

## THE STUFFED SLEUTHS AFFAIR - Part 3

by Supercake Studio (<http://www.patreon.com/supercakestudio>)

*“You’ve meddled for the last time, Miss Drew!” the masked man chortled. Nancy struggled against the rough rope which bound her wrists and ankles to the chair.*

*“And you’ll never get away with this!” she spat.*

*“On the contrary, my dear, you’re the one who won’t get away,” said the man, tousling Nancy’s titian hair. “These old riverboats are terribly unreliable, aren’t they? Why, I wouldn’t be surprised if this old wreck sprung a leak any second.”*

*He smashed his cane--the one with the distinctive copper boar’s head top and the hexagonal shaft which had made those strange markings in the soft dirt behind he conservatory -- through the half-rotten bow. The room felt warmer at once, and Nancy heard the thick, gluey glorp of something thick and runny bubbling up into the hole.*

*“Oh dear. It looks like the end of the line for this bulky, crumbling old tub--because she’s about to perish in a shipwreck.” The villain pulled up the cane and poked the end of it rudely into Nancy’s stomach, leaving a smear of something warm and yellow. “Really, you ought to thank me. At least this fowl will be singing her swan song before she grows too fat to fly.”*

*“Never!” Nancy cried, redoubling her efforts. She felt perspiration break out on her brow. The room was becoming a sauna.*

*“A young sleuth, cut down in her prime--well, not quite her prime, eh?--by a tragic accident. How unfortunate.” The man sighed wistfully as he climbed the stairs to the deck. “Farewell, Miss Drew.”*

I’m tied to a chair, Nancy thought. Some accident! I wasn’t just whistling Dixie when I said he’d never get away with it. His grimy fingerprints are all over this caper. But a fat lot of good that’s going to do me!

*Her toes curled as the wave of molten cheese smothered them in gooey warmth. The whole floor of the room was a blanket of liquefied cheddar. It crept past her ankles and up her shins, two stinging rings of heat climbing up her legs in unison. Under other circumstances it might have felt pleasant, like sliding into a jacuzzi, but the steady glorp-glorp-glorp of the leak reminded her it wasn’t about to stop anytime soon.*

*Nancy fought against her bonds. The knots had been poorly tied, and the loops of rope weren’t nearly as tight as they should have been. She should have been able to work her wrists and ankles out easily. But, for some reason, she couldn’t. Her wrists felt thick and ungainly. Her ankles were elephantine. The chair creaked as she shifted, as if it was laboring under a massive weight.*

I’m too plump to escape, she thought miserably. The burgeoning cheese had bubbled up to her waist. And drowning in a fattening fondue sure isn’t going to help!

*The cheese reached her chest. Her chin. Her nose, and then it was over her head and she was trapped in a dark, hot womb. She held her breath until she couldn’t stand it anymore, and then she exhaled and drew in a mouthful of hot cheese.*

*It slid easily down her throat, filling her up with heat from the inside. She felt herself bulge as she filled with cheese. She coughed and spluttered and thrashed, but the cheese kept coming, and she was so big and full and overcooked...*

This is it! she thought miserably. I’m fon-done for!

With a choking gasp, Nancy sat up in bed, kicking off the heavy comforter. Her mouth felt like it was stuffed with wool. A moment later, she realized that’s because she was chewing on one of the thick, quilted corners, and spat it out.

She sighed and ran a hand through her sopping titian locks. No wonder she'd felt so overheated, sleeping under those heavy covers. In the bathroom, she splashed cold water on her flushed face. The sun was just beginning to rise. *I may as well get up now. The early bird gets the worm!*

*Then again, this early bird has had more of her share of worms already,* she reminded herself ruefully as she shrugged on her blouse. After a solid week of Aunt Mildred's cooking, she could barely do up the buttons, and her skirt was getting uncomfortably tight. It was no wonder Nancy was having dreams about growing plump--when it was happening to her wide awake, too!

Nancy craned her neck, then put her chin against her chest. Was her face fuller? Her figure certainly was. She really should have purchased a new set of clothes yesterday--she looked almost indecent, the way the fabric was stretching and bunching.

