

Chapter 1

Sarcasm, Suspension, and Summer

It may seem impossible, or at least pointless, for a teacher to suspend a student on the last day of school, but Ms. Place did it anyway. Her therapist had been the first one to suggest that the act may have a calming effect on her, and she had inwardly hoped that Tobey would be the one to give her a reason, any reason, to suspend him on that last Friday before summer. In fact, Ms. Place had been trying to suspend Tobey Freeman in her science class all year but could never seem to collect enough concrete evidence to connect him to the unexplainable events that took place. The believability of her proof was no better this time either, but she decided to suspend him simply out of spite, since it would be her last chance to do so and would be beneficial for her emotional state.

As always, the offense wasn't a big thing, but it was a direct violation of her authority in the classroom. As a reward to her students on the last day of class, Ms. Place was trying to show a video on mutations in animals due to pollution. She awaited with certainty Tobey's usual pranks. At least she assumed they were his pranks. In reality, she had yet to catch him in the act of doing anything even remotely against the rules. The movie had only been playing for five minutes when the students noticed that the volume was slowly increasing, one notch at a time, until the speakers were blaring: "The damage done to this five-legged frog is permanent, and it is unlikely that *he will live long with the disability in the face of natural predators.*"

Confused, Ms. Place glanced at the remote sitting in front of her on the desk. She quickly lowered the volume and apologized to the neighboring teacher, who was glaring in from the doorway.

“Other animals are affected by pollution in water sources as well. Take, for instance, this rare, two-headed . . .”

The documentary suddenly muted, and the kids started to snicker. Ms. Place turned the volume back up and glanced around the room at the innocent faces. Tobey propped his head in his hand and rolled his eyes in boredom. As he yawned, the screen flashed completely off, and Ms. Place stood abruptly. Marching over to the door, she flipped on the light switch.

“All right, enough! I don’t know how you managed this, Tobey, but I know it’s your fault.”

Tobey gave her an innocent look. “How would I do that? The remote has been on your desk for the entire period.”

“So you don’t deny it!” she exploded. “You have no respect. You have been making a mockery of my teaching all year, and I have had enough. I don’t really care if I have proof or not!”

Tobey tried to hold his tongue, he really did, but he couldn’t help himself. “I’m sorry you feel that way, Ms. Plackey.”

The kids around him tried to smother their giggles at his obvious mispronunciation of her name.

“It’s ‘Place’! And I should suspend you. I have been trying to suspend you all year, and I have had enough!”

“Then why don’t you? I mean, if it will make you feel better, then that’s what you should do. I don’t want to upset you.”

“I do not want to hear another word out of you!”

The whole class sat in complete silence, wondering if Ms. Place would find the nerve to actually suspend him for doing nothing.

With a stiff frown, Ms. Place straightened her skirt. “Why don’t I suspend you? Why don’t I?” she asked again, as if arguing with

herself. She dramatically opened her desk drawer, pulled out the infamous blue sheet of paper, and filled out the top portion with determination.

“Tobey, take this form to the principal’s office, immediately.”

“Are you serious?” As he took the form, he tried not to laugh at the absurdity of the situation. “I didn’t even do anything.”

“I am completely serious, and we’ll see how innocent the principal finds you. It’s your word against mine.” Ms. Place flashed him a triumphant smile. “Have a nice summer, Tobey. It’s a shame we had to part on these terms.” She didn’t even try to suppress the sarcasm in her voice.

“I agree, Ms. Plackey,” he replied with a sincere smile.

“It’s ‘Place’!” she responded, her voice cracking and her right eye twitching. “‘Place’!”

“Right, sorry.”

Tobey took the blue paper and strolled down the hall to the principal’s office with a satisfied grin on his face. As for Ms. Place, she could hear the words of her doctor echoing in her head as Tobey’s steps echoed down the hall.

“Work-related stress is causing numerous health issues that have the potential to develop into serious health risks unless you change your lifestyle drastically,” he had informed her at her last appointment.

She knew that every headache, blood clot, frayed nerve, heart pain, and eye twitch had been indirectly caused by Tobey, but now her problems were over. What would she possibly talk about in her therapy sessions during the summer?

Tobey walked down the sterile hall, realizing without nostalgia that it would be his last time to travel through it for the next three months. While he sometimes felt bad for the trials he had put Ms. Place through in the last year, he couldn’t ever seem to be able

to pass up the opportunity to play an untraceable prank. Tobey finally reached the principal's office, approached the secretary's desk, and handed her the blue form. The young woman with frizzy blonde hair behind the desk gave him a look of exasperation.

"What is this?"

"Uh, it's a suspension form."

"I know what it is," she replied tartly, gazing severely over the rims of her tiny glasses. "Why do you have one?"

"The movie stopped in the middle, and the teacher thinks I did it."

"I don't care why your teacher gave you one," she said, rolling her beady eyes. "What I meant was, why are you being suspended on the last day of class? It would go into effect tomorrow, which is, in fact, summer."

"I'm not sure."

"Which annoying teacher did this?" she demanded, waving the blue form in exasperation. "Wait, don't tell me, I already know. Just sit here until Ms. Place's class is over and then go home and enjoy your summer."

"Okay." He shrugged and sat down.

"Teachers these days," the secretary muttered to herself as she violently crumpled up the form and stuffed it into the garbage can. "They don't exercise their authority to punish students when they deserve it, and then they try to blame the innocent kids for everything when it's convenient. Suspending a kid on the last day of school—what an idea!"

