

David Williams



GANGSTA
GRANNY

7

Bags of Manure

“Can I stay at Granny’s again tonight?” announced Ben from the backseat of his mum and dad’s little brown car. The diamonds in the biscuit tin were so puzzling; he was desperate to do some detective work. Maybe even search every nook and cranny of the old lady’s bungalow. This was all awfully mysterious. Raj had said his granny might have a secret or two. And it seemed like the newsagent was right! And whatever Granny’s secret was, it must be pretty amazing to explain all those diamonds. What if she used to be a zillionaire? Or worked in a diamond mine? Or been left them by a Princess? Ben couldn’t wait to find out.

“What?” asked Dad, astonished.

“But you said she was boring,” said Mum, equally astonished, irritated even. “You said all old people are.”

“I was just joking,” said Ben.

Dad studied his son in the rear-view mirror. He found understanding his plumbing-obsessed son hard enough at the best of times. Right now Ben wasn’t making any sense at all. “Mmm, well...if you are sure, Ben...”

“I am sure, Dad.”

“I’ll call her when we get home. Just to check she’s not going out.”

“Going out!” scoffed Mum. “The old dear hasn’t gone out for twenty years!” she added with a chuckle.

Ben wasn’t sure why this was funny.

“I took her out to the garden centre that time,” protested Dad.

“It was only because you needed someone to help you carry a load of bags of manure,” said Mum.

“She had a super day out, though,” said Dad, sounding miffed.



Later, Ben sat alone on his bed. His mind was racing.

Where on earth had Granny got the diamonds?

How much were they worth?

Why would she live in that sad little bungalow if she was so rich?

Ben searched and searched his mind, but couldn't find any answers.

Then Dad entered the room.

"Granny's busy. She says she'd love to see you, but she's going out tonight," he announced.

"What?!" spluttered Ben. Granny hardly ever went out – Ben had seen her calendar. The mystery was getting even more mysterious...

8

A Small Wig in a Jar

Ben hid in the bushes outside Granny's bungalow. Whilst Mum and Dad were downstairs in the living room watching *Strictly Stars Dancing* on the TV, Ben had scaled down the drainpipe outside his bedroom window, and cycled the five miles to Granny's.

This alone was a sign of how curious Ben had become about his granny. He didn't like cycling. His parents were always encouraging him to get more exercise. They told him that being fit was absolutely necessary if you wanted to be a professional dancer. But since it didn't make much difference when you were lying under a sink, screwing in a new length of copper piping, Ben had never willingly taken any exercise.

Until now.

If Granny was really going out for the first time in twenty years, Ben had to know where. It might just hold the key to how she came to have a ton of diamonds in her biscuit tin.

So he huffed and puffed along the canal towpath on his clunky old bike, until he came to Grey Close. The only good thing was that, being November, instead of being drenched in sweat, Ben was only mildly moist.

He had pedalled fast because he knew he didn't have that much time. *Strictly Stars Dancing* seemed to go on for hours, days even, but it had taken Ben half an hour to cycle over to Granny's, and as soon as the show was over Mum would be calling him downstairs for his tea. Ben's parents loved all the dancing TV shows – *Dancing on Ice Skates*, *So You Think You Might Be Able To Dance A Bit?* – but they were completely obsessed with *Strictly Stars Dancing*. They had recorded every single episode, and had an unrivalled collection of *Strictly* memorabilia in the house, including:

