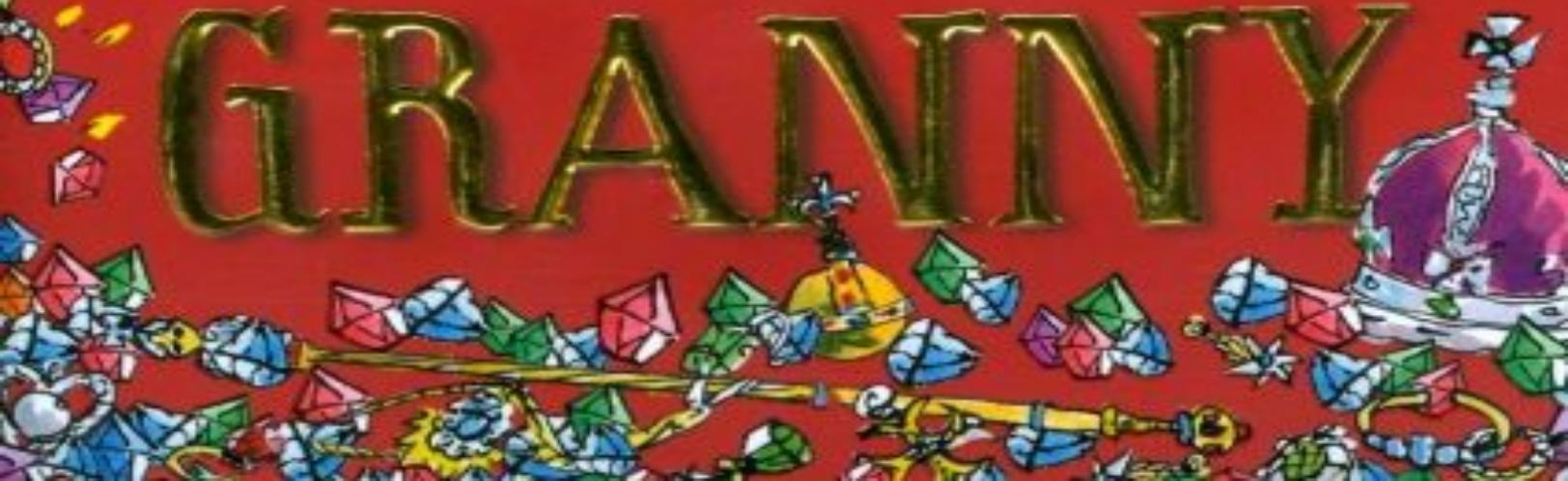


David Williams



GANGSTA
GRANNY



15

Reckless and Thrilling

When Granny had put her clothes back on, she and Ben sat down on the sofa.

“Granny, before Mr Parker turned up you were telling me there was one jewel that you never stole,” Ben whispered.

“There is something quite special that every great thief in the world would love to get their hands on. But it’s impossible. It just can’t be done.”

“I bet you could do it, Granny. You’re the greatest thief the world has ever known.”

“Thank you, Ben, perhaps I am, or rather was...and stealing these particular jewels might be every great thief’s dream, but it would just be, well...impossible.”

“Jewels? There’s more than one?”

“Yes, my dear. The last time anyone tried to steal them was three hundred years ago. A Captain Blood I believe. And I am not sure the Queen would be pleased...” She chuckled.

“You don’t mean...?”

“*The Crown Jewels*, yes, my boy.”



Ben had learned about the Crown Jewels in a history lesson at school. History was one of the few subjects he liked, mainly because of all the gory punishments they used to have in the olden days. ‘Hanged, drawn and quartered’ was his absolute favourite, but he also liked the breaking wheel, being burned at the stake, and of course a red-hot poker up the bum.

Who doesn’t?

At school, Ben had learned that the Crown Jewels were in fact a set of crowns, swords, sceptres, rings, bracelets and orbs, some of which were

nearly a thousand years old. They were used when a new king or queen was crowned, and since 1303 (the year, not the time), they had been kept under lock and key in the Tower of London.

Ben had begged his parents to take him to see them, but they had moaned that London was too far away (even though it wasn't that far).

