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Ingrid is Back!

'Dinah!' Lloyd raced up the stairs and hammered on her bedroom door. 'Are you in there? Ingrid's back!'

There was no answer.

He thumped the door again. 'Ingrid's back! We're going to have a welcome home party in the SPLAT shed. Now. Are you coming?'

Still no answer.

'Purple pickled onions!' Impatiently, Lloyd pushed the door open and burst into the room.

Dinah was curled up on her bed, reading. Lloyd marched across and glanced at the book.

'What have you got there? *Further Advanced Mathematics*? Yuck! Why do you always read such weird things?'

'Mmm?' Dinah looked up and blinked. 'Oh, it's you. What's up?'

'I'm not telling you again,' Lloyd said, crossly. 'Stay there and read your boring old book if you want to. Harvey and I are off to the SPLAT shed.'

'Hang on a minute and I'll come too.' Dinah slipped the book into her pocket and stood up. 'Why are you in such a rush? Is something special happening?'

Lloyd spluttered and rolled his eyes up to the ceiling. 'You'll have to wait and see.'

Then Harvey rattled up the stairs, puffing and panting. 'Aren't you two ready *yet*? Ingrid'll be there first if we don't hurry.'

'Ingrid?' Dinah beamed. 'Is she back? I thought she was still in Wales.'

Lloyd gritted his teeth. 'Listen, Dinah. *Ingrid . . . Is . . . Back*. Got that? The spots have gone, and she's better, and she's come home. And we're going to do a Grand Welcome in the SPLAT shed. *If* we get there in time.'

'Why didn't you say so?'

Dinah leapt down the stairs, grabbed her coat, and raced through the front door. Lloyd pulled a face.

'Just think—we *asked* Mum and Dad to adopt her. We must have been mad. Life was much simpler before she came.'

'When the Headmaster was here?' Harvey gaped. 'You *liked* it when everyone else was hypnotized?'

'Of course not,' said Lloyd. 'I just meant—'

But Harvey had stopped listening. He was marching down the stairs like a robot, chanting in a mechanical voice, 'You Will Do What I Say. The Headmaster Is A Marvellous Man, And This Is The Best School I've Ever Been To.'

He ran off after Dinah and Lloyd followed, shaking his head. Everyone in SPLAT was getting

impossible. It had been dreadful when the Headmaster was there, but at least they'd had something to struggle against. When there were only five of them who couldn't be hypnotized. But now . . .

Lloyd trudged down an alley and through the gate at the bottom. By the time he reached the SPLAT shed, Dinah and Harvey were already there, knocking on the door.

Mandy's voice came from inside. 'The man who can keep order can rule the world.'

Lloyd finished the password. 'But the man who can bear disorder is truly free.'

Then he pushed open the door. Mandy was spreading a cloth over the box they used for a table and she looked up and smiled.

'Did you get my message? You know Ingrid's back?'

'Oh yes,' said Lloyd. 'We all know. Even Dinah.' He pulled a face at her. 'What about Ian?'

'He's gone to get some lemonade,' Mandy said. 'There's lots of money in the SPLAT savings, and I thought—oh, here he is.'

Ian lounged in, not bothering with the password, and put three bottles of lemonade on the table.

He grinned at Lloyd. 'Have you heard? Ingrid's back!'

'Shimmering scarlet sausages!' Lloyd thought he was going to explode. 'Of course I've heard! But

why are we all *talking* about it. We've got to get this welcome *organized*—or she'll be here. What are we going to do?'

'I've made a cake,' Mandy said.

She lifted it out of her bag and put it on the table. It was a big cake with white icing and pink letters all over it. The big ones across the top said *Welcome Home Ingrid* and the little ones round the sides spelt out SPLAT's full name: *Society for the Protection of our Lives Against Them*.

'I thought we could sing a song before we cut it,' Mandy said.

'Really?' Ian raised his eyebrows. 'How about "Happy Birthday"?'

'Ha ha,' said Lloyd.

But Harvey was bounding up and down. 'That'll do! It will! We can change the words to "Welcome Back Home to You". Like this.

Welcome back home to you!
Welcome back home to you!
Welcome back home, dear Ingrid . . . '

Lloyd put his hands over his ears. 'We'll have to practise—'

But they'd run out of time. The gate creaked and there was a knock on the shed door.

'Hello?' said a voice from outside. 'Anyone there?'

Lloyd put his finger to his lips and lifted his

hand. 'We'll sing what Harvey said,' he hissed. 'Start when I drop my hand.' He raised his voice and called out the first half of the password. 'The man who can keep order can rule the world.'

'Oh, you don't need to bother with *that*,' Ingrid said impatiently. 'It's only me.'

She pushed at the door.

'Get ready!' whispered Lloyd, still with his hand in the air.

The door swung open and Ingrid bounced into the shed. Spreading her arms wide, she grinned at them and whirled round.

'I'm back!'

Lloyd brought his hand down.

But no one sang a word. They were too startled. All of them were staring in amazement at what Ingrid was wearing.

Ian was the first to get his breath back. 'That's a pretty nasty T-shirt,' he drawled.

Ingrid beamed. 'Isn't it *disgusting*?' She whirled round again, more slowly this time, making sure they didn't miss anything.