- A lime green thong once worn by Flavio Flavioli, framed with a photograph of him wearing it
- A *Strictly Stars Dancing* real fake leather bookmark
- Some athlete's foot powder signed by Flavio's professional dance partner, the Austrian beauty, Eva Bunz
- His and Hers official *Strictly Stars Dancing* leg warmers
- A CD of songs nearly used on the show
- A small wig in a jar that had been worn by the presenter, Sir Dirk Duddery
- A lifesize cardboard cut-out of Flavio Flavioli that had some of Mum's lipstick smudged around the mouth
- Some earwax in a jar that belonged to a celebrity contestant, the politician, Dame Rachel Prejudice MP
- A pair of tan tights that smelled of Eva Bunz
- A doodle on a napkin of a man's bottom drawn by the nasty judge, Craig Malteser-Woodward
- A set of official *Strictly Stars Dancing* eggcups
- A half full tube of raxjex used by Flavio Flavioli
- A Craig Malteser-Woodward poseable action figure
- A Hawaiian Hot pizza crust that had been left by Flavio (complete with a signed letter of authenticity from Eva Bunz)

It was a Saturday, so after the show had finished the family were going to be having Cheesy Beans and Sausage. Neither Mum nor Dad could cook, but of all the ready made meals Ben's mum took out of the freezer, pricked with a fork and placed in the microwave for three minutes, this was his favourite. Ben was hungry and didn't want to miss it – which meant he needed to get back from Granny's house quickly. If it had been a Monday night, say, and they were having Chicken Tikka Lasagne, or a Wednesday and Doner Kebab Pizza, or a Sunday and Yorkshire Pudding Chow Mein* was on the menu, Ben wouldn't have been so bothered.

≡ The supermarket chain where Ben's dad worked liked to bring the cuisine of two countries together in one easily microwaveable pack. By combining dishes from different countries, perhaps they would be able to bring peace to a deeply divided world. Or maybe not.



Night was falling. As it was late November it was rapidly growing colder and darker, and Ben was shivering in the bushes as he spied on his granny. *Where can she be going?* thought Ben. *She hardly ever goes out.*

He saw a shadow move in her bungalow. Then her face appeared at the window, and Ben quickly shot out of view. The bushes rustled. *Shhh!* thought Ben. Had the old lady seen him?

After a few moments the front door opened slowly, and out stepped a figure dressed entirely in black. A black jumper, black leggings, black gloves, black socks, probably even a black bra and knickers. A black balaclava disguised the face, but from the stoop Ben knew it was Granny. She looked like someone from one of the covers of the books she loved reading. She straddled her mobility scooter and revved the engine.

Where on earth was she going?

And, more importantly, why was she dressed like a ninja?

Ben propped his bike against the bushes, and got ready to tail his own grandmother.

Which was one thing he had never in a million years dreamed of doing.

Like a spider scuttling around a bathroom trying not to be seen, Granny steered her scooter close to the walls. Ben followed on foot as quietly as possible. It wasn't too difficult to keep up, as the top speed of the mobility scooter was four miles per hour. Whirring across the road, she suddenly looked back as if she had heard something, and Ben dived behind a tree.

He waited, holding his breath.

Nothing.

After a few moments, he poked his head around the trunk, and saw that Granny had reached the end of the road. He continued his chase.

Soon they were near the town's high street. It was all but deserted. As it was early evening, all the shops had shut for the day and the pubs and restaurants had yet to open for the night. Granny stayed out of the glow of the streetlights, swerved into doorways, as she neared her destination.

Ben gasped when he saw where she had parked.

The jeweler's shop.

Necklaces and rings and watches sparkled in the window. Ben couldn't believe his eyes as Granny took out a tin of cabbage soup from the

scooter's basket. She glanced around theatrically then pulled back her arm in readiness to smash the tin through the jeweler's shop window.

“Nooooo!” shouted Ben.

Granny dropped the tin. It crashed to the ground and cabbage soup oozed on to the pavement.

“Ben?” hissed Granny. “What are you doing here?”

9

The Black Cat

Ben stared at his granny as she stood by the jeweler's shop, dressed all in black.

"Ben?" she prompted. "What are you doing following me?"

"I just...I..." Ben was so shocked he couldn't form a sentence.

"Well," she said. "Whatever you're doing here, you'll have the cops on us in no time. We'd better get out of here. Quick, jump on."

"But I can't –"

"Ben! We've got about thirty seconds before that CCTV camera comes on." She pointed to a camera screwed to the wall of an apartment block next to the row of shops.