To be honest, they never really went anywhere as a family. When he was younger, Ben used to listen in silent wonder to his classmates, as they recounted their myriad adventures in 'show and tell'. Trips to the seaside, visits to museums, even holidays abroad. The knot in his stomach would tighten when his turn came. He was too embarrassed to admit that all he had done during the holidays was eat microwaveable meals and watch TV, so he would make up stories about flying kites and climbing trees and exploring castles.

But now he had the greatest 'show and tell' of all time. His granny was an international jewel thief. A gangsta! Except if he showed or told this, the old dear would be put in prison and they would throw away the key.

Ben realised that this was his big chance to do something crazy and reckless and thrilling.

"I can help you," said Ben in a cool and calm manner, though his heart was beating faster than ever.

"Help me do what?" replied the old lady, a little befuddled.

"Steal the Crown Jewels, of course!" said Ben.

Ben was sad to see that Granny was becoming like one of the boring grown-ups again, just when she'd started to become interesting. Still, he did what she said. Apart from anything else, he didn't want to make his parents suspicious, so he raced home and climbed up the drainpipe to his bedroom window, before rushing downstairs to the living room.

Unsurprisingly, though, Mum and Dad hadn't been worried about where Ben was at all. They had been too busy planning their son's rise to dancing superstardom to notice he was gone.

Dad had been calling and calling the national under-twelve dance competition hotline until finally he got through and secured his son a place. Mum was right, the competition was at the town hall in just a couple of weeks' time. There was no time to lose, so Mum had been working every waking moment on her son's Love Bomb outfit.

"How's the rehearsals going, boy?" asked Dad. "You look like you've worked up quite a sweat."

"Fine, thank you, Dad," lied Ben. "I really am getting something really spectacular together for the big night."

Ben cursed his runaway mouth.

Something spectacular?

He'd be lucky if he didn't fall over and knock himself out.

"Well, we can't wait to see it! Not long to go!" said Mum, not even looking up from the sewing machine, as she stitched a row of hundreds of sparkling red hearts down the side of his Lycra trousers.

"I'd kind of like to practise on my own for now, Mum, you know..." Ben gulped nervously. "Until it's completely ready to show you."

"Yes, yes, we understand," said Mum.

Ben sighed with relief. He had bought himself a bit more time.

But only a little bit.

In a couple of weeks Ben was still going to have to perform a solo dance routine for the whole town.

He sat on his bed, and reached underneath it for his stash of *Plumbing Weeklys*. Flicking through an issue from the previous year, he saw that it contained a feature entitled 'A Short History of Plumbing', that focused on some of London's oldest sewage pipes. Ben frantically turned the pages to find it.

Eureka! There it was.

Hundreds of years ago the River Thames, on the banks of which the Tower of London is situated, had been an open sewer. (Technically speaking, that means there was a lot of wee and poo in it.)

Buildings along the riverside simply had big pipes leading from their toilets straight into the river. In the magazine were detailed historical diagrams of various famous buildings in London, showing where their old sewage pipes connected to the river.

And...

Ben's finger ran down the article...

Yes! A chart of the sewer pipes at the Tower of London.

This could be the key to stealing the Crown Jewels. One pipe was nearly a metre wide, big enough for a child to swim up. And maybe big enough for a little old lady too!

The article also said that, when the plumbing systems were modernised and proper sewers installed a lot of the old pipes were simply left where they were, because it was simpler than digging them up.

Ben's head spun as he thought about what this meant. It was possible – just possible – that there was still a huge pipe leading from the Thames into the Tower of London, and that most people, apart from very keen plumbing enthusiasts, had forgotten it was there. Ben wouldn't have known himself, if he hadn't been a long-term subscriber to *Plumbing Weekly*.

He and Granny could swim up that pipe, and get into the Tower... *Mum and Dad were wrong!* he thought. *Plumbing can be exciting.*

Of course, it was a sewage pipe, which wasn't ideal, but any poo and wee still in it would be hundreds of years old.

Ben didn't know if that was a good or bad thing.

At that moment, he heard a creak in the floorboards and his bedroom door flew open. His mum burst in holding a big piece of Lycra that looked ominously like his 'Love Bomb' outfit.

Ben quickly concealed the magazine under his bed, which made him look incredibly guilty.

"I was just going to get you to try this on," said Mum.

"Oh yes," said Ben, as he sat on his bed awkwardly, his heels pushing the remaining *Plumbing Weeklys* out of sight of Mum's prying eyes.

