasoned warrior. She kicked and flailed, bucked and twisted, shoved to get up and when that failed, as he leaned his forearm across the small of her back, she bit him on the thigh.

Hard.

Hard enough to draw blood.

"That's it!" Peter yelled. He began to bust her butt as hard as her teeth were sinking into his leg, the rapid-fire whaps of his open hand hurting him almost as much as he was hurting her. She yelled, but they were angry sounds and she fought his hold relentlessly.

He spanked her until the agony in his fingers was unbearable. Until his own anger gave way to feelings of defeat and he knew without a doubt that her will was infinitely more stubborn than his own. He wasn't ever going to get through to her. It was a miserable realization. When it reached the point that he couldn't stand to swat her, not one more time, Peter gave up.

Shaking both his head and his hand, at a loss for what to do next, Peter was still holding her bent across his lap when Brandy cracked. She began to cry, loud lusty sobs that racked her shoulders and back.

"I'm sorry," she wept. "I'm sorry! I'm sorry!"

Peter caught her up and held her close to his chest, rocking her while she sat in his lap in a way no teacher in his

right mind would ever had done with a student. But then nothing that he had ever done with Brandy had been something a sane teacher would have allowed to happen with a student.

"I'm sorry!" she sobbed, clinging to him.

And for a moment, Peter felt close to tears himself. "I'm sorry, too."

He held her fiercely close and didn't let go, not until her sobs grew softer and her ragged breathing turned to sniffles and gaspy breaths.

Brandy raised her head to look at her, her face wet with tears. Her trembling lips parted moistly and her eyes drifted down to his mouth. He could almost have kissed her then.

Student, his conscience whispered.

"I'm sorry," he said, and set her on her feet. "I have to go."

As he made his way to the door, trying not to look back at her would have been as impossible as trying to stop the sun from rising; Peter just couldn't manage it. Still rubbing her bottom, a long tear winding its way down her cheek, she watched him walk away without another word.

What was he doing? He shook his head at himself all the way back to his apartments.

* * * *

Graduation day. Just one more tick on the steady metronome of life, it came whether or not Brandy, Nellie, or anyone else in the Seniors' graduation party was ready for it.

Feeling older, bracing herself to get wiser any second now, Brandy climbed into her ceremonial gown, tapped her cap onto her head, and prepared herself to fall into the unsung obscurity of adulthood. She looked at her reflection in the mirror that hung behind her door and tried not to be depressed.

Outside her room, Seniors were laughing and shrieking and running up and down in the halls. Someone beat on her door. "It's time! It's time!"

Staring at her reflection, Brandy could all but hear the irrevocable slamming of that heavy steel door on her childhood. There was no going back. She sighed.

The door to her room flung open and Nellie stuck her head inside. "Hey, you ready?"

"I have a million regrets," Brandy told her reflection.

Nellie's smile faltered slightly. "Are any of them going to stop you from having your senior photo taken?"

Nellie's grin returned full force when Brandy looked at her and she held out her arm. Shoulders slumping, Brandy walked into her friend's half embrace and they walked out of the dorm together.

The seniors gathered on the school's front steps, the students comprising two rows of thirty and the teachers lined up in back. As fate would have it, Brandy found herself standing right smack in front of Peter. They were all crunched so close together just to fit in the photographer's lense that she could feel the heat of him burning into her back. Maybe it was her imagination, but she could have sworn

she felt his steady breaths billowing against the back of her neck.

"Cheese!" the photographer called out, and like one both students and teachers took a collective breath, grinned and froze.

"I want to talk to you," Peter whispered in her ear, and Brandy turned to look at him.

Click!

She snapped back around to stare at the camera, her mouth agape, but if the photographer noticed he wasn't being paid for retakes.

"We're done!" he called with a smile and began to pack up his gear.

Sister Mary Magdalene clapped her hands. "All right, everyone! It's auditorium time!"

While the rest of the Seniors hurried on ahead, Brandy waited with Peter. "You must be pretty astounded that I graduated at all."

"Not really." He smiled. "I don't think any of us wanted to risk having you in our class for another year."

"O-ho!" Brandy grinned. "It's like that, is it?"

Laughing softly, he looked away. "You definitely made my year something of an experience. And next year will be even better."

"Because I won't be your student," she teased.

"That's right." Peter turned back to her. "And I," he said meaningfully, "won't be your teacher."

Brandy almost forgot how to breathe.

"Brandy, come on!" Nellie yelled from the auditorium's door.

"Congratulations," Peter told her, and waved her off. "You'd better hurry. The last thing you'll want is for them to start without you."

Backing away, she started to run to the auditorium, but then stopped. She turned back to him. "I got another postcard," she called out. "This time from Germany."

"Someday he's going to realize what he threw away," Peter told her.

She smiled, somewhat sadly. "No, he won't. But that's okay, too. I'm learning to live with it." She raised her hand to wave. "I'll see you later."

Peter held up one hand in a half-hearted goodbye wave. "Be good."

She laughed. "I always am."

Thankfully, he knew better.

