

THE STUFFED SLEUTHS AFFAIR - Part 2

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"I didn't realize anyone owned this island," Nancy said. *Because nobody does!* she thought.

A tall man in trousers and shirtsleeves stepped towards them from the trees. He had dark, beady eyes, a thin mustache, and an unfriendly expression. His bare arms were muscular and glistened with perspiration. Nancy gulped. He looked terribly strong!

"It'll be ours soon enough," the man sneered. "What are your three doing, poking around here?"

"Now, now, Al," said a sultry voice. A woman emerged from the trees. She had long, dark red hair and wore a black dress that was rather impractical for the woods, Nancy thought. "You leave these poor dears alone. Why, they've just come for a picnic. See the hamper they brought?"

Nancy nodded enthusiastically. "Oh, yes! That's why we're here, all right!" She shot a glance at the others, and they nodded too.

"Well, don't let us stop you," the man said. "*Have* your picnic! In fact, why don't we *join* you?"

"You don't need to--"

"Oh, I *insist!*" the man stated. "We wouldn't want to be *bad hosts*. You know, the kind who leave their guests alone to wander around getting into *trouble*. So c'mon. Let's all sit and eat."

He hoisted the hamper out of the boat, dropped it in the sand with a heavy thud, and sat down next to it. Bess, who hated to look bad in front of any man (even the suspicious-looking, beady-eyed kind), did her best to sit up straight and hold her stomach in, though she'd eaten so much breakfast it wasn't much help. George was leaning against the boat, legs splayed in a not-terribly-ladylike fashion, scratching her belly. It was rare for George to put away as much breakfast as Bess, but today (thanks to Nancy's stern intervention) she had very nearly managed it.

"A picnic does sound lovely, doesn't it?" the woman said, lowering herself delicately to the sand. She pulled out a pair of sandwiches wrapped in wax paper. "Here, allow me."

She handed one of the sandwiches to George, who bit her lower lip. "Um. A picnic. Oh...boy." George picked up the sandwich as if it were a scorpion and eyed it, waiting for the sting. She handed it around to Nancy as quickly as she could. Bess had gotten the other sandwich and passed it on as well.

The mysterious woman simply pulled out another pair of sandwiches and replaced the cousins' portions. She nodded at Nancy. "Well, *you* must be hungry."

Nancy looked down at her hands. She'd ended up holding *two* sandwiches. Two sandwiches! However was she going to manage? And yet she would have to try. Today it wasn't just a beloved aunt's feelings at stake--it was their safety, maybe even their lives! If they didn't play along with their cover as picnickers, who knew *what* these shifty-looking characters were capable of.

She shot the other two a brief but meaningful glance. All three girls knew what they had to do. If only their poor exhausted stomachs would cooperate for just a little longer! She cast a sidelong glance at the sinister-looking couple and sank her teeth deep into white bread and juicy ham.

George looked down at the heavy slab of bread and meat, building up her courage. "All right," she said uncertainly. She licked her lips. "Okay. Oh, hypers. Here we go." Before she could lose her nerve, she stuffed the end of the sandwich in her mouth and tore off a huge hunk.

"So, what brings you girls to Lake Benson?" the woman asked pleasantly. She'd taken a pile of sandwiches of her own and was nibbling one neatly with perfectly straight and pearly teeth.

"Oofff, I--" George began. She coughed and thumped her chest, struggling to swallow her mouthful. Nancy handed her a bottle of lemonade and the brunette took a grateful gulp.

"Whew! What I meant to say was, my cousin Bess and I, and our friend Nancy, are here visiting my aunt. I'm George, by the way. And it's not short for anything!" George loved her boyish name, and she hated nothing more than people thinking she must be a *Georgette* or a *Georgina*. "How about you?"

"None of your beeswax," the man grouched.

