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SURVIVING A SIX-WEEK SLEEPOVER WITH THE MAN WITH THE PLAN BY BEN SLOVAK

Rule 1: Absolutely NO PLANS (except for this plan for having none)

Rule 2: When in doubt, REMEMBER RULE 1.

Rule 3: Non-plans that are really the same as plans (operations, strategies, schemes, brainstorm, plots, ploys, or tactics) are STRICTLY FORBIDDEN.

Rule 4: No hair in bathroom sink . . .

“That one’s definite,” Ben concluded as they crossed the parking lot of the Cedarville Mall. “My mom’s a clean freak. And no messing with Ferret Face. He gets really sensitive in warmer weather.”

The small ferret’s needle nose and beady eyes poked out from inside Ben’s collar.

Griffin looked up from the paper just in time to sidestep a curbstone. “I thought you were psyched for me to stay at your place while my folks are away.”

The Bings were on an eleven-country tour, trying to drum up interest in Mr. Bing’s orchard inventions in Europe. The promise of the extended sleepover had prompted Griffin and Ben to stay in town, while many classmates — including their friends Logan and Pitch — had headed off to camp for the start of the summer.

“*I am . . .*” Ben hesitated. No one admired Griffin more than Ben. But in Cedarville, Griffin Bing was known as The Man With The Plan. And that had not always proved to be a good thing.

“But your folks aren’t,” Griffin concluded.

“They said yes, didn’t they? My dad is totally on board. My mom . . .”

Griffin made a face. “She thinks I’m a menace.”

“Of course not! It’s just that — well, six weeks is a long time. She’s a little stressed that something might — you know — go wrong.”

“What could go wrong?” Griffin demanded.

The car horn sounded from so close behind them that both boys jumped. A large SUV roared past them and pulled up to the mall’s gleaming entrance. The rear door opened and out jumped Savannah Drysdale and a hulking brown-and-black form nearly as tall as she was: Luthor, a Doberman pinscher the size of a small pony.

Savannah waved to the boys. “Hurry up, you guys. We don’t want to miss anything.”

Griffin and Ben scrambled after her, but fell back when Luthor’s huge head swung around and issued a threatening growl. The Doberman was perfectly mild mannered and sweet — to Savannah. To the rest of the population, he was every ounce the trained attack dog he had once been.

At a safe distance, the boys followed Savannah and Luthor through the automatic sliding doors. The mall’s huge atrium was jam-packed with hundreds of people, dozens of whom had brought their pets. There were dogs of all breeds and sizes — carried in their owners’ arms, penned in plush carriers, or tethered at the ends of leashes. Excited

barking filled the soaring space, mingled with a buzz of anticipation from the spectators. All eyes — human and canine — were on the raised dais, where a banner declared:

WELCOME, ELECTRA

GLOBAL KENNEL SOCIETY DOG SHOW

THREE-TIME CHAMPION

Ben turned to Savannah. “I thought you didn’t approve of fluffing up dogs and forcing them to strut around like beauty pageant contestants.”

“I don’t,” Savannah admitted. “Animals should be themselves, not glorified windup toys. But Electra is different. If she wins a fourth Global Kennel Society show next month, that record will stand forever! Dmitri Trebezhov called her the most perfect canine ever born.”

“Who’s Dmitri Trebezhov?” asked Griffin without much interest.

She stared at him. “I can’t believe you’ve never heard of him. He’s only the greatest dog trainer and handler in history!”

Ben looked around. “Which one is he?”

“He isn’t *here*! Nobody’s seen him in three years!” Savannah’s face turned tragic. “Meeting him would be my life’s dream. Everything I know about animals comes from his teachings. No one has ever been able to communicate with them better than he can.”

“So what made him go from dog-whispering superstar to dog-whispering hermit?” Ben probed.

Savannah’s sweeping gesture indicated the hullabaloo in the packed atrium. “Look around you. This isn’t about animals; it’s about greed! Mall tours, T-shirts, plush toys. Do you think Electra honestly cares that her paw prints are on cereal boxes? A handler and a dog are like soul mates. It’s the purest, most beautiful relationship in the world. That’s why Dmitri quit. He coached Electra to her first Best in Show, but then the moneymakers took over. Agents, managers, image consultants. Dmitri dropped out of sight three hours later.”

“Sounds like a kook to me” was Griffin’s opinion.

Luthor began to rumble deep in his chest. Savannah stroked him lovingly. “Ignore him, sweetie,” she told the Doberman. “Griffin doesn’t know what he’s talking about.”