“What’s that?” she said. “What did you hide when I came in? Is that *Nuts* magazine?”

“No,” said Ben, swallowing his guilt. This looked way worse than it was. It looked like he was hiding a naughty magazine under the bed.

“It’s nothing to be ashamed of, Ben. I think it’s healthy you are expressing an interest in girls.”

Oh no! thought Ben. *My mum’s going to talk to me about girls!*

“There’s nothing embarrassing about being interested in girls, Ben.”

“Yes there is! Girls are gross!”

“No, Ben, it’s the most natural thing in the world...”

She’s just not stopping!

“THE DINNER IS NEARLY READY, LOVE!” came a shout from downstairs. “WHAT ARE YOU DOING UP THERE?”

“I AM TALKING TO BEN ABOUT GIRLS!” Mum shouted back.

Ben was so red that if he opened his mouth wide enough he might be mistaken for a postbox.

“WHAT?” cried Dad.

“GIRLS!” shouted Mum. “I AM TALKING TO OUR SON ABOUT GIRLS!”

“OH, RIGHT!” Dad shouted back. “I’LL TURN THE OVEN OFF.”

“So, Ben, if you ever need to – ”

BRING BRING. BRING BRING.

It was Mum’s mobile phone going off in her pocket.

“Sorry dear,” she said, placing the handset to her ear. “Gail, can I call you back? I am just talking to Ben about girls. OK, thanks, bub-bye.”

She hung up the phone and turned to Ben.

“Sorry, where was I? Oh yes, if you ever need to have a little chat with me about girls, then please do. You can trust me to be very discreet...”

17

Planning the Heist

For the first time in his life, Ben skipped to school the following morning.

Through his love of plumbing, the previous night he had discovered that the Tower of London had a weakness. The most impregnable building in the world, where some of the country's most dangerous criminals had been imprisoned and executed, had a fatal flaw; a large sewage pipe that led directly into the River Thames.

That ancient tube would be his and Granny's way in and out of the Tower! It was a quite brilliant plan, and Ben's body couldn't hide its excitement at this amazing discovery.

That's why he was skipping.

Now he couldn't wait until Friday night when his mum and dad would once again pack him off to Granny's.

Then he would be able to convince the old lady that together they really could steal the Crown Jewels. Ben would bring along the diagram in *Plumbing Weekly* of the Tower of London's sewage system to show her. The two of them could stay up all night and work out every detail of the most daring robbery of all time.

The problem was that a whole fat week of lessons and teachers and homework stood between now and Friday night. However, Ben was determined to use the week at school wisely.

In his IT lesson, he looked up the Crown Jewels and memorised every detail on the web page.

In History, he asked his teacher questions about the Tower of London and exactly where in the building the jewels were kept. (That would be the Jewel House, fact fans.)

In Geography, he found an atlas of the British Isles and pinpointed precisely where on the Thames the Tower is situated.

In PE, he didn't accidentally on purpose forget his kit like usual, instead he did extra press-ups so his arms would be strong enough to pull himself up the sewage pipe that led into the Tower.

In Maths, he asked the teacher how many packets of Rolos you could buy with five billion pounds (which is what the Crown Jewels were said to be worth). Rolos were Ben's absolute favourite sweets.

The answer is ten billion packets, or twenty-four billion actual Rolos. That's enough for a year at least.

And Raj was sure to throw in a few extra packets for free.

In his French class, Ben learned how to say, 'I know nothing about the theft of, how you say, 'the Crown Jewels', I am but a poor French peasant boy', in case he needed to pretend he was a poor French peasant boy in order to escape from the scene of the crime.

In Spanish he learned to say, 'I know nothing about, how you say, 'the Crown Jewels', I am but a poor Spanish peasant boy', in case he needed to pretend he was a poor Spanish peasant boy in order to escape from the scene of the crime.

In German he learned to say...well, I'm sure you get the idea.

In Science, Ben quizzed his teacher about how you might be able to penetrate bulletproof glass. Even if you got into Jewel House, removing the jewels was not going to be easy, as they were kept behind glass that was inches thick.

In his Art class, he made a detailed scale model of the Tower of London out of matches so he could role play the daring robbery in miniature.

The week absolutely flew by, never had school been so much fun. Most importantly, for the first time in his life Ben couldn't wait to spend time with his granny.

By the end of school on Friday afternoon, Ben felt he had all the data he needed to put the daring plan into place.

