



1 ★ Let's Plan to Win

It was lunch break, and the cafeteria was loud. I guess it was the buzz from everyone's weekend plans, everyone discussing who did what, who went where, and who said what.

Two girls, Nikke and Michelle, came up to our table—yeah, *our* table. I finally was able to say that, which meant Rebecca, Nia, and I always sat there, every single day. Our names were practically etched in the wooden table. It seemed it would be our table for the rest of the year. I mean, everyone has a table at lunch, right? And it was a great feeling to finally have a group of good friends at my new school.

So, these two girls came up to our table to find out how ice skating went on Friday.

It had gone fantastic. We told them how we had a blast even though we all thought we were going to break a leg at some point from falling down. Some good had come out of being bullied into doing Rayna Sullivan's science project — getting to go ice skating during school! As we continued to talk, I noticed Rebecca sat deep in thought, straining her eyes to their very corners, as if she were eavesdropping or spying. After we finished talking with Nikke and Michelle, she whispered, intently, to the both of us.

“You guys, let's get outside. Like right now. We need to talk, like ASAP.”

Sensing the urgency in her tone, I quickly wrapped up my lunch, curious to hear what she had to say. Did she see someone doing something incredibly horrible? Was someone cheating on a test? Was someone seen stealing something? I wondered what she'd seen because it was clear to me that she had been spying on someone. The suspense was killing me.

As we made our way outside, she led us to a picnic bench near a tree. We all sat down and began unpacking our lunches. “What's

up?” I asked. I was just about to start eating again when Rebecca said, “OK, listen. We have to really bring it, like *for real*.” She was *serious*. Like, dead serious.

“Bring what?” Nia asked.

“Like, bring *it*. In the talent show!” she said with a tone that screamed, “Like, *hello?*”

Nia and I both stared at her. While we were ice skating, she had told us there was going to be a school talent show. So we knew that it was in three weeks, that Rebecca had signed us up, and we were going to sing and dance.

“Right. Well, of course we will,” I said in confidence. Of course I would, at least. I never did anything halfway. You can ask my Mom.

Rebecca reached for a notepad out of her backpack and looked over what seemed to be her “list.”

“OK, I’ve been brainstorming. But I need to tell you what I just heard at the lunch table.”

“Yeah?” I asked.

“What?” Nia asked.

“I just heard Britney Chambers say to the table next to us that . . .” she stopped. “And I mean, this is top secret in the way she was telling her friends. I mean, she was practically whispering. I don’t know how I even overheard. I guess I have good ears.” She shrugged.

“What? What did she say?” I asked.

“She said that she is going to have a real life tiger on stage — as part of her magic show.”

“I wonder how she will make it go away,” Nia said.

“With her magic! Duh,” I smiled and teased. Nia laughed at me as Rebecca just sat there with that dead-serious look on her face.

“Oh, come on, Rebecca. Lighten up a little. Maybe she’s not telling the truth. You know, exaggerating a bit? I mean, come on, a tiger? There’s no way.”

“Clearly, Shawnee, you weren’t here last year for the talent show. There was a real life horse on stage.”

“For real?”

“Oh yeah. I remember that,” Nia said.



“Everyone thought Miranda was like the coolest after that. But it was a pony. And they did get into trouble because they broke the rules. Parents went ballistic.”

“Are you serious?” I asked.

“For real,” Nia said.

Rebecca snapped us back to business. “So, like I said, we have to totally bring it. Let’s brainstorm, shall we?” she said as if she were the CEO of *Operation Talent Show*. I was beginning to see a new side to Rebecca. Normally, Rebecca was nice, pleasant, and hardly ever bossy, which was the reason I always liked her. But now she was really taking charge. *Maybe she is extremely competitive?* I thought to myself, trying to figure out a reason for this sudden change of behavior.

“OK, so initially I was thinking about fire torches. But then I realized the sprinklers would go off because of the smoke. It would completely ruin our hair and makeup. So scratch that.” She marked that one off her list. “Or, unless it was part of the act? Like if we were dancing in the rain . . .” Rebecca let her thoughts hang as she tapped the

pencil on her chin.

“Fire?” I gasped.

“Yeah, like fire torches.” Rebecca said this as if she were telling me something, again, in that *duh* tone.

As I sat there wondering how we would dance with fire torches, she began prodding me. “Come on, Shawnee, do you have any ideas? Think, think, think. I mean you *do* have brilliant ideas. I saw the science project you made for Rayna.” She was the girl who had bullied me.

I opened my mouth to speak, but before I could answer, Rebecca shouted, “Smoke machine! That’s what we can use. And our own lighting — strobe lights.” As she eagerly wrote down her grand ideas, I tried to get my mind to register them all.

I did a talent show once back in my old school and, well, Rebecca’s vision and expectation of our performance made my old act look like a traveling circus parked next to Disney World.