A drum roll sounded in the atrium, and pink

spotlights began to dance across the empty stage. “*Ladies and gentlemen,*” came a public address announcement. “*Our guest of honor has arrived! Put your hands and paws together to welcome the greatest show dog in history, three-time Global winner, the Regal Beagle herself, Electra!*”

The ovation was deafening — a mixture of applause, cheers, and excited barking. On a sparkling rhinestone leash, the star herself trotted out into the spotlight. Griffin and Ben exchanged a look of utter bewilderment. After the huge buildup and the worshipful crowd reaction, they had expected a larger-than-life glowing canine beauty to glide in on gossamer wings. But the real Electra was kind of small, nicely groomed, and well behaved. She was white with attractive black and brown markings. Long ears, short fur.

Griffin regarded Savannah, whose eyes were riveted to the stage. Behind her, Luthor was up on his hind legs, giant paws on her shoulders, staring at Electra with what looked like approval.

“Maybe I’m missing something,” Griffin said at last, “but isn’t that just a dog?”

“I figured she’d at least be jumping through flaming hula hoops,” Ben agreed in a whisper.

Savannah glared at him. “I pity poor Ferret Face for having to live with someone so out of touch with the animal kingdom.”

Ben’s shirt heaved and wriggled. “Speaking of Ferret Face, I don’t think he’s too happy. All this barking makes him nervous.”

Griffin and Ben retreated a little way down the concourse. It was a good idea, since the crowd became even louder when Electra stepped up onto a platform and posed for photographs. Cameras and cell phones clicked and flashed.

A very tall woman with flaming red hair and a metallic silver raincoat dabbed at her eyes with a tissue. “She’s *so* beautiful!” She held a camera but was too overcome to point it at the stage.

The boys sat on a bench, shaking their heads in wonder. They were used to Savannah’s great love of all animals, but these dog-show people sure knew how to make a big deal out of nothing.

Griffin removed the folded list of rules from his pocket and handed it back to its author. “Anyway,” he said, “you didn’t have to write all this down, because we’re not going to need it. There won’t be any trouble. I promised my parents, and they promised yours.”

Ben still looked worried. “It’s always like that. And before you know it, we’re all in the middle of a *plan*.”

“You don’t have a plan just to have a plan,” Griffin lectured. “You have one because something’s gone wrong and you have to make it right. Our lives are totally fine. Better, even. School’s out, no homework, and we just scored a six-week sleepover. Where’s the downside?”

A noise rose above the hubbub in the atrium — a canine roar so stomach-churningly deep, so earsplittingly loud, that it could only have come from one source. Griffin and Ben looked back just in time to see Luthor soaring over spectators’ heads in a single bound. He hit the dais with a titanic thump, his hindquarters knocking out one of the poles supporting the arc lights. Down came the heavy ring, the bulbs popping and shattering in a blizzard of flying glass and shooting sparks. Electra darted in terrified circles, yapping rapidly and circling her trainer, who huddled center stage in the duck-and-cover position. Mall security agents surged forward, along with audience members shocked into action by the sight of the celebrity beagle menaced by disaster.

“What’s going on?” gasped several spectators.

“That big dog’s attacking Electra!” someone screamed.

“Grab his leash!”

“No!” Savannah shrieked, pushing into the fray in an attempt to reach her dog. “Luthor — come down from there!”

Dozens of spectators poured up the risers, onto the stage. A forest of hands reached for Luthor’s lead. The Doberman leaped, the leash whipping over their heads. The look in the former guard dog’s eyes was fierce and wild.

Griffin and Ben raced onto the scene, although how they might be of any help was a mystery to both of them. The two were scared stiff of Luthor when he was at his calmest, let alone when he’d gone completely ballistic.

“*Ladies and gentlemen,*” entreated the announcer’s voice over the PA, “*please come down off the dais! It’s not approved for so much weight —*”

Electra’s fans ignored him. In their minds, their beloved beagle was in danger, and they had to save her. Soon there were more people on the stage than off it.

“Move it, buster!” Savannah hip-checked a two-hundred-fifty-pound security guard out of the way and bulled through the throng to her dog.

“Sweetie” — she opened her arms to accept Luthor into a nurturing embrace — “come here —”

It was too late. The wooden stage buckled under the load of so many bodies. It split across the middle, sending people sliding down to the floor. Those who refused to slide hung on for dear life, creating a total collapse at the center. Luthor clamped his jaws around Savannah’s belt and lugged her to safety.

Screams came from the melee they left behind — screams and one prize-worthy yelp.