"Shut up, Al!" For a split second, the woman's attractive face twisted in a snarl, but she quickly smoothed her features back to placid pleasantness. "That is to say--you could be a bit nicer to our guests. My name is Mary Smith, and this is my husband, Alfred. You've got to forgive the big oaf. The reason he calls it *our island* is that we're planning on using the fishing cabin on the other side for a bit. That's why we're here today--to look it over. Isn't that right, Al?"

"Yeah, that's right, all right." He looked uncomfortable. "So, uh, Bess. That's a real swell getup you have on."

"Really?" Bess said, blushing. "What do you love about it?"

"Oh, the color, and the, uh, fabric." He flashed her a grin. "Especially the way you fill *out* that fabric--real thorough-like."

Bess's blush deepened. "Oh?"

"Yeah, and in all the right places. An' then some! Reminds me of a big juicy watermelon--ack!"

Mary had elbowed Al's side. "*Excuse* my husband. Sometimes he forgets that I'm sitting right next to him. It *also* tends to slip his mind that not all girls enjoy being treated like a piece of produce at the greengrocer's!"

"That's all right," Bess said, blushing so brightly that she was indeed almost the precise color of watermelon flesh. "I don't mind!"

"There, see? Some girls are *happy* to be produce. Come over here, dollface, let's give you a squeeze and see if you're ripe."

Bess put a hand to her stomach. "No squeezing! *Please!*"

"Aw, c'mon!"

"Ahem," Nancy said, gently changing the topic of conversation. "So, Mr. and Mrs. Smith, you're not afraid of the ghost? They say Specter Island is haunted, you know."

"Ghosts, schmots," Al said dismissively.

"We don't believe in those superstitions," Mary explained.

Although Nancy certainly didn't either, she was disappointed to hear this. She had hoped to draw the Smiths into a lengthy conversation. The more animated the discussion, the less she would have to eat, and Nancy was finding eating more and more difficult with every bite she forced down. She felt like a woman trying to pack too much into a small suitcase.

Two huge dinners, and all that breakfast this morning, and now sandwiches... Goodness, just thinking about it made her queasy! Had it really been less than twenty-four hours since they'd arrived in Lake Benson? She looked at the others. Bess seemed to be doing all right, but then, you could put almost anything in front of Bess and she would manage at least some of it, no matter how full she was. Poor George's stomach was so crammed she could have been mistaken for a girl in the family way, and Nancy regretted forcing her to eat so much at breakfast. But what was done was done, and now they were going to have to muddle through.

Nancy took another bite and leaned forward, trying to squash her stomach into a more compact position. Sometimes when you were overstuffing a suitcase, you just had to sit on it.

Mary smiled sweetly and dabbed crumbs from her lips. "Mm. Well, thank you so much for playing hostess, girls. That was delicious!" She stood up. "We really should be getting back to the cabin. Shouldn't we, Al?"

"Yeah," Al said darkly. The suspicion still hadn't got out of his eyes, and aside from his clumsy flirtation with Bess, he'd scarcely said a pleasant word to anyone the whole meal. "Let's."

The moment they had vanished into the woods, George flung down the remains of her fourth sandwich. She fumbled with the button on her shorts, sighing in relief as they popped open. "Finally! I

thought it would never end.”

“Death by sandwich!” Bess groaned in agreement.

“You did very well,” Nancy said. “It was important to look as if we really were simply picnicking, after all.”

Glancing at the woods, she called brightly “Let's pack up and head back, girls!” She lowered her voice. “Psst! Now's our chance to look 'round!”

George laughed bitterly. “How much rounder can we look?” She winced and put a hand to her stomach. “I've got to let this settle!”

“I'm not moving from this spot,” Bess agreed, “until... until I can move!”

“Well, I just can't let this opportunity pass me by,” Nancy said. “I must get to the bottom of this mystery!”

“I think those sandwiches went to your head, Nan,” George said. “Sure, Al and Mary might have been a little odd, but there's no proof they're really up to any funny business.”

“Isn't there?” Nancy said triumphantly, struggling to her feet with a prim grunt. “They acted like they'd never seen us before. And that was a lie! Bess, remember when Al called you by name?”