*I'm practically bursting at the seams! Goodness, what is Ned going to think?* she fretted. *Maybe I can tell him I'm sick, and do a solid week of calisthenics before I let him see me-- or maybe I can wear one of Father's old school sweaters everywhere...or maybe he'll just have to make do with a chubby girlfriend until I slim down!*

Breakfast certainly wasn't going to help matters. Aunt Mildred had made another gigantic spread, and Bess began drooling just looking at it.

"Oh, no, you don't," George said, slapping the blonde's hand away from the plate. "You've got an eating contest to win today!"

"That's not until noon!" Bess moaned. "What am I supposed to survive on until then, bread and water?"

"Not bread, certainly," Nancy said. "But I think ice water would be acceptable. You're in training, Bess, remember?"

Bess groaned. "I can't skip breakfast. I'm a growing girl."

"You sure are," George said, grinning.

Nancy eyed her, mentally adding another dessert to George's tally. She was going to have to start watching what she said. Bess may have put on a few pounds over her week of training, but if anyone here was a "growing girl", it was George herself! Aunt Mildred's endless pampering--and the gooey desserts Nancy had sternly insisted she consume every time she made fun of Bess's weight--had taken quite a toll on the slim brunette's figure. It didn't take a big meal to give her trouble with those shorts anymore; her midsection was growing so plump that she could barely button them up.

*She's gained more weight than either of us,* Nancy reflected, *and she still can't let Bess alone!* Nancy had been sure the tomboyish girl would stop her cruel taunting once she'd started getting chubby herself, but if anything, George had gotten worse even as Nancy stuffed her full of fattening treats.

*At this rate, she's going to be the plumpest girl in River Heights, and she'll still be making fun of Bess,* Nancy thought wryly.

"Just one strip of bacon?" Bess whined.

"No!" said George. "Oh, let's face it, Nancy. There's no way we're keeping this out of Bess's greedy gullet short of eating it all ourselves."

"Then that's just what we'll have to do," Nancy said practically.

George's eyes grew round. "Hypers, Nancy, there's enough here for an army! There's no way!"

"After this week," Nancy said, "I think our stomachs can handle anything." She leaned forward and began scooping piles of scrambled egg onto her plate, feeling her waistband pulling tight. *Golly, I just hope I can say the same for these seams!*

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"Oh, boy, does that smell good!" Bess said, salivating at the delicious sights and smells of the Lake Benson Fishing Festival. "U-m-m-m! Just look at those delicious catfish fillets!"

She plucked a skewer of crispy fish from the tray of free samples and opened her mouth eagerly,

only to bite into air as Nancy deftly plucked the skewer away from her.

“No you don't, Bess,” Nancy said, passing it to George. “The contest! Think of the contest!”

“The only thing I can think of is food,” Bess moaned. “I'm hungry enough to eat a horse!”

“How about a catfish?” Nancy said. “You'll be eating plenty of it soon enough! In the meantime--”

“In the meantime, I'm starving!” the plump blonde complained. “You left me one measly slice of toast for breakfast. One! And speaking of bread--”

She picked up a freshly-baked mini-croissant and had it halfway to her mouth before Nancy snatched it away and handed it to George.

“Please stop taking food,” she chided. Bess sniffed and reached for another mini-croissant, pointedly picking the least “mini” in the basket, and Nancy grabbed it away again.

“I can't go on,” George moaned, holding her stomach. “I'm too full!”

“How can you possibly be *full*?” Bess asked. She spun to take in the full breadth of the festival, her flower-printed sundress twirling around her in the breeze. It had an empire waist, and was the only thing she owned that was still just a little loose-fitting after her week in Lake Benson. Perfect for a girl who was about to compete in an eating contest in a few hours--but she seemed more concerned with the cornucopia surrounding her at that moment. “I don't think I could *ever* get full here,” she continued. “It all looks so *scrumptious!*”

“Let's hope you're right,” Nancy said. For her part, she was trying to look at the food as little as possible. She was so stuffed from breakfast, just the sight of it made her feel ill.

But when she saw Bess twirl over to a booth selling deep-fried candy bars and deftly scoop up a pair, Nancy tsked and plucked them right out of her fingers to be disposed of by George and herself.

“Can we please take a break?” George moaned. “I need sit down somewhere far away from the food, before this blonde garbage disposal stuffs us both to death!”