On the front of the T-shirt was a close-up of a pig's face, with a disgusting, slobbery snout. The face was grinning triumphantly and large black letters were printed underneath it.

WHO'S ALWAYS RIGHT?

On the back was another version of the same face. This time, there was pig-swill dribbling from its mouth and the words underneath were different.

I'm an ED-u-cated pig!

Harvey shuddered. 'How can you bear to wear it?'

'I was afraid you'd all have them too,' Ingrid said happily. 'But I can see I'm the first. *Who's always right?*'

She whirled again, and then slowed down as she took in their expressions.

'You mean it, don't you?' she said, in an astonished voice. 'You really *don't* like it.'

'I'm sorry,' Mandy said apologetically, 'but it makes me feel sick. I don't think I can eat any cake if I have to look at it. I've never seen anything like it.'

Ingrid's mouth dropped open. 'You mean—they're not all over the shops? But you can't buy anything else in Wales. Everything's Hunky Parker there.'

Ian raised his eyebrows. 'Everything's *what*?'

'Hunky Parker. Oh, come *on*. You must have heard of Hunky Parker. He's been on television for four weeks.'

'Not here he hasn't,' said Lloyd.

Ingrid stared at him. Then she glanced at the others. All their faces were blank and, for a second, she looked taken aback. Then she grinned.

'Well, he soon will be. He's just *brilliant*. If you come back to my house after the cake, I'll show you my video.'

'I don't think—' Mandy began.

But Lloyd didn't let her finish. He hated the T-shirt too, but he liked to know what was going on.

'We'll all come,' he said firmly. 'After the lemonade and the cake. We'll watch the video together.'

'SPLAT meets Hunky Parker!' Ingrid giggled. 'You wait. You'll just love it. I know you will. *I'm an ED-u-cated pig!*'

She grabbed the cake and cut it into six big slices. Then she sat back and bit into one of them.

It was six o'clock before they got to Ingrid's. Dinah tried to slip off home, but Lloyd wouldn't let her.

'This is a SPLAT meeting, and that means we stick together. You've *got* to come.'

Dinah didn't look pleased, but she went to Ingrid's and sat down in the front room, with the rest of them.

'It's not a very long video,' Ingrid said, as she pulled out the cassette. 'Only a quarter of an hour. But it's fantastic. This was the first Hunky Parker programme Auntie Rachel let me watch, and I

was still quite ill then. But the moment I saw it I was hooked.'

She switched the video on and sat back, with a pleased expression on her face. Almost immediately, the screen was filled by a huge, slobbery pig's face, exactly the same as the one on the front of her T-shirt. It cocked its head and spoke smugly.

'*Who's always right?*'

A hundred voices roared the answer, as the words splashed across the screen.

'HUNKY PARKER!!!'

The pig blew a raspberry, drooling bubbles from its snout. Then it waddled away from the camera, into a neat, clean kitchen, where the table was laid for breakfast.

'I just love eating with the family,' it said. 'I'm an ED-u-cated pig!'

Seizing a packet of cornflakes, it began to tip them into its mouth, showering crumbs all over the table.

Lloyd stared. Ingrid thought *this* was brilliant? Had she gone mad? He didn't know if he could sit through a quarter of an hour of it.

He looked round at the others. Dinah had already given up. She'd slipped the maths book out of her pocket and was reading that, totally ignoring the video. Lloyd shook his head. He ought to *make* her watch. But how could he, when the video was such rubbish?

Glancing back at the screen, he saw Hunky Parker pick up a tin of golden syrup and empty it on to the table, on top of the sugar and toast and cornflakes he'd already spilt. *Bor-ing*, Lloyd thought.

And then something very odd happened.

While Hunky Parker was spilling the golden syrup, he just looked horrible. Fat and smug and grubby. But, as he threw the tin on to the floor, something changed.

Not Hunky Parker himself. He was just as fat and smug and grubby as before. The change was in Lloyd's mind. Suddenly, that fatness and smugness and grubbiness wasn't horrible any more. Hunky Parker looked at the camera, grinned a dribbling grin and said, '*Who's always right?*'—and Lloyd found himself laughing.

He would have felt silly, but Mandy and Ian and Harvey were laughing too. And Ingrid was clutching her sides and rolling around on the couch. Only Dinah was quiet, buried in her book. How *could* she? When Hunky Parker was so . . . so . . .

When the video finished, Lloyd was still hunting for the right word. Funny? Smart? Clever? Those were all wrong. He couldn't think of any way of describing how he felt about Hunky Parker. He was just—It. The thing there had to be more of.

Looking at Ingrid, Lloyd began to wonder

where he could buy a T-shirt like hers. He was going to ask, but Mandy got in first.

'You know your Auntie Rachel, Ingrid? In Wales?'

Ingrid nodded.

'If I sent her some money, d'you think she'd buy me a Hunky Parker T-shirt?'

'And me!' said Harvey.

'I fancy one too,' murmured Ian.

So do I, Lloyd was going to say—when he had a much better idea. A fantastic idea. He beamed at Ingrid and waved a hand towards her T-shirt.

'We'll *all* have one. *They can be SPLAT uniform!*'

Ingrid clapped her hands and Harvey bounced up and down with delight.

'That's brilliant! Fantastic!'

Lloyd grinned triumphantly. He didn't notice that Dinah was still deep in her maths book.

She hadn't heard a word.