

Chapter 1

The Great Escape

"Excuse me, sir, but you're standing in my pudding." The gentleman in the hospital gown standing on the table didn't seem to notice and Bernardo wasn't particularly annoyed, as he was never a pudding fanatic, but it was instances like this that were making his stay at The Lombardo Institute For The Mentally Sub-Standard into something of a chore. The dining hall was abuzz with activity and the other inmates of this little prison wandered aimlessly about him, screaming, crying, and otherwise acting like a bunch of crazy people, as crazy people are generally wont to do.

"Get him down from there!" The head orderly was exceptionally unhappy with the way things were going and was expressing his frustration loudly toward the two orderlies under his guidance by screaming directions and stomping his cowboy boots, his one bit of personal identity in the bland conformity of the institution, not that he was supposed to wear them. "Get him down now! Francois! Get his leg! No, Rudy, get the other one! Jesus Christ!"

Things were going less than swimmingly for the subordinate orderlies and the man hanging from the ceiling fan, spinning in slow circles, wasn't budging at all. Somehow he kept his grip as Francois and Rudy were lifted from the ground, trying desperately to hang on, and they too spun slowly through the air as the lead orderly, Mick, rubbed his brow in frustration and watched them from his perch on the step ladder, surely on his way to a migraine or an early retirement after dealing with this sort of foolishness day in and day out for seven and a half years. Of course, one couldn't *really* blame the patients, as they were crazy. They didn't even realize they were crazy, which is why they were here and why, subsequently, he spent all day trying to pry grown men off ceiling fans, prevent them from eating paint chips, small objects, or each other, and restraining a large variety of people who would start screaming for no reason at all, in slight difference to the same kind of people who talked loudly on cell phones while riding mass transit or insisted on screaming at the minimum wage slaves at Taco Cabeza because they didn't read the person's mind in regards to which sauces or ingredients they didn't want on their food.

Bernardo anticipated something violent or horrible coming very soon, so, as he got up to take his tray back to the kitchen, he walked by the fan and its human ornaments, dangling precariously in the midst of the hall, still rotating over the linoleum.

"Claude, please be a dear and get down from the ceiling fan. I thought we'd had a talk about responsibility and the proper usage of household mechanical devices."

Claude, until then hanging from the fan, released his grip immediately and he, Francois, and Rudy collapsed into pile at the base of the ladder with the crunch of stretched tendons and torn ligaments as Bernardo turned and headed on for the kitchen, barely stopping to even notice the results he had wrought. Mick started dragging them all to their feet and finally apprehended the mischievous Claude. The orderlies stared daggers into Bernardo's back as he shuffled away.

"Thank you," Bernardo yelled back to the milling and oblivious Claude as he left the room.

Bernardo Walterhaus headed back to the day room.



Bernardo sat quietly in a large comfy chair in the day room, wrapped snugly in his standard-issue scrubs and robe, thumbing through an ancient, yellowed copy of *Woman's Day Monthly*, admiring the new and fashionable developments in gowns for 1968 as the sun beat down through the greenhouse-like windows of the expansive room, where various other strange men wandered, gibbering and laughing to themselves, as the insane generally do when left to their own devices.

"Walterhaus..." Bernardo looked up as Mick closed in on him, scowling through his handlebar moustache and swaggering in his would-be cowboy way.

Bernardo tapped at one of the pictures in the magazine. "I think my mother had this very same dress." He slowly kicked his slippered foot back and forth in disinterest, refusing to make eye contact or acknowledge Mick's presence, as he felt doing so only encouraged the orderlies to do their jobs, which was never a good idea. "Of course, she was wearing it twenty years ago, which is a little behind the curve. Though many say that I got my fashion sense

from her. What do you think about fashion as a representation of the self?"

Mick's face showed no acknowledgement, as it never seemed to, though that could be the moustache getting the way. "Dr. Lombardo wants to see you, pronto."

Bernardo closed the magazine, which crackled with age and nearly spat a cloud of dust from its decaying pages, setting it aside on a table, and stood up amongst the chaos of the wandering institutionalized souls around him.

"Well, then, perhaps we should see him immediately... On the way, I'll tell you a story about my father's pipe collection."