“It's only...” Nancy glanced down at her watch. *Three more hours to the contest!* How were they ever going to survive Bess' appetite for that long? “...only a little while longer.”

“Um, Nancy, I *really need* to sit down. Somewhere out of the way.” George spoke in a low voice, but there was a blush in her cheeks.

“Is something wrong?” Nancy asked.

George turned a deeper crimson. “I-I think I lost a button.”

Nancy looked down at George's smart white nautical shorts and gasped. It was true! George's waistline had finally expanded so far, the top button had popped clean off! It was a darn lucky thing that George's bottom had gotten so big, too, otherwise her shorts would be falling down around her ankles. As it was, they were so full of George that they didn't budge. But it still had to be awfully embarrassing!

“I think that sounds like an excellent idea,” Nancy said. She was sure she was only a bite of two away from popping a seam herself. The two girls hustled the protesting Bess over to the nearest bench and sat her down between them.

“This ought to keep you in your place, oh chunky cousin of mine,” George said with satisfaction as the two girls leaned against her from either side.

“One...one dessert...for you...” Nancy yawned.

“Aren't I...fat enough?” George mumbled, leaning her head on Bess's shoulder. “I'm starting...to look...like Bess...”

“Two...desserts...” Nancy murmured, closing her eyes. *A good sleuth has to stay sharp*, she reminded herself. *A good sleuth has to stay vigilant!*

*And what better way to keep myself sharp as a whip than to take a short, refreshing catnap?*

No! she told herself. Vigilant!

But even as she said this, she was sinking, down, down, her cheek mooshing into Bess's soft shoulder, her jaw going slack, the warmth of the girl seeming to envelope her. She was

sinking...sinking...

She snored lightly.

Bess jiggled her shoulder, but Nancy didn't wake up. George, on her other shoulder, was similarly unconscious. The combination of warm sun and their overstuffed, distended stomachs had conspired to send them deep, deep into food comas.

Her own growling belly refused to let her rest, twisting inside her like a starving snake. Carefully, Bess extricated herself from the snoozing girls.

*I've got to take the edge off*, she told herself, shooting a guilty look back at them. *I'm about to faint from hunger! All I need is a little snack to tide me over, that's all. Just a teeny tiny snack.*

Squaring her shoulders, she strode off in the direction where the delicious smells were the thickest. *Nancy and George think I have no willpower! she sniffed. Well, I'll show them!*

She resolved she would only have one little snack. Just to take the edge off. But that one little snack was *so* good...

She had a second, to keep taking the edge off.

Then a third. It was a big edge.

"I've really...mmph...I've got...mmph...I've got to stop eating," Bess told herself sternly, shoveling French fried potatoes into her mouth. "Right after I finish this."

She dropped the container in the trash. "That's it. That's it! No more food. *Oh*, but they have deep-fried egg rolls...!"

"Okay, that was really it," she warned herself under her breath as she polished off the carton of egg rolls. "You don't want to be too full to compete. You're done!"

"Say, I know you!" she heard a friendly voice call. Bess turned, and her eyes widened as she met the gaze of the handsome boy from the malt shop, the one she, George, and Nancy had met on their way into town. He was manning a small, freshly-painted booth. He smiled at Bess, and her heart fluttered.

"It's, uh--" the boy said. "Uhm...Bess, wasn't it? Gosh, you look pretty today."

"Thanks!" Bess said, melting. "So do you!"

"Huh?"

"Oh, I mean...uh..." Bess blushed. "...so...do... you...come here often?"

"Er, once a year," the boy said, "during the fair, to represent our malt shop. I make a mean root beer float. Want one? On the house."

"Oh, yes!" Bess said. After all, it would have been positively *rude* to say no. And the frosty, foaming mug of root beer looked *so* appetizing as he poured in the foamy liquid and plopped in three big scoops of vanilla ice cream. Bess smacked her lips. All this eating could really work up an appetite!

She lifted the mug to her lips and drained it greedily, feeling the icy mixture of soda and dairy products flowing into her belly with a shock of cold. "Mm!" she said, putting down the empty glass. "Oh, *jeeppers*, that was delicious!"

"Glad you liked it!" he said. "I hope you have a good time at our little fair."