“Yes, but hadn't George just introduced us?”

“George said she was with 'my cousin Bess and my friend Nancy'. She didn't say which of us was which. And yet he called you Bess--even though you and George look practically nothing alike! If he had really been meeting us for the first time, he would have assumed I was her cousin, or perhaps asked who was who. *Hic!*”

Nancy covered her mouth with a hand. *Hic!* Oh dear--on top of everything else, eating too much and too fast had given her a case of the hiccoughs!

“You two can--*hic!*--rest up here if you want--*hic!*--I'm going to look for clues!” Nancy said, standing up with as much dignity as she could muster and making her way towards the dank and ominous forest.

Despite her bravado, Nancy was far from at her best. In fact, as the consequences of overeating began to catch up to her, she began to feel downright ill. Her stomach was crammed so full that each step was awkward and ungainly, and her navel felt like the knot on a badly-tied parcel, barely holding in the contents.

I've just got to walk it off a bit, she resolved. *Goodness knows I could use the exercise!* A good detective ought to keep trim, and Nancy was proud of the fit figure she maintained with a wholesome diet and plenty of healthful activities.

At least, most of the time, she thought ruefully. *I certainly haven't been doing my figure any favors on this trip! The way I've been eating, I'll be lucky if Hanna doesn't have to let out my entire wardrobe when I get home!*

Perhaps it was just her naturally sensitive disposition, but she felt as if her clothes were already tight, and not just around the waist. Even her feet felt big and swollen. *Surely it must be my imagination*, she told herself. *Who ever heard of fat feet?*

Nancy leaned against a tree to take a few deep breaths. She put a hand over her mouth and belched. Phew! Thank goodness nobody was around to hear *that!* The elegant and feminine Miss Drew, daughter of renowned lawyer Carson Drew, burping like a common criminal? She'd never live it down.

Oh! But her stomach was just *killing* her! Her poor guts felt like they'd just gone three rounds with a prizefighter, and her sides were ready to split. This made her bellyache the night before seem like an insignificant twinge. Her cheeks puffed out with another belch, and she hastily clapped a hand over her mouth before releasing it, slowly and quietly, through her fingers.

Just when she thought she couldn't go another step, she saw it--the fishing cabin! This ramshackle old shack was where the Smiths were staying, if they were telling the truth. Nancy approached, her eyes darting this way and that for any sign of Al and Mary, and tried the door.

“It's locked,” she said to herself. How was she going to get in?

Walking around the house, she spotted it--a broken window at the back of the house. It had been pasted over with newsprint, but, possibly because of its height and small size, nobody had bothered to replace the glass. There was her way in!

She climbed onto the crates on the back porch and stood on tiptoe to reach the window. Under most circumstances, it would have been a simple trick for the limber young sleuth to pull herself up and wriggle through, but today... Today she felt a warning twinge in her stomach as she stretched her arms over her head. Her sweater rode up, and her bare, full stomach pressed against the rough, peeling boards, forcing out another burp that she no longer had a free hand to muffle. She hauled herself up and hooked an arm through the window, ripping out the paper.

"Ow!" she said as something sliced her arm. There were still a few shards of glass left in the window! Nancy groaned. The window was awfully small. And she felt *awfully* big. Even without the glass, she wasn't sure she could squeeze through. With the glass...*with* the glass...

She just had to give it the old college try. This was a case, Nancy reminded herself, and she had to see it through.

She got her head and shoulders through without too much trouble. The real problem was going to be her stomach. She put every ounce of strength into sucking it in, then slid forward slowly.

For a split second, she relaxed just a fraction, and felt the sharp point of a glass shard against her belly. Her stomach pressed every so lightly against it, a bulging reservoir of food balanced on the head of a pin. Nancy shuddered. Visions of balloons being violently punctured by long, wicked-looking needles danced in front of her eyes. With every bit of strength that she could muster, she sucked in again, flattening her belly just enough to slip through. Her rear end wasn't exactly an easy fit either, but she managed it. She was almost through--

"Ohhh-h-h-h!" Nancy cried as she lost her balance and tumbled to the wooden floor. One foot smashed through the rotting boards. Nancy doubled over, tears welling in her eyes. Her jolted stomach was in absolute agony.