Bernardo sat across the desk, waiting. The woman that sat behind it, Clovis, had been Dr. Lombardo's secretary for nigh on twenty years, it was said. Very little looked to have changed about her during that time, her hair sitting in a winding pile on the top of her head, held in place by two huge pins, her blouse appearing to be something out of that issue of *Woman's Day Monthly*, lacy and polka-dotted with a ruffle down the front, stretched to its limit across her girth, and a pair of ill-fitting cat's-eye black-rimmed glasses perched on her voluminous face, whose features were all packed into its center, a quality most people found particularly disturbing. She was something out of antiquity, but possessed no anachronistically pleasing personality like one would imagine from some woman who walked out of a 1950's home economics film strip. That type of woman was far from Clovis, who carried the reek of medicinal-grade cleansers and disinfectants about her constantly and was well on her way to developing a full moustache, much better than the weak clumps of hair that Bernardo had attempted to grow in the general stupidity of his youth and exuberance to seem older and, therefore, more mature. Obviously, he eventually learned all life's hard lessons about age, maturity, and moustaches.

"You're looking lovely today, Clovis. There's something particularly radiant about you." Bernardo often lied just to keep himself entertained.

She gave Bernardo the sort of look that a fish generally gives while being wrapped in newspaper.

"Are you using any new moisturizers, waxes, or fixatives? A new facial... gloss of some kind?" He added "Moustache bleach?" under his breath, unsure if any of these things actually existed for conventional sale.

Clovis was generally quiet to the point of never making a sound, only communicating in sluggish grunts when necessitated by her work. Her voice was a rasp and it was best unheard for everyone's sake. Dr. Lombardo had even taken to answering his own calls, so he wouldn't have to speak with her over the intercom. Realistically, that severely limited the actual amount of utility she provided, as she was a secretary and not a professional TV-watcher, bowler, or a seafaring Norse barbarian warrior.

So she spent much of her time watching a small television set, usually tuned to whatever grimy soap opera she could find with the limited reception of the rabbit ears within the huge stone building. Usually it was something about large-chested men and women coming together in strangely-named small towns and hospitals to incite each other to passion, violence, or the onset of legal proceedings. Or very well all of the above, just not necessarily in that order. Today, those soap operas had been pre-empted to show an important local news story on every one of the channels that had decent reception on Wednesdays, of which there were three, a fact which surely must have annoyed Clovis, but no one would know the difference as her range of emotion only went from a deep scowl to a blank daze.

Having received not even the most reptilian of responses from Clovis regarding his queries on facial alteration and lubrication, Bernardo began watching the TV with particular attention as the reporter detailed the crime that had lead to this daytime TV standstill.

"Tom, we're outside the Archipelligo mansion as we speak, where Desmond Archipelligo is meeting with the Mayor, representatives from the Oberwalz police force, federal agents, and Mr. Archipelligo's legal team. It is unclear whether they have any leads in the case at this time."

"Thanks, Robert." They returned to the anchor in the studio, a grim-faced man with a bushy moustache totally unfitting to his face and a wardrobe unfitting to his body. "Louissa Marianna Archipelligo, daughter of Desmond Archipelligo, millionaire industrialist, missing. There are currently no suspects announced, but her driver, Pepé

Blackwell, is also listed as missing. Authorities are unsure at this time if there is any connection..." He seemed to sag in his seat from the sheer weight of the suit jacket he was wearing, perhaps borrowed from another anchor that was 40 pounds heavier.

"Very curious... It may be time, if the proverbial stars are so aligned." Bernardo muttered to himself, not that Clovis registered anything. "If not now, then when? When better than now? And, if not then, then what better time than now for this, which so obviously is for me? None, so it then must be time."

Clovis barely spared him a piggish glance before returning her porcine eyes to the tiny television with a hunger that was usually accompanied by a feral gorging or a sale at MacHaggarty's Women's Clothiers & Equestrian Supply Depot (where you get "panties for pennies" and all petite maternity clothing and horseback riding outfits are 30% off for a limited time). "Now we return you to 'The Nights Of Our Passion', already in progress. We will break back in with any further developments. I'm Tom Brunswick. Good day."

"Today of all days. Today of all days..." Bernardo looked for significance in the date: August 18. And a Wednesday. There was a full moon in 4 days. Salisbury steak was on the menu for dinner. He believed corn was accompanying, though he could be wrong. They had been known to go with pinto beans as a vegetable side, but it was entirely inappropriate for the meal. The Dow was down 20 points. No two-headed calves had been born in Oberwalz in one year, three months, and six days. He was starting to think that Pepsi might taste as good as Coke. He had a rash on his left inner thigh in the shape of Jimmy Dean serving a Bundt cake to the Pointer Sisters. Was this indeed the time? Were these the portents he was looking for?