"I'm sure I will, now that the wardens aren't looking over my shoulder," Bess said. She gazed up at him with big eyes and fluttered her lashes. "Although I'm sure I'd have an even better time if I had a handsome escort..."

"Gee, I'd love to, Bess," the boy said, looking rueful, "only I have to stay here and man the station. Pop says I can't take my morning break until I've sold at least six dozen floats. Unless you want to wait around while I sell three more?" He looked hopeful. "Maybe it won't take too long."

Bess looked around. Nobody else was stopping at the booth. *Maybe* it wouldn't take too long, and maybe...

She made up her mind. She just couldn't let this scrumptious fellow out of her sight! "There's no need to wait," she said, laying a neatly folded dollar bill on the counter. "Three floats, please."

"Gosh, that's an awful lots of floats for one girl," the boy observed.

"It's an awful lot of floats for anybody," Bess said with a coy smile, "but gosh, I'm feeling real warm all of a sudden."

Beth licked her lips in anticipation as she watched the floats come together. A little voice reminded her that she had a contest to enter, but that was three hours away--well, more like two and a half, now, but still--and she would surely be hungry again.

She dove right in to the first float, taking big gulps of the icy liquid. It was a good thing she'd worked up that immunity to brain freeze while helping Nancy solve *The Case of the Vanilla Ice Cream Vampire!* She polished off the first float and started on the second, relishing the soft, thick dessert. They were very substantial shakes, with several scoops each, and by the time she finished the second one, she felt bloated. The last shake didn't look as appetizing.

*Two out of three won't get me anything, she told herself, and it's mostly liquid anyway. I'll be fine. I can't stop now!*

The third shake went down much more slowly. Conscious of the boy's eyes on her, Bess tried not to lean back too far as she drained the tall glass, lest the fall of her sundress revealed just how much her stomach bulged.

"Whew!" she said, finishing and setting down the glasses. "Done!"

The boy whistled. "Now that's impressive!"

Bess grinned and ran her tongue over her teeth. She wished she could belch. After chugging four highly carbonated sodas in a row, her stomach felt a little like an overinflated party balloon, but she didn't dare let any of it off in front of such a handsome cutie pie.

She shuddered. The icy cold was spreading out from her belly, robbing her plush body of its usual warmth, and she was really starting to feel the chill.

The boy's arm was around her, cradling her shoulder. "Are you okay?"

"J-j-j-just a little cold," Bess said through chattering teeth, rubbing her bare arms. She was breaking out in goose flesh.

"You're freezing!" the boy said, concerned. "We need to get something warm in your stomach. Something to act as an antidote to all that ice cream."

"Oh, I s-shouldn't eat any-m-m-m-more," Bess protested. "I-I-I h-have to--"

"Ice cream's not a real meal," the boy said, and Bess couldn't help but agree. "You need something more substantial. How about a hamburger? Come on, my treat!"

Bess's eyes lit up. Were there any words more beautiful? And she still had more than two whole hours before the competition, after all...

"Okay," she said, "j-j-just don't let me eat too much!"

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Slowly, deliberately, Bess put one foot in front of the other, cursing every cute boy and delicious hamburger she'd ever met. Her stomach was so full that even the drape of her sundress couldn't fully disguise the way she bulged.

*Why do I do this to myself?* she groaned, but of course she knew the answer--she'd been staring at that gorgeous face, and all the food had been free, free! Now she was staring at an eating contest in her immediate future, and she was already stuffed to the gills. *Oh, Nancy's going to kill me, she thought miserably. And I'll never hear the end of it from George!*

At least things had gone well with...what was his name? No matter. They had a date for the movies tonight. Bess sighed. *I just hope I can squeeze myself into a theater seat by then!*

She made her way back to the bench, ready to face the music, but to her surprise, Nancy and George were still snoozing. Had they really been *that* tired? Well, it was a stroke of luck. She settled her weight carefully between them, gingerly easing herself into position, and lay her head on Nancy's shoulder. Bess was hot, sweaty, exhausted, and completely stuffed--and she passed out almost at once.

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Nancy had almost given up, content to sink into the depths, when she felt a strong hand grip her collar and haul her upward. With a loud, sucking smack, she broke free of the endless sea of molten mozzarella and landed in a small fishing dinghy, gasping like a fish.