Ben jumped on the back of her mobility scooter. "You know when the CCTV cameras come on?" he asked.

"Oh," said Granny, "you'd be surprised by what I know."

Ben looked at her back as she drove. He'd just seen her preparing to rob a jeweler's shop, how could he be *more* surprised? Clearly there was a lot more to his granny than he had ever known.

"Hold on," said Granny. "I'm going full throttle."

She violently twisted the handle of the scooter, to absolutely no effect that Ben could feel. They hummed off in the dark, going about three miles per hour with the increased weight.



"'The Black Cat'?" repeated Ben. They were finally back sitting in Granny's living room. She had made a pot of tea and laid out some chocolate biscuits.

"Yes, that's what they called me," replied Granny. "I was the most wanted jewel thief in the world."

Ben's head was exploding with a million questions. *Why? Where? Who? What? When?* It was impossible to know what to ask first.

"No one else knows except you, Ben," continued Granny. "Even your granddad went to his grave not knowing. Can you keep a secret? You have to swear not to tell a soul."

"But –"

Granny's face looked fierce for a moment. Her eyes narrowed and darkened like a snake about to bite.

"You have to swear," the old lady said with an intensity Ben had never witnessed before. "Us criminals take our oaths very seriously. Very seriously *indeed*."

Ben gulped, a little scared. "I swear not to tell anyone."

"Not even your mother and father!" barked Granny, nearly spitting out her false teeth in the process.

"I said, I swear not to tell anyone," barked back Ben.

Ben had been learning about Venn diagrams in school recently. As he had sworn not to tell anyone, and let's say that 'anyone' is Set A, then Mum and Dad are obviously included in Set A and are of course a subset of it, so there was really no need for Granny to ask Ben to swear a second time.

Take a look at this handy diagram:



But Ben didn't think his granny would be interested in Venn diagrams right now. Since she was still staring at him with those scary eyes, he sighed, and said, "All right, I swear not to tell Mum and Dad."

"Good boy," said Granny as her hearing aid began to whistle.

"Erm, on one condition," ventured Ben.

"What's that?" said Granny, seeming a little startled by his nerve.

"You have to tell me everything..."

10

Everything

“I was about your age when I stole my first diamond ring,” said Granny.

Ben was astonished; partly at the idea that Granny had ever been his age, which seemed impossible, and partly because of the obvious fact that eleven-year-old girls do not usually steal diamonds. Glitter pens, hairclips, toy ponies maybe, diamonds definitely not.

“I know you look at me with my Scrabble and my knitting and my fondness for cabbage, and think I am just some boring old dear...”

“No...” said Ben, not entirely convincingly.

“But you forget, child, that I was young once.”

“What was the first ring you stole?” said Ben eagerly. “Did it have a really big diamond on it?”

The old lady chuckled. “Not so big! No, it was my first one. I’ve still got it somewhere. Go into the kitchen will you, Ben, and fetch the Silver Jubilee biscuit tin from the shelf.”

Ben shrugged as if he knew nothing about the Silver Jubilee biscuit tin, and its incredible contents.

“Whereabouts is it, Granny?” asked Ben as he left the living room.

“Just on top of the larder, boy!” called Granny. “Chop-chop. Your mummy and daddy will be wondering where you are soon.” Ben remembered that he had wanted to rush home for Cheesy Beans and Sausage. Suddenly that seemed colossally unimportant. He wasn’t even feeling hungry any more.

Ben re-entered the room holding the tin. It was even heavier than he remembered. He passed it to his granny.

“Good boy,” she said as she rummaged through the tin, and picked out a particularly beautiful little sparkler.

“Aah, yes, this is it!”

To Ben, all the diamond rings looked pretty much the same. However, Granny seemed to know each of them as if they were her oldest friends. “Such a little beauty,” she said as she brought the ring up to her eye for closer inspection. “This is the first one I stole, back when I was a nipper.”