Dr. Lombardo opened his office door. "Mr. Walterhaus, I can see you now."

"I should hope so; otherwise it means you're still blind..." He was met with silence. "Just a small joke, doctor."



The man with the hat had stopped at the rest stop on Highway 96, fourteen miles to the West of Westfallsbrookburg, well out of Oberwalz County. More

noticeable than the large, colorful, ostentatious bowler hat that he wore, most people assumed to annoy those around him or be ironically hip by wearing something that no one else would bother to wear on purpose, was the strange and slimy contents oozing from the sides of the trailer being dragged behind his late-70's mid-sized American sedan. Though covered in a tarp, it possessed the strangest smell imaginable and, if the pay to move the goods hadn't been so high, he surely would have never bothered to accept the assignment. But strange and eccentric millionaires who pay large sums of money to have trailers carried 250 miles were not a dime a dozen and he'd be damned if he'd pass up a good opportunity at money, even one such as this, suspect and disturbing though it may be.

He skirted around the edge of the trailer, eyeing it warily. The blue tarp over the simple two-wheeled steel and wood trailer gave it a benign normality, but he knew what was lurking underneath the colorful sheet of plastic.

He lifted up a corner to check on the contents, watching some greasy runoff dripping from one corner of trailer's bottom. Underneath the tarp, all was currently well, or as well as a trailer-load of greasy cooked pork chops and small packets of the orange cheese powder to be mixed with boxed macaroni and cheese could be on a sunny day. It was still there, at least.

He headed quickly for the rest stop bathroom, hoping to be back on the road and done with this pricey fool's errand before dark so he could get back to his life and away from the smell.

As the hat (and its accompanying wearer) disappeared from view into the men's room, the Asian man skulked closer to the vehicle and its cargo, making sure that he was not noticed.



"Mr. Walterhaus, how are we doing today?" The short, ever-increasingly more round Dr. Ernst Lombardo sat down behind his large wooden desk, barely even paying attention to Bernardo as he talked to him. He wore his white doctor's coat as a badge of his station, but he spent most of his day confined to his office, avoiding patients and Clovis, so it was for little more than show.

Also for show was the very old and intricate stained glass window looming behind the desk, surely to give the impression of superior importance or, perhaps, piety to those poor souls who sat before him.

Bernardo sat on the other side of the large oak desk and, lurking behind him in the corners, stood Francois and Rudy.

Bernardo gazed out the window and noticed the pigeons scurrying on the window sill, watching intently, he imagined, the people inside. Perhaps it was yet another one of the signs he'd been looking for...

"We're doing fine, I suppose, Doctor. Yourself? Any news of the world? Portents? Cures and potions? Better days to come? Hopes and dreams? Feelings of insecurity and doubt?"

"Bernardo, what's going on here?" There was a bitter edge in Lombardo's voice.

Bernardo took the spiteful tone in stride and happily replied, relaxing in his chair, as if he was discussing life with an old friend over coffee. "Well, Doctor, I imagine it's supposed to have something to do with the healing of the human psyche, the regaining of that lost element of one's humanity that drives one to madness, the search for meaning in a meaningless world..."

Lombardo was nearly over the desk, eyes bulging, barking at Bernardo. "Bernardo! Do you understand what *you're* doing here?"

"Well, I suppose it has something to do with my defiant nature, my desire to right the wrongs of a chaotic world, my insistence on doing things the proper way..."

"Your way bears little resemblance to the 'proper way', Mr. Waltherhaus! You fancy yourself a detective..."

"The world's greatest detective."

"...yes, the 'world's greatest detective'. But your irrational methods amount to nothing more than luck and being in the right place at the right time. You're a fraud, Waltherhaus, and you know it, deep down."

Bernardo finally took noticeable offense. "There is no lack in art and skill regarding my previous work! 'The Case of the Big, Burning Mattress'? 'The Case of the Relatively Unattractive Middle-Aged Gentleman'? These are not the works of an amateur or some lucky chump! These are the works of a brilliant mind. These are the works of someone with a keen insight into the human condition. These are the works of a former "Wheel of Fortune" contestant. These are

the works of the world's greatest detective!" Bernardo gestured triumphantly and held the pose for far longer than necessary, no one in the room breaking their cold stares.