Breathe, she told herself sternly. *You're fine. Nothing's broken, nothing's burst, and you have a job to do, young lady.*

She quickly surveyed the cabin. It was just as dilapidated on the inside as on the outside. Practically falling apart, and certainly not fit for human habitation. It looked abandoned.

Dirty dishes and empty beer bottles were scattered on top of a cheap folding table. Nancy looked closer. She ran her finger across the tabletop, drawing a line in the thick dust. She felt one of the bottles. No dust there. The scraps of food on the table were moist, not moldy.

So, Nancy thought. *They are living here!*

She sniffed. Mary Smith certainly wasn't much of a housekeeper. And both of them must drink like sailors!

Quickly, Nancy searched the small cabin. There wasn't much to find. If Al and Mary were hiding something here, they were hiding it well. There were no sacks of money, no firearms, no masks. Were they even the ones responsible for robbing the bank? For trying to run Nancy off the road? Or was some other sinister plot afoot?

One of the front porch boards creaked. Nancy almost jumped out of her skin. A key rattled in the lock. The front doorknob was turning!

The young sleuth rushed the closet and pulled the door shut just as the cabin's front door swung open with the shriek of rusty hinges.

"Okay," said a rough voice--Al's. "See, I'm puttin' it back. Can you remember this, you dumb bunny, or do I have to write you a note?"

"Oh, for Pete's sakes, Al," Mary said, exasperated. "They hid it under the *welcome mat*. You'd *have* to be pretty dumb not to be able to get into *this* place."

Nancy could have kicked herself.

"Yeah, well, let's face it, doll. You ain't exactly the sharpest knife in the drawer sometimes."

“Me? It was your crazy stunt that put that meddling sleuth onto our trail in the first place. Trying to run her off the road? In broad daylight? What were you thinking, you leadfooted maniac? If it wasn't for you, we wouldn't have to hide on this miserable island. We'd be halfway to Mexico--”

“If it wasn't for you grabbing the wheel, Nancy Drew's pretty little brains would be splattered all over the bottom of that cliff!”

“And us along with them!” Mary replied acidly. “You weren't even sure it was her until we saw her just now. It's like you see a blue convertible and you just go berserk!”

“I do when its driver got my brother Ludwig twenty years in Sing Sing!” Al shot back. A face flashed into Nancy's mind--Ludwig Cooper, the notorious yegg she'd unmasked after discovering *The Clue in the Chrysanthemums*, whose shifty, beady eyes and heavy brow bore a striking resemblance to Al “Smith's”!

Nancy drew in her breath sharply and wished she hadn't. Her hiding place was no ordinary closet. It must have been used for storing fish at one time, and not all of them had been retrieved in a timely manner. And under the rotten fishy stink was another smell, thick and mediciney, which made her eyes water. Unless the sleuth missed her guess, this “fishing” shack had once been used by bootleggers, and still reeked of moonshine. Every breathe of the stinking air was making Nancy feel sicker. Her stomach bubbled like a witch's cauldron.

“I coulda had her,” Al continued. “I could had that rotten little snitch. It's you--you're always sabotaging me. Just now, on the island, I had that Marvin dame in the palm of my hand. I was gonna charm 'em into leaving us alone. But you had to go and throw cold water on the plan!”

“A wolf like you needs all the cold water I can throw,” Mary grumbled. “As if I haven't noticed what it takes to turn *your* head! You were all hot and bothered over that overstuffed goose. Admit it!”

“It was a ploy!” Al roared.

“And what about the accident, huh?” Mary's voice was accusing. “Was *that* a ploy? I don't remember my hands being on the wheel when *you*--”

There was a dull, ugly smack, and Mary stopped talking. For long seconds, there was silence in the cabin.

