

HIDEOUT



GORDON KORMAN



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HISTORY'S MOST FAMOUS LOSERS:

CHRISTOPHER COLUMBUS: couldn't find Asia, largest continent on earth.

THE BUFFALO BILLS: made it to four straight Super Bowls, and lost them all.

K2: runner-up for world's highest mountain.

THE PRONGHORN ANTELOPE: not quite as fast as the cheetah.

LUTHOR:

Griffin Bing set down his pen. How could he begin to explain why Luthor, Savannah Drysdale's oversized Doberman, belonged on this list? Luthor had gotten himself disqualified from the Global Kennel Society Dog Show, minutes before he was about to win it all. Therefore, he was a loser. But he'd managed to lose so spectacularly that he was more famous by far than the poodle who'd actually won the top prize.

Ben Slovak, Griffin's best friend, stepped into Griffin's bedroom and asked, "Are you ready?"

"Almost," said Griffin. "I'm just finishing up the card."

Ben peered over his shoulder. "*That's* a birthday card? Calling Luthor a loser?"

"It's a compliment," Griffin insisted. "You just have to read between the lines."

"Savannah's going to feed you to the birthday boy!"

Griffin was stubborn. "Who has a birthday party for a dog, anyway?"

But neither friend had to answer that question. Everyone knew Savannah was the greatest animal lover and animal expert the town of Cedarville had ever known. In addition to Luthor, she was the housemate—never say *owner*—of a capuchin monkey, two cats, four rabbits, seven hamsters, three turtles, a pack rat, a parakeet, and an albino chameleon.

"Let's go," Ben prodded. "Ferret Face has been looking forward to this all day. He can usually manage to snag a few bites of Luthor's dog food."

At the mention of his name, the little ferret poked his needle-like snout out of Ben's collar and looked around with black, beady eyes. He didn't live inside Ben's clothes; that was his workplace. Ben suffered from a condition called narcolepsy—he could fall asleep without warning at any time of the day or night. It was the ferret's job to administer a wake-up nip whenever he felt his master nodding off.

“Oh, all right,” Griffin relented. On the card, he wrote:

Win or lose, Luthor's the best. Happy 5th, Big Guy.

By the time they got to the Drysdales', the party was in full swing. A picnic blanket had been spread in the living room, and Luthor sat at the head, all one hundred and fifty pounds of him, big black nose buried in a Bundt cake made of meat loaf. The human guests were giving him a fairly wide berth. Savannah's friends all remembered the guard dog that Luthor used to be. And although he was much calmer now, he always seemed ever-so-slightly unstable, as if a vicious beast might be lurking just below the surface.

The monkey Cleopatra, Luthor's closest friend, circulated among the partygoers with a tray of mini pizza bagels.

Griffin popped one into his mouth. “Thanks, Cleo,” he said absently, like he was speaking to a waiter. In the Drysdale house, you almost never noticed the difference between people and animals. That's just the way it was.

Antonia Benson, who usually went by her rock-climbing nickname, Pitch, sidled up to him. “You missed *Pin the Tail on the Dogcatcher*. This party is the dumbest thing I've ever seen not on TV.”

“Don’t tell that to Savannah,” Ben whispered nervously.

“It’s going to get a lot better,” Logan Kellerman assured them confidently. “As my present to Luthor, I’m going to perform the final scene in *Old Yeller*.”

“You’re kidding, right?” exclaimed Griffin. “You’re going to be the kid who has to shoot his dog?”

“No,” said Logan. “I’m going to be the dog.”

“Kill me now,” requested Pitch, “before I have to witness this.”

Melissa Dukakis agitated her head, causing her curtain of hair to part and reveal her shy eyes. “How does Savannah even know when Luthor’s real birthday is? She didn’t get him as a puppy.”

Savannah looked up from returning one of her rabbits to its cage. “It really is today. The tattoo inside his ear gave me the name of the breeder. It turns out Luthor was born in Germany. He was sold off because he was the runt of the litter, and that’s how he came to America.”

All the friends looked over at the former runt, whose mouth was open wide enough to accommodate a human head as he polished off the last of his meat loaf ring. Peering on from Ben’s collar, Ferret Face heaved a sigh of disappointment.