Ben couldn’t imagine what Granny would have been like young. He had only known her as an old lady. He even imagined she had been born an old lady. That years ago in the hospital when her mother had given birth and asked the midwife if it was a boy or a girl, the midwife might have replied, “It’s an old lady!”

“I grew up in a small village, and my family were very poor,” continued Granny. “And up at the top of the hill was this grand country house where a Lord and Lady lived. Lord and Lady Davenport. It was just after the war and we didn’t have much food in those days. I was hungry, so one night at midnight, when everyone was asleep I crept out of my mother and father’s little cottage. Under the cover of darkness, I made my way through the woods and up the hill to Davenport House.”

“Weren’t you scared?” asked Ben.

“Yes, of course I was. Being alone in the dark woods at night, it was terrifying. There were guard dogs at the house. Great big black Dobermans. So as quietly as I could, I climbed a drainpipe and found an unlocked window. I was a very little girl at eleven, small for my age. So I managed to squeeze myself through a tiny gap in the window, and landed behind a velvet curtain. When I pulled back the curtain I realised I was in Lord and Lady Davenport’s bedroom.”

“Oh no!” said Ben.

“Oh yes,” continued the old lady. “I thought I might just take some food perhaps, but next to the bed I saw this little beauty.” She indicated the diamond ring.

“So you just took it?”

“Being an international jewel thief is never that simple, young man,” said Granny. “The Lord and Lady were snoring heavily, but if I woke them I’d be dead. The Lord always slept with a shotgun by the bed.”

“A shotgun?” asked Ben.

“Yes, he was posh, and being posh he liked hunting pheasants, so he owned many guns.”

Ben was sweating with nerves. “But he didn’t wake up and try and shoot you, did he?”

“Be patient, young man. All in good time. I crept over to Lady Davenport’s side of the bed and picked up the diamond ring. I couldn’t believe how beautiful it was. I had never seen one up close before. My mother would never have dreamed of owning one. ‘I don’t need jewels,’ she would say to us children. ‘*You* are my little diamonds.’ I wondered at the diamond in my hand for a moment. It was the most gorgeous thing I had ever seen in my life. Then, suddenly, there was an almighty noise.”

Ben frowned. “What was it?”

“Lord Davenport was a big fat greedy man. He must have had too much to eat earlier because he let out the most enormous burp!”

Ben laughed and Granny laughed too. He knew burps weren’t supposed to be funny, but couldn’t help laughing.

“It was so loud!” said Granny, still chuckling.

“BBBBBBBBBBBB BUUUUUUUUU UUUUUURRRRRR RRRRRRRRPPPP PPPPPPP!!!!!!!” she mimicked.

Ben was helpless with laughter now.

“It was so loud,” continued Granny, “that I was startled and dropped the ring on the polished wooden floor. It made quite a bang as it hit the teak, and both Lord and Lady Davenport woke up.”

“Oh no!”

“Oh yes! So I grabbed the ring and ran back to the open window. I didn’t dare look behind me, as I could hear Lord Davenport cocking his shotgun. I leapt down on to the grass, and all of a sudden the lights in the house came on and the dogs were barking and I was running for my life. Then I heard a deafening sound...”

“Another burp?” asked Ben.

“No, a gunshot this time. Lord Davenport was shooting at me as I ran down the hill and back to the woods.”

“Then what happened?”

Granny looked at her little gold watch. “My dear, you had better head home. Your mummy and daddy will be worried sick.”

“I doubt it,” said Ben. “All they care about is stupid ballroom dancing.”

“That’s not true,” said Granny unexpectedly. “You know they love you.”

“I want to hear the end of the story,” said Ben, frustrated. He was desperate to know what happened next.

“You will. Another day.”

“But Granny...”

“Ben, you have to go home.”

“That’s not fair!”

“Ben, you must leave now. I can tell you what happened when you come another day.”

“BUT!”

“To be continued,” she said.