The story of the theft of the Crown Jewels would be on the TV news for weeks, on every website, and emblazoned across every front page of every newspaper in every country in the world. However, no one, but no one, would suspect that the thieves were in fact a little old lady and an

eleven-year-old boy. They were going to get away with the crime of the century!

18

Visiting Hours

“You can’t stay with Granny tonight,” said Dad. It was four o’clock on Friday afternoon, and Ben had just got home from school. It was strange that Dad was home so early. He usually didn’t finish his shift at the supermarket until eight.

“Why not?” asked Ben, noticing his dad’s face was dark with worry.

“I’m afraid I’ve got some bad news, son.”

“What?” demanded Ben, his face darkening with worry too.

“Granny’s in hospital.”

A little while later, once they’d finally found a parking space, Ben and his parents went through the automatic doors of the hospital. Ben wondered if Mum and Dad were ever going to find Granny in here. The hospital was impossibly tall and wide, a great monument to illness.

There were lifts that took you to other lifts.

Mile-long corridors.

Signs everywhere that Ben couldn’t comprehend:

CORONARY CARE UNIT
RADIOLOGY
OBSTETRICS
CLINICAL DECISION UNIT
MRI SCANNING ROOM

Confused-looking patients on trolleys or in wheelchairs were being wheeled up and down by porters, as doctors and nurses who looked like they hadn’t been to bed for days, hurried past them.

When they finally found the wing Granny was in, right up on the nineteenth floor, Ben didn’t recognise her at first.

Her hair was flat on her head, she didn't have her glasses on or her teeth in, and she was wearing not her own clothes, but a standard issue NHS nightgown. It was as if all of the things that made her Granny had been taken from her, and she was now just a shell.

Ben felt so sad to see her like this, but tried to hide it. He didn't want to upset her.

"Hello, dears," she said. Her voice was croaky, and her speech a little slurred. Ben had to take a deep breath to stop from bursting into tears.

"How are you feeling, Mum?" asked Ben's dad.

"Not too clever," she replied. "I had a fall."

"A fall?" said Ben.

"Yes. I don't remember much about it. One moment I was reaching in the larder for a tin of cabbage soup, the next thing I knew I was lying on the lino staring at the ceiling. My cousin Edna called me a number of times from her nursing home. When she couldn't get an answer, she called an ambulance."

"When did you fall over, Granny?" asked Ben.

"Let me think, I was lying on the kitchen floor for two days, so it must have been Wednesday morning. I couldn't get up to reach the telephone."

"I am so sorry, Mum," said Dad quietly. Ben had never seen his father look so upset.

"It's funny, because I meant to call you on Wednesday, you know just for a chat, to see how you are," said Mum, lying. She had never called the old lady in her life, and if Granny ever called the house Mum couldn't get off the phone quick enough.

"You weren't to know, my dear," said Granny. "They did all kinds of tests this morning to see what's wrong with me; X-rays and scans and the like. I'll get the results tomorrow. Hopefully I won't be in here too long."

"I hope so too," said Ben.

There was an uncomfortable silence.

No one quite knew what to say or do.

Mum hesitantly nudged Dad and mimed looking at her watch.

Ben knew hospitals made her uncomfortable. When he'd had his appendix out two years before she had only visited him a couple of times, and even then it had made her sweat and fidget.

“Well, we’d better be off,” said Dad.

“Yes, yes, you go,” said Granny, with lightness in her voice but sadness in her eyes. “Don’t you worry about me, I’ll be fine.”

“Can’t we stay a bit longer?” piped up Ben.

Mum shot him an anguished look, which Dad clocked.

“No, come along, Ben, your granny will need to go to sleep in a few hours,” said Dad, as he stood up and readied himself to leave. “I’m quite busy, Mum, but I’ll try and pop in over the weekend.”

He patted his mother on the head, like one might a dog. It was an awkward gesture; Dad wasn’t a hugger.

He turned to go, Mum smiled weakly, and then pulled a reluctant Ben across the ward by his wrist.



Up in his bedroom, later that evening, Ben determinedly sorted all the information he’d gathered from school that week.

We’ll show them, Granny, he thought fiercely. *I’m going to do it for you.* Now Granny was ill he was more determined to do it than ever.

He had until tea time to plan the greatest jewel theft in history.