“I don't want to hear another word about it,” Al said.

“Yes, *sir*,” Mary grumbled. “You know, you coulda broke my jaw, you big ape.”

“You better hope I didn't, doll, because we're gonna put that overactive mouth of yours to work. We need time, we need this cabin, and that means we need *you* to win it for us.”

“Al, be reasonable,” Mary pleaded. “I can't win an eating contest. I can't eat that much--”

“Why not? Your mouth is big enough. And you've got a week to practice.”

“Ha, so that's it! Any chance to fatten me up a little! Admit it, Al, you're twisted--”

“*I'm not twisted!*” Al roared. “You shut your lying mouth before I have to pop you another one. You're gonna win that contest, doll, or bust wide open trying, or else I'm gonna take every dollar of that money out of your worthless hide.”

Nancy quivered with anger. That awful man! She made a vow then and there that she would see Al behind bars, no matter what. Although her heart went out to Mary as the victim of such shocking treatment, she knew it was her duty to catch the lady crook as well. *At least it'll get her away from him!* she reassured herself.

She leaned back against the wall, unbuttoning her top collar button. Her neck was slick with sweat. Her groaning stomach felt like a washing machine overflowing with rotten soup, and there was nothing she wanted more than to bend down and sick up everything churning inside her. But she couldn't do it here. That would be disastrous! She kept her jaw clamped shut and fought back the impulse.

“Al,” Mary said, “I know we need the cabin, and I'll get it for us. But can't we stay in town at night? That...that thing I saw last night, it gave me the creeping heebie-jeebies. Now that Drew kid says this island's supposed to be haunted. I'm scared, Al.”

What thing? Nancy wondered. *What did she see?*

"You're dreaming, doll," Al said. "These nutty hicks and their ghosts stories have got you koo-koo in the head. But if it means that much to you, sure, we can get a room in town."

"Gee, thanks Al. That's swell."

"We need to get you in shape for the competition anyway. I figure we'll start with the diner, get a few sundaes into you and see what you can hold--"

"Gee, thanks Al," Mary said again, sarcastically this time. Nancy heard the door snap shut, and the crooks' voices faded away.

She counted two minutes. Then, unable to stand the stench and her roiling innards for a moment longer, she flung the door open, raced out of the shack, and gratefully gulped in the outside air. She doubled over in the bushes, coughing and choking, expecting to be sick. To her relief, the fresh air worked wonders, and the nausea soon abated on its own. That was fine with Nancy. She was a scrupulous economizer, and hated the thought of wasting food.

"So here's what we know," Nancy began. Bess and George waited expectantly. The three girls had returned from Specter Island to sleep off their enormous lunch and had been dead to the world straight through to dinner time. Now comfortably full of pasta, they sat on their beds to review what Nancy's sleuthing had uncovered.

"We know that Al and Mary have a grudge against us--especially me! We know that they're sticking around for a while, but we don't know why. Nor do we know where they hid the money. We don't even know if they're really the bank robbers, come to think of it. It could be merely a coincidence that their car was similar. Nevertheless, I feel quite confident that they're up to *some* sort of no good! And whatever it is, they want that fishing cabin to do it." Nancy thought about bringing up the mysterious *something* she'd heard Mary talking about. No, she decided. It probably wasn't important, anyway, and there was no need to frighten the others.

"So themmf emmff--" George began. She swallowed a huge mouthful of gooey brownie. The tall brunette was still working her way through the multiple desserts Nancy had piled on her for her comments at her cousin's expense. "So they're entering that eating contest? The one with an official cabin rental as a prize?"

"Mary is, yes. That must be the very cabin that's being offered. Which means if we want to foil their scheme--"

"--we've got to make sure they don't win the contest!" George finished. "Which means one of *us* is going to have to enter and win instead. The question is, who?"

They both looked at Bess.

"Oh, *no*," Bess groaned. "I'll never fit in my swimsuit again, will I?"