“Anyway,” Savannah continued, “there must have been a mix-up, because he was trained to be a guard dog.” For a moment, her eyes filled with tears. “It’s tragic. But it’s all part of the sweet, wonderful, sensitive creature you see before you today.”

An awkward silence followed, as everybody remembered being chased, cornered, barked at, and even snapped at by this sweet, wonderful, sensitive creature.

There was a cake for the people, too, with six candles—one for each of Luthor’s five years, and one to grow on.

“Like *he* needs to grow!” Ben whispered.

They were in the middle of singing “Happy Birthday” when Luthor suddenly leaped up, overturning the cake plate and the table it stood on. The growl that came from his throat rattled the windows. The short hairs at the scruff of his neck stood straight up.

Ben crouched behind a chair. Inside his shirt, Ferret Face tried to burrow under one arm.

“Sweetie, what’s the matter?” Savannah asked, alarmed.

The doorbell rang. The growl turned into a sharp bark.

Savannah threw open the door. There on the front step stood a short, stocky man in his thirties with curly hair exploding out from around an L.A. Dodgers baseball cap. He was smiling broadly, but his eyes, which appeared double-size behind Coke-bottle glasses, were not smiling at all.

“Savannah Drysdale! Lovely to see you again! Did you miss me?”

The shocked silence was punctuated only by Luthor’s angry roaring. Cleopatra set down her tray and rushed to comfort her best friend.

Everyone knew the newcomer all too well. He was the last person anyone had expected to see—or wanted to.

S. Wendell Palomino, better known to Griffin and his friends as Swindle.

The name brought back horrible memories. Swindle had once owned the collectibles shop where Luthor had been a guard dog. The storekeeper had cheated Griffin out of a Babe Ruth baseball card worth nearly a million dollars. In the end, Swindle had left town in disgrace, deserting Luthor at the dog pound. Savannah had adopted him instantly. It had all worked out okay.

Or so everyone had thought.

“What’s *he* doing here?” Pitch demanded, voicing the question on all their minds.

Swindle beamed. “Simple, little lady. I’m not here to trouble any of you young people. I just came to pick up my dog.”

The collective gasp nearly sucked all the air out of the house.

Savannah found her voice at last. “*Your* dog? You abandoned him!”

Palomino’s smile didn’t waver. “We got separated a while back,” he admitted. “I appreciate your looking out for him while I was tracking him down again.”

“I don’t *look out* for Luthor!” Savannah almost blew a gasket. “He’s a part of me, and I’m a part of him, and we love each other with all our souls! Someone

like you wouldn't know anything about that! I'm amazed you bothered to drop him at the pound instead of leaving him to starve! If it hadn't been for me—"

Swindle's smile turned suddenly ugly. "If it hadn't been for you kids, I would still have my business and my home and my good reputation in this community! All I have left is my beloved pet."

Griffin could always smell a rat, and the rat smell coming off of Swindle had nothing to do with Savannah's menagerie of pets. "Wait a minute!" he said. "You don't care about Luthor! You've been reading about how he almost won the big dog show! You just want him because you think he'll make you some money! That's low, even for you!"

Palomino's huge eyes narrowed. "Don't think I've forgotten *you*, sonny boy. Your little plan ruined my life! Lucky for you, I've got no hard feelings. I'll take my dog and be on my way."

Griffin stepped in front of the Doberman, his arms folded in front of him. "If you want Luthor, you're going to have to go through me."

"And me," Ben added immediately, joining his friend. Ferret Face appeared out of his collar, looking defiant.

One by one, the others formed a phalanx between the Doberman and his former owner.

Luthor let out an angry bark, as if letting them all know that he was quite capable of protecting himself.

Swindle reversed a step. “Funny thing. The dog pound can’t find any paperwork from when I supposedly left Luthor there.” He turned to address Savannah. “Which means you never legally adopted him, since he wasn’t free to be legally adopted. At least, that’s what my lawyer says.”

That was all Savannah needed to hear. “*Mom! Dad!*”

Her parents were out of earshot in the backyard, laying down a portable doggie dance floor. Pitch ran to get them, but Swindle held his ground on the doorstep.

“The law’s on my side,” he said with sinister glee. “I will get my dog back. And when I do, I’ll make sure you never, ever see him again.”

With that, S. Wendell Palomino spun on his heel and left. By the time Mr. and Mrs. Drysdale came running in with Pitch, he was gone.

The party was over.