



SNEAKING OUT AT NIGHT - HELPFUL HINTS:

(i) When lying to your parents, maintain EYE CONTACT.

(ii) Make sure you ask permission to attend the correct FAKE SLEEPOVER. (Boys - Stan Winter's place. Girls - Karen Lobodzic's)

(iii) Meet at the OLD ROCKFORD HOUSE at 8:30 p.m. Friday. (You can't miss it; there's a CRANE with a giant WRECKING BALL parked in front.)

(iv) Enter through missing planks in BOARDED-UP WINDOW, first floor, east side.

(v) Bring your SLEEPING BAG. Remember:
The old Rockford house is a CONDEMNED
BUILDING that will be demolished TOMORROW
MORNING. There will be no beds, no running water,
no furniture, no lights, no TV. . . .

When a plan came from Griffin Bing, even the tiniest detail had to be perfect. He'd agonized over every fine point and possibility. All except one: What if nobody showed up?

"We probably shouldn't have put in the part about no TV," Griffin's friend Ben Slovak said glumly.

Griffin and Ben sat cross-legged on their sleeping bags in what had once been an elegant living room. They were surrounded by shredded drapery, remnants of ancient furnishings, and mounds of dust. All around them, the cavernous old house creaked and groaned with hollow, eerie noises. Outside, a thunderstorm raged.

Griffin trained the beam of his flashlight on his wristwatch: 10:34 p.m. “I can’t believe it,” he seethed. “How could we get *nobody*? Twenty-eight people said they were coming!”

“Maybe they’re just late,” Ben offered lamely.

“Nine o’clock is late. Ten-thirty is a no-show. Don’t they have any self-respect? This is like saying it’s totally fine for the adults in this town to walk all over us.”

Ben would have dearly loved to be No-Show #29. Only loyalty to his best friend had brought him here tonight. “Come on, Griffin,” he reasoned. “What difference does it make if two people or two *hundred* people spend the last night in a condemned building? How does that show the adults that we’re standing up for our rights? They’re never even going to know about it.”

“*We’ll* know,” Griffin said stoutly, sticking out his jaw. “Sometimes you have to prove to yourself that you’re more than just a slab of meat under the shrink-wrap in your grocer’s

freezer. Why do you think I came up with the fake sleepover idea? I wanted to make sure everybody had an excuse to be here. That was the whole point behind the plan.”

The plan. Ben groaned inwardly. It was the best thing about Griffin, and also the worst. Griffin Bing was The Man With The Plan.

“Maybe the other kids wanted to come, but they were scared,” Ben suggested.

“Of what?” Griffin challenged. “Dust? The rain? A whole night with no TV?”

“This house is supposed to be haunted,” Ben insisted. “You know the rumors.”

“What rumors?” Griffin scoffed.

“How do you think it got abandoned in the first place? Old Man Rockford was in jail for cutting up his wife with a chain saw — that’s what Darren said.”

“When’s the last time Darren’s said anything that’s been worth the air it took to blow it out of his big fat head?” Griffin exploded. “He also says he’s distantly related to the Rockfords — with no proof whatsoever.

Besides, they didn't even have chain saws back in Old Man Rockford's time."

"They had railroads, though," Ben noted. "According to Marcus, the real murder weapon was a railway spike pounded into her skull."

Griffin wasn't buying it. "He's just pulling your chain. You know how he loves messing with people."

"But Pitch doesn't, and you know what she heard? The house is haunted by the spirit of a dog that the old man brought home from Europe after World War One. Or maybe it wasn't a dog."

Griffin rolled his eyes. "Then what was it? A Komodo dragon?"

Ben shrugged. "Nobody knows. But just a few days after it got to town, pets started disappearing. At first it was just little kittens and puppies, but pretty soon full-grown Saint Bernards were vanishing into thin air. And there were bones buried all around the house — only Rockford wasn't feeding his dog any bones."

A flash of lightning cast strange angular shadows through the boarded-up windows. Ben paused to let his story sink in. “The townspeople took the law into their own hands. They put rat poison inside a big steak and left it on the doorstep. It never occurred to them that if an evil spirit could live inside a dog, it could live inside something else, too — like a house!” He peered around at the shadowed walls, as if expecting to see something supernatural and hideous coming through.

“Oh, come on!” Griffin refused to be shaken. “There’s no such thing as a haunted house.”

“Well, Marcus heard the same story,” Ben said with a sniff.

“No, he didn’t,” Griffin reminded him. “He heard the one about the railway spike.”

“He heard *both*. And so did Savannah. Only in her version, it wasn’t a dog. It was a baby.”

“Why would the townspeople poison a baby?”

“They didn’t. It got carried off by a chicken

hawk. But the baby's ghost put a curse on the house to take back all the years it never got to live. There was this schoolteacher — the first non-Rockford ever to live here. No one saw her again after the day she moved in — or maybe they did. People talked about an old, old woman peering out an attic window. But here's the thing: That schoolteacher was only twenty-three."

A gust of wind blew through the eaves, and an unearthly moaning sound echoed around them. Ben's head retreated turtle-like into his collar, and even Griffin paled a little.

"No offense, Ben, but shut up. You're starting to creep me out." Griffin panned the crumbling walls with his flashlight. "It's almost eleven. Nobody's coming. Gutless wonders."

"It's the railway spike," said Ben nervously. "That's got to be a splitting headache. Literally."

Griffin spread out his bedroll and lay back, standing his flashlight on its base like a miniature floor lamp. "Let's try to get some

sleep. The sooner the sun rises, the sooner we can get out of this rat trap.”

“Maybe we can leave now,” Ben suggested hopefully. “Since nobody else came, they’ll never know that we weren’t here all night.”

Griffin was horrified. “You mean *back down*?” These two words were not in his vocabulary.

“I don’t want my years sucked away by some baby’s ghost!”

“There’s no such thing!” Griffin exclaimed.

“Who says you have to believe in ghosts to be afraid of them?” Ben challenged. “All right, fine. I’ll sleep.” He rolled over onto his side, pulling his knees to his chest. “But if I wake up eighty-five years old, you owe me twenty bucks.”

“Deal.”

They lay there in silence for what seemed like a long time, listening to the machine-gun rhythm of rain on the ancient slate roof.

Griffin stared up at a gaping hole in the ceiling that had once held a chandelier. “I hope you know how much I appreciate this. You’re the only kid who had the guts to see it through.”

His friend said nothing, so Griffin went on. “I mean it, man. The others — they talk a good game, but where are they? Darren dared half the sixth grade to come. He even made fun of us, said we’d wimp out. But who’s the real wimp, huh, Ben?”

Ben’s reply was slow, steady breathing. Almost like . . . snoring?

“Ben?”

Griffin sat up and peered at his friend. Ben was curled into a ball on his bedroll, fast asleep.

Griffin let out a low whistle of admiration. Creepy house, creepy night, and Ben was relaxed enough to doze off. He came off as a big chicken sometimes, but when it really counted, he was too cool for school.

It was harder for Griffin to settle down. Not because he was scared. Not at all.

Griffin stayed up because he was mulling over the reason he and Ben were camping out with dust bunnies and a century of supernatural speculation.

He was thinking about the *last* plan.