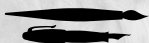


JINGLE



GORDON KORMAN



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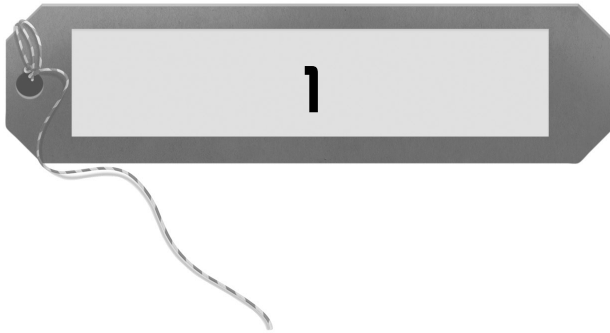
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Dear Elf,

Thank you for volunteering to participate in Cedarville's annual Santa's Workshop Holiday Spectacular. As always, the festivities will be held at the Colchester mansion from December 18 through January 2.

Please report to the Mansion this weekend to be fitted for your elf costume. Don't forget to let us know of any special requirements, such as orthotic inserts for your pointed slippers.

Yuletide greetings!

The Colchester family

Griffin Bing reread the letter his best friend, Ben Slovak, held out to him. "Dear Elf"? Why would the Colchesters make you an elf? Aren't you Jewish?"

"Half," Ben explained. "On my dad's side. We celebrate Hanukkah *and* Christmas. The point is, we don't celebrate either one by being an elf!"

Griffin shrugged. “It’s obviously some kind of mistake. I mean, how did your name get on the elf list? Just write back and tell them thanks but no thanks.”

“My mother won’t let me,” Ben lamented. “She grew up here. She’s been going to the Holiday Spectacular since she was a little girl, just like you and me and everyone else we know.”

“Bummer,” Griffin offered.

“Tell me about it. Where am I going to fit Ferret Face in that tight little green vest? He’s not a pet, you know. He’s a medical service animal.”

Hearing his name, the small weasel-like creature poked his head out from Ben’s collar and looked around.

“Live it up now, Ferret Face,” Ben advised darkly. “In a couple of weeks you’ll be squeezed flat in an elf suit.”

The creature withdrew back inside Ben’s shirt.

“I feel sorry for you, Ben. When I’m at Santa’s Workshop, I always pity those poor elves—dressed up like idiots with those pointy ears and bells on their shoes. But if your mom’s forcing you, there’s nothing you can do about it.”

Ben’s eyes had found a stack of mail on the Bings’ kitchen counter. “Hey, that envelope’s just like mine. Isn’t that the Colchester family crest?”

In alarm, Griffin tore open the letter and stared at the contents.

Dear Elf . . .

“*Mom!!*” Griffin bellowed in a voice loud enough to bring Ferret Face to the surface again.

“I thought you said there’s nothing we can do about it,” put in Ben.

“There’s nothing *you* can do about it,” Griffin amended. “There’s no way *I’m* going to dress up like a Brussels sprout and make a fool of myself in front of the whole town! *Mom!!*”

No answer.

“I don’t think she’s here, Griffin.”

“That’s right—she’s got jury duty. No problem, I’ll take this to Dad. He’s always got my back.”

Mr. Bing’s “office” was actually a workshop in the garage. He was a professional inventor, with several successful patents to his credit. Griffin punched in the code and the automatic door rose on an astounding sight.

A large orange globe hung suspended from the ceiling. Before it danced Griffin’s father, armed with a golf club. He hacked at the metal surface, making loud clanging noises and yelling at the top of his lungs.

“Take that! And that! And that!”

“Why’s he freaking out?” Ben asked in horror, patting the cowering Ferret Face inside the fabric of his T-shirt.

“It’s his latest invention!” Griffin called back over the noise.

“What is it—an iron piñata?”

“Dad! Dad!” Griffin rushed up to his father, narrowly avoiding the swinging seven iron. “You don’t have to wreck it! If it’s no good, you can start over!”

Panting, Mr. Bing backed off and lowered the club. “Oh, hi, guys.” Sweat poured down his face. “You’re just in time.”

“Why are you destroying all your hard work?” Griffin demanded.

“I’m not destroying it,” his father replied, “I’m *testing* it. This is Fruit Armor. Every year, thousands of tons of pieces of fruit arrive at their destinations bruised and ruined during transportation. But with Fruit Armor, every delicate peach, apricot, or grape arrives in perfect condition. See?”

He opened the globe, which separated into two hemispheres. This revealed a slightly smaller inner globe made of rubberized plastic, protected by a system of springs and ball bearings. This he removed and placed on his worktable. It was full of apples—shiny, red, unmarked, and beautiful.

“These should be applesauce after what I’ve put them through,” he announced proudly. “And look at them. They’re perfect.”

“Great, Dad.” Griffin’s mind was elsewhere. “Look at what came in the mail today. You’ve got to get me out of it.”

His father read the elf letter. “You’re so lucky! When I was your age, I’d have given my right arm to be an elf at Santa’s Workshop!”

“I guess things were pretty different back when you were a kid,” Ben offered.

“I’ll never forget the thrill of walking into the Colchester mansion the first time,” Mr. Bing reminisced. “I was four years old, and I thought I was in heaven! The size of the place . . . the decorations . . . the tree with that special star! Even today, when I think of the holidays, the first thing that comes to mind is Santa’s Workshop.”