"The Mayor thinks that you manufacture these little convenient crimes yourself so that you can come up with your very improbable solutions. And I, for one, am forced to agree with him, based on my opinion of you and your insights."

"Yes, well, the Mayor isn't a very bright man. I wouldn't even begin to speculate as to all the strange and wondrous things that enter his imagination."

"Well, your estimation of him is of very little value to me, as he is the reason you're in here, he provides me with much of our funding, and he is the Mayor of Oberwalz. He is a person of importance. You are a person who is going to rot away the rest of your miserable deluded life amongst the insane."

"I'm sorry, Ernst... Did we get off-topic somewhere in this line of questioning? Why am I here exactly?"

"That's what I was asking *you*. It seems that Francois and Rudy have informed me that you were rather disruptive in the cafeteria earlier today."

Bernardo's eyes glanced back briefly at the orderlies bookending the door behind him. "Not in the least."

"Well, this is far from the first complaint I've had since you got here. You may have made some deranged connection with a few of the patients, who are undoubtedly now under the spell of your lunacy, but I think you'll have to spend a week or two under confinement until we can be sure that the orderlies feel safe in your presence again. A few hard weeks. I feel it's the necessary step to making everyone's life here a little more tolerable and getting your mind straight as to how things run around here and your place within that system."

"Doctor, I don't think that I can stand for this sort of treatment. I didn't stand for it when I took second place in the Miss Oberwalz Tire Factory pageant, I didn't stand for it when MegaVideo told me I owed a seven dollar late fee on some bleak French film called *One Hundred Years Of Today* that I'd never heard of or rented, and I'm not going to stand for it now." Bernardo's eyes narrowed and his posture straightened in defiance.

"Well, Mr. Walterhaus, I don't imagine you'll have to." Francois and Rudy closed in from the sides, hands outstretched, ready for the struggle to come. They all

struggled and fought, but it was only a matter of time before they were locked away.

Bernardo had a different idea, though. He sprang up from his seat, leaping onto the desk in front of him. Francois and Rudy rushed after him, but Bernardo never stopped for a moment. With a glancing step off of Ernst Lombardo's face, Bernardo barreled through the stained glass window and fell three stories to the ground.



The car pulled up outside The Lombardo Institute For The Mentally Sub-Standard. Ching Dic-Tofon was entirely unsure as how to signal Mr. Walterhaus as to the escape plan he had devised. With a mix of luck and careful timing, he'd managed to procure the elements necessary for the escape. Now came the arduous task of alerting him to the plan, distracting the guards, and managing a speedy rescue from the bonds of the asylum.

He was somewhat surprised, then, when he heard a shattering sound and it rained down colorful shards of glass all around him, moments before Bernardo Walterhaus crashed into the pile of greasy, overcooked pork chops and small packets of orange cheese powder that filled the trailer he'd been towing.

Bernardo sat up, greasy and orange, from the rumpled tarp. "Ching, my good man, your timing is impeccable! We must away, as quickly as possible! The chase is already on and I am now slick with the moisture of freedom!"

The lanky Asian nodded. "Yes, Mistah Watahaus."

"I have the highest hopes that you brought me a change of clothes or a very small washer and dryer..." Ching was already hanging halfway through the back window of the car, tossing Bernardo a full backpack as he pulled himself back out.

Bernardo headed for the passenger seat. "Ching, you are indeed the best."

"Yea, suh." Ching quickly unlocked the trailer from the car's hitch and they sped away down Rural Route 9 as orderlies surged from the front of the building, running behind in the car's dust trail in a vain attempt to catch up with the vehicle.

Breathless, one hand over his pounding heart and the other searching for a wall to steady himself, Dr. Lombardo

finally burst from the front door of the building. Francois and Rudy rushed to the puffing, red-faced man's aid.

"Find... that... bastard," he wheezed, coughing out words between breaths. "Bring him... back... to me."

The Mayor would not be happy when he heard that Walterhaus had escaped. First, Lombardo had to make sure that the damage was controlled and, if done quickly, he could even make sure the Mayor never heard about the incident at all. But Ernst Lombardo would have his revenge on Walterhaus, at any cost.