“Are we even allowed to do all of this? The smoke machines, strobe lights . . . I mean, isn’t there like . . . I don’t know. A

budget or something? To keep parents from spending an arm and a leg to make their child win? I mean, because . . . ”

“*Budget?*” Rebecca cut me off, with annoyance.

“Um, no,” she snickered. “Welcome to Mount Hope. Everything costs a pretty penny. It already costs an arm and a leg. But I guess we can look at the rulebook about the smoke machine. You do bring up a good point.”

“Yeah, because I have asthma,” Nia said.

Rebecca shook her head. “That’s easy to fix. You can just take your inhaler. I mean, I was talking about not doing it to keep the fire sprinklers from going off, which, once again, would mess up our hair and makeup.”

I looked at Nia to see her response. She just sat there, seemingly unmoved.

Rebecca then turned to me. ”Why are you being so uptight anyway? Besides, it’s not like you have to pay for anything because Nia’s family is going to sponsor our performance. All you have to do is just show up and dance.”

Nia looked at Rebecca with obvious

surprise. Rebecca quickly looked down at her list.

“Oh, that was number five.” Rebecca smiled angelically. “I meant to ask you. Do you think your family can sponsor us?” Before Nia even answered, Rebecca went on to say, “Oh, and then we will make a YouTube video. Which leads us to . . .” she looked further down her list.

“Our marketing budget.” She wiggled her pencil. “And let’s be honest, ladies. I’m thinking, if we really want to win and be unique, we need to hire a choreographer for the best ever, most original dance performance.”

Ladies? Choreographer? Originality?
OK, I was thinking, what aliens have abducted my friend Rebecca? The normal friend who laughs with me and is anything but overbearing, complicated, and formal.

I looked at Nia to see if any of this struck her as odd. But as I thought about it all, Nia was used to tailor-made things. And being called “miss” and “madam” and hearing things like “attention ladies.” She was also used to being told when to do things. Her

life was basically mapped out from the moment she woke until the moment she slept, I recently learned. So none of this really fazed her.

But me? *Uh, hello?! We're in 5th grade!* Yes . . . I knew the school we went to . . . it was so different from my old school: more prestigious and grander in every possible way. But tigers appearing on stage for a performance? Hired choreographers? *Would this even be fun?* I wondered. *And why did she all of a sudden want to make this huge production anyway? What did she need to prove?*

“So, like I said earlier, we need a really awesome dance and maybe even an original song,” Rebecca said as she tilted her head and chewed the end of her eraser. “So, songwriter?” she asked, waiting for us to answer.

“For us to sing, right?” I asked. She said we were to be like some group she had mentioned, where we all sing and dance.

“Yeah, to sing. For *me* to sing, that is,” she quickly added.

For you to sing? I wondered. So I said,

“Wait, I thought you said we would all be singing, you know, as a group? And do we really have time for someone to write a song?”

Rebecca was quick to answer. “Ummm, you will be singing a bunch of ‘ohhhhs,’ ‘ahhhhs’ and ‘la las,’ but leave the main stuff to me. And we’re still a group, but every group I know has a main singer. And yes, when money is involved, you can get anything you want, right Nia?”

Both Nia and I were taken back, and I said, “Really?”

“But you said . . . ” Nia said. “Not exactly . . . ”

But Rebecca quickly cut us both off.

“Nah, I guess you misheard me about all of us singing, you know, since we were ice skating and you kept falling down.”

“Yeah, right! We were all falling down,” I challenged. Nia laughed.

“Don’t worry — leave that hard stuff to me,” Rebecca said, then winked.

“Seriously, I’m a very good singer. I sing in choir at church and . . . ” I heard myself trying to convince Rebecca.

“Church choir — *exactly*. No one has to try out for that, Shawnee. Do you want to win or not?”

Technically, you do have to try out for choir at my church. OK, so it’s to decide which section you’ll sing in, but that’s not the point. I looked over at Nia, who sat there looking bored with her arms crossed. Regardless of all these plans, I just honestly planned to have some fun and maybe shine a bit. I instantly smiled at that thought: spotlight on me, crowd cheering, Mom and Dad taking pictures of me, and then showing their friends. Determined to see that happen, I pressed a little more.

“I really *am* a good singer. You should hear me.” I was trying hard to convince Rebecca.

“Look — *whatever* . . . OK?” she said with dramatic flair, seasoned with major attitude, her hands flying in the air.

“We’re going to win, and then we’ll be famous,” Rebecca said. “It’s just the fact of the matter. This is the price to pay. Are you in, or are you out?”

Up until that point, I was fine. Wasn’t

really looking too much into her attitude, but it was at this moment, I fully realized, that I didn't like the way she was treating me.

“Then we can post the video on YouTube and be famous like Justin Bieber. Don't you watch the Grammys? Award shows?” I shook my head because I hadn't watched them before. Mom and Dad said they had inappropriate performances in them.

“There are so many components that go into making a fabulous performance. Oh, it will be fun, Shawnee.” She put her arm around me. “Just watch and see. Just wait and see.”