Tobey smiled in spite of himself as he fingered the universal remote on the keychain in his pocket. For only seven dollars, Tobey had purchased the most entertaining gadget that he had ever tested in Ms. Place's class. The remote the size of a bite-sized Hershey's bar could control power and volume on any nearby electronics at the press of a button. It was such a simple trick but provided endless

potential for pranks with no possible trace back to him. He was always surprised at how often people would express their anger towards the malfunctioning machines rather than suspect that a person was behind the strange behavior of their electronics.

As he sat in the faded, mustard-yellow chair in the principal's office, Tobey thought about his plans for summer, the topic that had occupied his attention for the last few weeks. The first day of summer meant more than just the end of the school year. It meant freedom: freedom from society, from all constraints, from wearing shoes, from doing homework, and from the reality of life with any form of obligation and regulation. Tobey wasn't really expecting much out of the summer other than a lot of video games, sleeping late, and playing laser tag with his neighborhood friends.

There were a few things he would miss about school but nothing that he couldn't live without. He needed some time to work on new pranks anyway; he had used up his best ones in Ms. Place's class. One of his favorite tricks of the year was the famous Printer Prank. One day when Ms. Place had the class break into groups and do computer research for their papers, Tobey temporarily changed the settings of the printer to print a paper one week from the command. The next week, at the set time, the printer sprang to life in the middle of Ms. Place's lecture on photosynthesis. It spit out the page into the tray, and Ms. Place stopped midsentence to stare at the machine in surprise. She picked up the paper with caution and read it slowly to herself.

Dear Ms. Place,

This is a cordial warning from a fellow teacher that if you even think about looking at my lunch in the teacher's lounge refrigerator one more time, I will personally assure that you are no longer a threat to my mealtime.

Sincerely,

The owner of the Tupperware container with the green lid

Her lips moved as she read over the words a second time in astonishment.

“Um, class, would you please excuse me for just one moment?”

The students murmured in confusion as she practically stomped out of the room and down the hall. As she left, Tobey rose and stood in the doorway. Ms. Place rapped on the classroom door just down the hall from hers with determination. Staying out of sight, Tobey heard the following conversation.

“Ms. Place? Can I help you?” Mr. Johnson asked, poking his head into the hall.

“This letter is completely uncalled for!” she sputtered, practically throwing the paper at him. “If you think I would even consider eating your week-old meatloaf, you must be kidding! Don’t ever interrupt my class with such a ridiculous claim again, or I will take it all the way to the superintendent!”

Tobey rushed back to his seat as Ms. Place’s heels clacked angrily back down the hall, leaving Mr. Johnson speechless in his doorway. Ms. Place burst into the room and paused in the doorway, tucking a lock of stray hair behind her ear and visibly composing herself.

“Class, let’s continue with the lesson,” she had declared stiffly.

Tobey was not really looking for trouble. He simply could not keep himself entertained enough in class without the occasional diversion. Tobey was a boy right on the edge of becoming a man who was trying to figure out his purpose in life on the inside, while only trying to grow into his quickly expanding world on the outside. Thirteen years old and on the brink of manhood, Tobey was trying to decide what kind of person he would become, but all of his changes and struggles were subconscious. All he knew was that during this particular summer, life was waiting to be lived, games were waiting to be played, and time was ready to be wasted

in whatever way he thought best. He considered himself a typical teenager, not quite ready to grow up or think about life beyond the joys of the day, and he made a point of making the most of each moment as it came.

Tobey's signature physical feature was his curly blonde hair, which no female could resist running her hands through. From the day he was born, women at the grocery store or at church whom Tobey didn't even know were irresistibly drawn to touch his golden locks. While it had been cute when he was little, he had grown self-conscious about it as a teenager and hated for anyone to get near his hair.

He had hazel eyes and was an active boy with an insatiable adventurous spirit. He enjoyed catching snakes, climbing buildings, sword fighting with sticks, learning ninja tricks, and leaping out of trees. Anything seeming remotely dangerous, requiring some skill to perform, and presenting a physical challenge was fair game in his activities, keeping him endlessly entertained.

His suburban southern Louisiana neighborhood had an abnormally large number of boys, all between the ages of seven and thirteen, and they were capable of creating unbelievable havoc when they were together. While the boys rarely took advantage of their power in numbers, they worked hard to keep themselves constantly occupied with every kind of diversion they could think of. The favorite activity was laser tag. The electronic guns would shoot lasers at the guns of the other players, taking away from the opponents' allotted number of lives. The guns also had a button for shields, giving the player ten seconds in which the gun cannot get shot or shoot others. Each gun had a screen that displayed the number of lives left and when shields were being used. The weapon would also audibly alert the player at the beginning of the round, when an opposing player was near,

and when the player ran out of lives. With changing teams, the group played laser tag from dawn until dusk in nearby forests, by the river, in their mothers' flower gardens, and in and around the houses. They constantly practiced the techniques of the various roles of assaulting, sniping, charging, and sneaking yet never seemed to tire of the game.

Tobey mulled over all of the possibilities that the next day presented until the bell announcing the end of class jerked him out of his thoughts.

"And the year is finally over," the secretary remarked with a sigh as she shoved some papers in the desk drawer.

Tobey smiled sweetly and waved to the secretary. She rolled her eyes in return.

"You don't have to be nice. Just go home," she told him.

Ignoring her lack of enthusiasm over the single best day of the year, he squeezed through the crowd of students filing into the hall and boarded the bus for the last ride of his seventh-grade year. Absolutely nothing could dampen Tobey's spirits as the bus driver pulled out of the busy parking lot.

This summer is going to be the best one in my entire life. I can just tell that things are never going to be the same again!