"Nancy" her rescuer cried. "Nancy, are you all right?" Nancy's eyes bugged out in surprise, for this was no scruffy member of the angling classes--why, this was none other than Ned Nickerson, Nancy's long-time boyfriend, who had shown up just in time to save her from her cheesy fate!

She coughed and sputtered. She may have been out of the cheese, but the cheese wasn't out of her. She was so full of it, she could barely talk! "I'm...all right," she managed, breathing shallowly. "Thank you...Ned."

She looked down at herself and almost screamed. She'd grown even plumper while submerged, as if her body had absorbed the calories like a sponge. Her blouse had burst open, leaving her lumpy torso covered by nothing by the thin silk of her slip, which lay on her like a drift of snow on a landscape of hills and valleys. This would have been embarrassing even if she'd been her usual svelte self, but now, with her as fat as a prize pig...she wanted to die of humiliation!

"Ned," she said, "I can explain! I'm going to start a rigorous program of exercise just as soon as we get back to River Heights--at least, as soon as I can move--"

"No time for that now, Nancy!" Ned exclaimed. "The boat is sinking!"

"Sinking?" Nancy breathed in horror.

"Your gigantic weight was too much for it. We've sprung a leak!"

Nancy looked down in horror as cheese bubbled through a crack in the dingy, forming a gooey puddle between her splayed knees. "Oh, Ned! What can we do?"

"There's only one thing we can do, Nancy. You're going to have to eat it as fast as it comes in while I row us to shore."

"Eat it?" Nancy squawked. "Oh, no, I couldn't!"

"You have to!"

"Ned, please," Nancy begged. "I'll burst!"

"We'll both drown if you don't!"

Her eyes wet with frustration, Nancy laboriously pulled herself to a sitting position and got her legs under her, finally positioning herself on her hands and knees. "Yowch!" she said. Her belly was already so distended it hung down almost to the boards, and the hot cheese had stung against the taut porcelain flesh.

I must do this, she told herself sternly. And you, stomach, are going to hold it in and like it!

She put her mouth against the hole and began gulping the cheese down as quickly as she could, forcing it down, down, down into her already overfull reservoir and praying they got to shore soon.

"Only fifty more miles!" Ned said cheerfully. "Keep drinking, Nancy! It'll be your fault if we sink, you know. If only you hadn't gotten so fat...so fat..."

Nancy jolted awake again, blinking against the blinding light of midday. She realized, with some embarrassment, that rather than drinking molten cheese, she'd been enthusiastically licking Bess's ear. Bess and George snoozed next to her.

"George?" she said. "George, wake up!"

"Mrrmm," George murmured. "Stop pumping, I'm full."

"Come on, George!" Nancy said, and George's eyes fluttered open.

"Nancy, is that you?" she said blearily. "Ugh. I was dreaming I was a bike and someone was putting too much air in my tires. Then some little brat rode me all over town,"

"I suppose bad dreams are only to be expected, napping on such full stomachs," Nancy said practically. She stretched, carefully-stopping when she felt the buttons on her too-small blouse straining. Then she checked her watch. "And goodness, did we sleep! It's almost time for the contest!"

“Say, Nancy?” George asked.

“Yes?”

“Has Bess been here the whole time?”

“Well--we were leaning against her. I didn't feel her move, did you?”

“I was a little busy being pumped to sixty PSI and ridden around town by some snot-nosed brat!” George snapped.

“I guess being turned into a child's bicycle would make anyone a little huffy,” Nancy observed wryly. “Do you really think Bess could have gotten off this bench without us waking up?”

“This ball of blubber can be surprisingly cunning when it comes to food. I wouldn't put anything past her.”

Nancy eyed Bess's stomach. Was it her imagination, or did Bess look a little rounder than she had this morning? Then again, she'd been looking rounder and rounder all week--they all had.

“Bess?” she said. “Bess? It's time to wake up.”

Bess groaned and shifted in her sleep. Nancy gently shook the pudgy blonde until she finally awoke, yawning and muttering.

“Guess what, Bess?” Nancy asked.

Bess blinked sleepily. “What is it?”

“I know you've been waiting--well, guess what? It's time for you to show everyone just how much food Bess Marvin can put away when she's *really* hungry!”

Bess smiled weakly, looking green. “Oh...goody.”