Griffin watched his father’s face grow more and more animated. This was not the reaction he’d been hoping for. “Come on, Dad, I kind of like it, too. What’s not to like? But as a guest, not stuffed in green tights, wiping kids’ noses while putting them on Santa’s lap. They cry; they spill their juice. And if they barf, you have to clean it up!”

“Are you kidding?” crowed Mr. Bing. “Those elves were like rock stars to me. I used to look at them and think they had it made. Your mom was an elf back in high school. The first time I asked her out on a date she said no because she had elf duty.”

Griffin’s heart was sinking. Not Mom, too! How was he ever going to get out of this? “Well, congrats, Dad, on the, uh, Fruit Armor.”

“I hope it’s a big success,” Ben added.

“Thanks,” Mr. Bing acknowledged, looking pleased with himself. “I’ve got to get this prototype over to Daria Vader’s. It’s time to start the legal paperwork for the patent office.”

As they stepped out behind the closing garage door,

the grinding gears of a big motor caught their attention. A transport truck roared past the Bing home. On its flatbed trailer lay a thick, dark green fir tree at least twenty-five feet long.

“That has to be going to the Colchesters’,” Ben observed sourly. “Who else would order a Christmas tree that big?”

As the truck swept by, they both saw a smaller figure behind it, moving just as fast. Antonia “Pitch” Benson rollerbladed up the street and swooped onto the driveway, stopping on a dime in front of them. She was the best Rollerblader in town, and also the best at everything else athletic—including climbing. She was better at that than at all other sports combined.

Clutched in her gloved hand was an all-too-familiar envelope.

“Don’t tell me you got a ‘Dear Elf’ letter, too!” Griffin blurted.

Pitch’s face was a thundercloud. “Oh, it gets way better than that. My parents have already rescheduled our rock-climbing trip to Sedona so I won’t miss this fabulous honor!”

Ben was bewildered. “That’s three of us already.”

“Four,” Pitch amended. “Savannah got one yesterday. Her parents volunteered to take care of her animals so she can elf it up with us.”

At that moment, Griffin’s phone pinged. It was a text from their friend Melissa Dukakis: **If you get invited to be an elf, do you have to do it?**

Ben's eyes widened. "Melissa, too? That's all of us except Logan!"

Griffin dialed Logan's number. There was no answer.

"Let's go over there," Griffin decided. "How did our whole team get on the elf list?"

"It's a mystery," Pitch said grimly. "And I don't like mysteries."

"Logan's not going to like this, either," Ben commented as they started in the direction of the Kellerman house. "It'll take time away from his acting. Didn't he just join that theater company?"

Griffin shook his head. "He tried but he didn't get in. Poor guy was pretty broken up about it. You know how he is about his acting career."

"He's probably devastated," Ben agreed.

"He doesn't seem so devastated to me." Pitch pointed down the block toward the Kellerman home. There was their friend Logan.

Griffin squinted. "What's he doing? Is that *dancing*?"

Logan was in the front yard, hopping and skipping around the base of a small blue spruce, his arms alternately at his hips and up over his head.

"What gives, Kellerman?" called Pitch. "Why the Riverdance?"

"Oh, hey, guys," Logan greeted them. "I'm practicing my Christmas jig. How am I doing?"

"That depends," Ben told him. "If you're trying to be arrested, you've nailed it. What Christmas jig?"

“At the Holiday Spectacular,” Logan explained, “all the elves perform a jig around the tree. You guys better start practicing, too, if we’re going to have a polished performance.”

Pitch’s eyes narrowed. “How do you know that the rest of us are elves, too?”

“I’m the one who signed us up!”

“You *what?*” Griffin turned crimson. “Where would you get a crazy idea like that?”

“From *you!*”

“From me?” Griffin echoed. “I think I’d remember saying, ‘Wouldn’t it be great if Logan volunteered us all to be elves!’”

“When I got rejected by the North Shore Players, you said that instead of complaining, I should come up with a plan to get myself in. This is my plan. Yvette Boucle, the director of the Players, lives in Green Hollow, just one town away. Her daughter, Tiffany, is an elf every year. If I’m an elf, too, and really knock it out of the park, her mother will see what a great actor I am and change her mind about rejecting me.”

“That’s why *you* have to be an elf,” Pitch said through clenched teeth. “Why do *we* have to do it?”

“Well, every star needs a supporting cast.” Logan gave Griffin a dazzling smile. “I guess you’re not the only Man With The Plan around here anymore.”

Enraged, Pitch lunged at Logan. Only the frantic efforts of Griffin and Ben held her back from going for his throat.

“Kellerman, I’m missing Red Rocks because of you!”

Ferret Face poked his head out of Ben’s sleeve, hissing vigorously, a sign of agitation.

“Calm down, everybody,” Ben soothed, his shoulders slumped in resignation. “There’s no point in getting all bent out of shape about this. However we ended up on elf duty, our parents are going to make us do it. They *love* the Holiday Spectacular. It’s a tradition that we’ve been part of since before we could walk.”

“Fine.” Pitch looked daggers at Logan. “But you owe us, Kellerman. You owe us *huge*.”

“And from now on,” Griffin added, “all the plans around here come from *me*! Understood?”

Griffin Bing had always believed that nothing was impossible if you had the right plan. Now he saw how wrong that could be.

No plan could save a person from elf-hood.