



The silver mouse was in full flight down Honeybee Street, body angled into the wind, round ears flattened by the force of sheer speed. The hood ornament's long rodent tail trailed straight toward the windshield of the battered red truck.

The truck backfired, and Ben Slovak jumped a foot in the air.

Griffin Bing laughed. "What's with you, Ben? That thing backfires every day, and every day you hit the moon. When are you going to get used to it?"

"When is Ralph going to get a new truck?" Ben countered testily. "Ferret Face doesn't like loud noises, you know. It gives him a nervous stomach."

A furry head emerged from the collar of Ben's shirt. From his pocket, Ben took out a thin slice of pepperoni and offered it to the little creature. The food disappeared in a heartbeat.

"Ralph should have a fleet of limousines for all the money he's charged us to get rid of the spiders in our

basement!” complained Logan Kellerman. “My parents say he’s the most overpriced exterminator on Long Island.”

Griffin, Ben, Logan, and their friends Savannah Drysdale, Pitch Benson, and Melissa Dukakis watched as the exterminator’s vehicle rolled on past them.

A faint bark sounded in the distance.

“Uh-oh.” Savannah turned to look behind her. Everyone else turned, too.

It began as a tiny dot two blocks back but grew at an alarming rate. The bark grew, too, swelling to a roar.

Shy Melissa agitated her head, causing her curtain of hair to part. Her beady eyes widened. “Is that—?”

“*Luthor!*” exclaimed Savannah in a scolding voice. “Stop this instant!”

Savannah may have been Long Island’s premier dog whisperer, but her words had no effect on the giant, galloping Doberman. Luthor was intent only on the truck. He hurtled up the street, all one hundred fifty pounds of him, in a determined bid to overtake the exterminator.

Spying the dog in hot pursuit, the driver stomped on the gas and pulled away. It only made Luthor run harder.

Now Savannah was running, too, her book bag bouncing behind her. “*Luthor—Sweetie—come back!*”

“Shouldn’t we help her?” asked Melissa in a small voice.

“Count me out,” Ben replied, nervously stroking Ferret Face’s little head. “If Luthor thinks he can take down a whole truck, just imagine what he could do to one of us!”

“We’re going to be late for school,” Pitch warned. “If you have a bad attendance record, they don’t let you try out for sports.”

“I thought they already told you that the wrestling team is boys only,” said Logan.

Pitch was tight-lipped. “That’s sexist.”

“Maybe so,” said Griffin, “but it’s also the rules.”

Pitch stuck out her jaw. “The team is supposed to have the best wrestlers in the school. I pity the poor guy who thinks he can wrestle me and win.”

No one disputed this. Pitch was the most talented athlete at Cedarville Middle School, thanks to the skills and conditioning she had acquired from her rock-climbing family. The only thing more painful than wrestling her would be arguing with her when she was sure she was right. She had already been kept off the all-male football team. Wrestling seemed to be next.

The five of them continued along the street, heading toward the end of the block and the cut-through that led to Cedarville Middle School. After a few minutes, they caught up to Savannah. She had hold of Luthor by the collar and was scolding him gently but firmly.

“I don’t know what’s gotten into you. You’ve never chased cars before. You could have been hurt, or even killed! What would I do without my Sweetie?”

Luthor looked contrite. But when a distant backfire sounded, he perked up and seemed to want to run off again.

“Absolutely not!” Savannah snapped. “I’m taking you home, and I expect you to stay there. Is that understood?”

Ben leaned in to the group. “She knows he’s a dog, right?”

“Big talk from the guy with a weasel in his shirt,” Pitch tossed back.

They all knew it wasn’t the same thing. Luthor was a pet; Ferret Face was a medical service animal. Ben suffered from narcolepsy, a sleep disorder. It was the little ferret’s job to provide a wake-up nip whenever he felt his owner beginning to nod off.

“You guys go without me,” Savannah called. “I’ll get my mom to write me a note. This is an emergency.” She started back down Honeybee, leading her Doberman by the collar.