* * * *

Danny Griggson sat in the students' section of the audience, watching as each Senior took his or her long walk across the stage to take their diplomas, shake the principal's hand, smile at the gathered parents, who took massive quantities of photos, and he bided his time. In his hands, he held a garage door opener sized remote control, its six-inch antenna pointed at the stage. He was waiting, a half smile pulling at the corner of his mouth as he envisioned how everyone would respond when he pressed this button—he traced his thumb lightly over the mark—and emptied fifteen

fifty-five gallon drums of whipping cream onto the stage. In particular, he was aiming for Brandy Smith. That, he mused, would be a fitting send-off for his prankster predecessor.

His gaze rose up from the stage to the heavy ceremonial curtains that surrounded it. Curtains that hid the drums he'd painstakingly spent all night hosting up into the rafters. He stroked the button again, his leg beginning to jiggle as his excitement grew.

A flutter of movement at his right attracted his attention. His eyes widened as he turned to find the object of his night's work making her way through the audience right for him.

Brandy sat down in the empty chair to his right. She leaned slightly towards him. "Hi."

Danny palmed the remote control. The soft whisper of movement from his left had him turning the other way to find Nellie sitting down on his other side.

She smiled at him. "Hi," she said.

She had a lot of teeth.

"What?" he said, looking from one to the other. The best offense was a good, aggressive defense, and he tried to muster one. "I didn't do anything."

"Who said you did?" Nellie asked in her best imitation of 'good cop'.

Brandy, on the other hand, went right for the throat. "I'm not going up there," she told him, nodding to the stage. "I've already told the good Penguin that I'll take my diploma in the mail."

Danny looked from her to Nellie.

"We pay our informants well," she told him, still smiling.
"Clap."

Both she and Brandy clapped and whooped enthusiastically as the Seniors whooped with joy, throwing their caps up in the air in a culmination of the ceremony. Not just thwarted but caught, he clapped very unenthusiastically twice and then slumped down in his chair, arms folded across his chest.

Up on the stage, Sister Mary took the podium. "And now, I'd like to announce a few unexpected awards. But before we do, I would like to say a few words about our dearly departed Mr. Toodles, a man who selflessly stood by our humble school though all the hardships and strife that we've endured this past year. I know he truly did want to be with us on this momentous day. If only his plane hadn't developed engine trouble just after take-off then, well ... perhaps we might have been able to express our gratitude to him face-to-face. Let us all bow our heads for a moment of silence."

Both Brandy and Nellie bowed their heads, solemnly giving the non-existent Toodles the respect he deserved for his untimely demise. Here and there in the audience, Danny could even hear the occasional snuffle as his fellow students shed a few tears.

"And now," Sister Mary said. "On to brighter news."

"Oh here we go," Brandy chuckled. "I like this part best."

Feeling a nervous tickle of apprehension growing in his belly, Danny looked at Nellie, who wiggled her eyebrows up and down. "I like this part, too."

"Our school," Sister Mary continued, "has been selected to represent the Catholic community in the newly launched

Interfaith Relationships Program." She held up an envelope. "One lucky member of our school has been selected to go to—" she widened her eyes, pausing for dramatic effect before announcing, "Amish country!"

Danny felt himself pale. "Dear God, no."

"Oh yes," Brandy told him, smiling her Cheshire best.

"My family's going to Disneyland over the summer!" Danny cried.

"And that lucky soul is—" Sister Mary ripped open the envelope.

"Crap!" Danny covered his head with both hands. He probably should have covered his ears.

"It's our very own Daniel Griggson!"

"No TV," Nellie told him. "No Gameboy, Playstation One or Two."

"No Wii. No radio or indoor flushing toilets," Brandy intoned.

"No buttons and zippers, either. No Disneyland, but you might get to raise a barn or two."

"And learn how to milk a cow."

"You can't do this to me," Danny snarled at them. "I won't do it! You can't make me do it!"

"Danny Griggson," Sister Mary called out excitedly as everyone in the audience turned around and looked at him. "I've already notified your parents. They are thrilled, as are we all. Save the heathens, son! You'll do us proud!"

Nellie started everyone in a rousing round of applause while Danny slumped so far down in his chair that he almost

fell onto the floor. "That's for nailing us with your nun-chat prank!"

"Don't mess with the pros," Brandy told him, laughing darkly. "We will eat you alive."

"Try not to tip too many cows," Nellie giggled.

While the school lauded his exile into Amish land, his craftier predecessors got up and left him there. And there was nothing that he or eight hundred and twenty-five gallons of whipping cream could do about it.

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Epilogue

Two weeks after graduating from college, Nellie and Gordon were married. They had four children, all of whom acted just like they did, which accounts for most of their grey hairs. Gordon worked as an architect. Nellie hit the New York Times Best Sellers' list five weeks in a row with her national hit, 'Pranks I Have Pulled.' The sequel to this, 'Life At Saint Walburga's' is due to be released sometime this year.

Danny Griggson fell in love with Amish country and was formally adopted by his Interfaith exchange family. He did tip a cow or two, but the Amish quickly ironed him out and he was officially converted in 2005.

As for Brandy, she did manage to get in one last prank at Saint Walburga's: She became a teacher there. And although the name Brandy Smith did eventually fade from memory, the name Brandy Newman lived on for much, much longer—almost always uttered in conjunction with a particularly stellar prank!