The rest of them continued to the end of the street and the cut-through to school. Griffin was the first to notice that something was different. The last house on the block had an odd triangular lawn abutting the wooded area. Now, on the grass, blocking the access to the cut-through, stood a wooden sawhorse. Against it leaned a hand-painted sign:

PRIVATE PROPERTY
NO TRESPASSING
THIS MEANS YOU

Ben frowned. “Why would Mrs. Martindale block the shortcut?”

“Maybe it’s a joke,” suggested Logan.

Griffin shook his head. “Mrs. Martindale never jokes.”

Pitch looked exasperated. “It’s a sign, not the Great Wall of China. Go around it.”

“It says ‘no trespassing,’” Logan pointed out.

“We’re not trespassing; we’re just passing through.” She stepped around the sawhorse and began to cross the triangular strip of lawn.

“Hey!”

Running across the grass was a short, wiry man in his forties with dark hair and black, staring eyes. With both hands, he carried a giant pipe wrench that must have been three feet long.

“Can’t you read? This is private property!”

Melissa, who didn’t like confrontation, stepped behind Griffin and tried to make herself small.

Griffin spoke up. “It’s our shortcut to school. Mrs. Martindale says it’s okay.”

The man stepped closer. His eyes seemed to burn even wilder. “Mrs. Martindale doesn’t live here anymore. I do. And I don’t allow strangers on my lawn.”

“We’re not strangers,” Griffin explained. “We all live around here. Uh—welcome to the neighborhood.” He manufactured a grin.

The newcomer’s burning look grew no friendlier. “I like my privacy. As a matter of fact, I insist on it. And I don’t care how Mrs. Martindale used to do things.”

“But how are we supposed to get to school?” Ben asked plaintively.

The pipe wrench must have been growing heavy, because the man hefted it. “It’s not my business whether or not you go to school, just so long as you stay off my property.”

“The thing is,” Pitch tried to reason, “without the cut-through, we have to go all the way up to Ninth Street. It takes at least an extra fifteen minutes. Maybe twenty.”

“Then I guess you’d better get right on it.”

He stood there and watched as they trudged away. As they passed the front walk, Griffin read the newly stickered name on the signpost.

“Ezekiel Hartman,” he said bitterly.

“Hah!” snorted Ben. “Ezekiel *Heartless* would be more like it!”

They were only halfway to school when they heard the bell ring.

Griffin was furious. “The nerve of that guy! Who does he think he is?”

“He *thinks* he’s the owner of that house,” Pitch returned. “And he is.”

“Mrs. Martindale’s been talking about retiring to Florida for a long time,” Melissa put in, puffing a little from walking so fast. “I guess she finally did it.”

“He threatened us with a giant wrench!” Griffin raged. “That’s a deadly weapon.”

“No, he didn’t,” Ben argued. “He was probably fixing something when he saw us, so he had it in his hands when he came outside. He may be a big jerk, but he isn’t a murderer.”

“Kids have been cutting through there forever,” Griffin said resentfully. “How long has he been here? A weekend? And now he thinks he can change all the rules! Well, we don’t have to put up with it! We need a—”

“No!” Ben cut him off. “Not the *P* word! Not again! My mother says the next time you talk about a plan, I have to run in the opposite direction.”

“She also wants you to get good grades,” Griffin reasoned. “And how are you supposed to do that when you’re late for school every day?”

“I have a plan,” Melissa ventured timidly. “We wake up earlier so there’s plenty of time to walk to school the long way.”

Griffin stared at her. “You’re kidding, right? That’s not a plan; that’s giving in.”

“I can’t get in trouble,” Logan said firmly. “I’ve landed a major part in a TV commercial. It’s a pivotal moment in my acting career, so nothing can interfere with my concentration while I’m getting into the role.”

“Okay,” Griffin agreed, “but think about the rehearsal time you’ll be missing during all that extra walking.”

Pitch was disgusted. “You guys are such airheads. We’ll go the long way for a couple of weeks until

Heartless stops looking for us. Then we start sneaking through the shortcut again. Problem solved, plan-free.” At the school, the late bell rang. “Come on, let’s run!”

And Griffin did, jogging alongside his friends. But deep down, he sensed there were problems ahead.

The kind of problems that couldn’t be solved without the *P* word.