A GANGSTER STOLE MY TRUNKS

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To Issy

ONE WEEK BEFORE THE CRUISE

CHAPTER 1

The Old Man with the Golden Gun

We sat in that kind of awkward silence you only get when surrounded by old people or farts. The clock on the wall above Gramp's armchair ticked in loud, slow tocks. *Tick*. *Tock*. *Tick*. *Tock*. I glanced up from the grey rock in my hand and looked at Mum. Mum looked at Dad. Dad looked at Gramp.

Gramp smiled and shrugged. "What?"

Dad squeezed the bridge of his nose. I desperately wished someone *had* farted. It'd be less awkward than this.

"What?" repeated Gramp, still smiling.

Dad drew in a deep breath and said, "Pops, you never lived on the moon."

Gramp waved his hand dismissively, his moustache bristling. "Course I didn't!" Dad breathed a sigh of relief. "I only visited! Top secret mission in sixty-nine. On the trail of an evil robot."

Dad screwed his eyes shut and pinched his nose harder.

Mum flashed me daggers and hissed, "Jesse Hall, I told you not to touch *anything* in Gramp's house."

I gingerly put the grey rock back in the big cardboard box. I knew I'd get in trouble for picking it up. It's just sometimes I can't help myself – it's almost like I get an itch that I *have* to scratch. It looked so … weird. I had to get a closer look at it. How was I to know that Gramp would claim it was from the *moon*?

"Pops, you came back with that rock after a trip to Lyme Regis. I remember it!" said Dad.

Gramp shook his head – gently ruffling the neat side-parting in his white hair – and levered himself out of his armchair. "That's just what I *told* you, son. I really used it to bash in the robot's head after

it grabbed me in its pincers. It almost had me, the fiend…" He straightened his bright orange cardigan and stood upright – very upright for an old man – then fixed me with his piercing blue eyes. "It was a great day! Fought an evil robot in a crater, then had corn-beef hash for supper!" He clicked his fingers, then clapped his hands. "Absolute winner! Now, who's for a cuppa?"

He didn't wait for an answer before weaving between his packing boxes and out of the room.

Dad called after him, "I'll have a coffee." Then he put his head in his hands. I could see visiting Gramp was getting to him – he looked even more dishevelled than usual and his crumpled shirt had come untucked from his trousers.

Mum waited for Gramp to leave the room, then turned to Dad. "I don't remember him always being like this. Not quite so" – she searched for a diplomatic word – "fantastical."

"Is that a good thing?" asked Dad. "Like the Fantastical Four?"

Mum's eyebrows lowered. "It's not."

"It's the *Fantastic* Four," I whispered.

"Oh, right," said Dad, then let out a big sigh. "Why's he behaving like this? He's always been difficult to figure out. Is he making up these stories about visiting the moon because he's bored? Because he wants attention? Or because he really believes it?"

I didn't know what he was so bothered about. Old people always have fruity stories. And even though I didn't know Gramp very well, it was clear from the last hour we'd spent in his new house that he was no different. You've just got to smile and say "Wow" at the right times, and you get free biscuits in return.

Mum rubbed Dad's back with all the tenderness of someone buffing a scratch from a car bonnet. I could see that she wasn't nearly as bothered as him. "It's just old age. He probably watched *Moonraker* last week and started dreaming he was James Bond."

I gazed around Gramp's new living room and its piles of boxes. This was the first time I'd ever visited him at home. Which is weird considering I'm eleven years old and he is my granddad. But since my granny died, before I was born, he'd lived in Virginia in America and he hadn't exactly been a big part of my life. Here's the sum total of what I know about him:

1. He's only visited us once a year since I was born.
2. He's always been friendly but a bit odd.
3. He's just decided to move back to England and Dad's rented him this little bungalow.
4. He used to be a dishcloth salesman.
5. He almost certainly never visited the moon.

"He could have visited the moon if he had some sort

of pressurized moon shelter and his own spaceship," I joked.

Mum fixed me with eyes that were way too serious. "Jesse, he never had a pressurized moon shelter."

"Or a spaceship," Dad added. "I'd have seen it in the garage. What's he playing at? When I told him we were coming over he said I needed to get off the phone because he was expecting a call from an international cat burglar."

I narrowed my eyes. "Is that someone who burgles cats or a cat that burgles?"

Dad chose to ignore me. "Maybe I should bring up the possibility of a care home. I'm not sure it's a good idea for him to be living on his own with his imagination going into overdrive."

Mum reached across and took his hand in hers. It shocked him. In fact, it shocked me. I think it even shocked Mum. It was the most affection they'd shown each other for … I couldn't remember how long. Mum dropped it pretty quickly, trying to disguise her embarrassed look by picking biscuit crumbs from Gramp's sofa while tutting.

I looked down at the moon rock box and pretended I hadn't seen the whole awkward moment.

Pushing it to the back of my mind, I studied the contents of the box – a jumble of trinkets and knick-knacks: seashells, snow globes and ceramic ducks, with a miniature Eiffel Tower sticking up in the middle. Something else caught my eye. Stuffed in the corner, there was a gold pistol. It looked SO cool. What was it? A toy? A paperweight? An *actual* gun?

I knew I had to find out. Just like that moon rock, it was like an itch that I *had* to scratch. I *knew* I shouldn't pick it up. I'd almost certainly get in trouble.

I glanced over at Mum and Dad. They were turned away from me.

I definitely shouldn't pick it up.

I gave Mum and Dad one last glance, then…

I picked it up. It felt cool and heavy like I imagined a real gun would.

I shouldn't pull the trigger, I told myself. Like, I REALLY shouldn't pull the trigger.

I pointed it at the empty armchair next to me, pulled the trigger and…

With a click and a thud the gun broke into three pieces: the chamber fell on to the carpet with a soft thud, the barrel landed next to it before rolling under the sofa, the handle remained in my palm.

I scrambled to put the handle back in the box but Mum was too fast. She spun round.

"What are you doing?" she snapped.

"Erm … polishing this for Gramp…" I offered with a wince.

"Honestly," she huffed, her nostrils flaring. "Everywhere we go you break something! You'd better not play any of your usual tricks at Maths Camp next week."

I bit my lip and slumped back into the chair. Maths Camp. Urgh. I did *not* want to go to Maths Camp. I didn't want to go to Maths Camp because I hated Maths Camp. But I also didn't want to go to Maths Camp because I knew *why* my parents wanted me to go to Maths Camp. And I felt sick in the pit of my tummy just thinking about it.

It was one secret I wished I hadn't found out. About three weeks ago – just after they'd had a

blazing argument over something stupid like milk or Dad not having a job – I overheard Mum telling Dad that they needed a chat after I'd gone to bed. So I snuck down and eavesdropped as Mum told Dad that she wanted a D.I.V.O.R.C.E. She wasn't happy, she said. He wasn't happy, she said. And they should send me to Maths Camp for a week so they could discuss the D.I.V.O.R.C.E. properly with me safely out of the way.

It had knocked the wind out of me. Every time I thought of it was like a jab of sadness digging into my brain. I didn't even want to say the word properly in my head. As though saying it would make it real. And I knew that going to Maths Camp would *definitely* make it real. Mum's a D.I.V.O.R.C.E. lawyer, you see. And she always says a good D.I.V.O.R.C.E. is just a long conversation. And that's why they want me out of the way – so they can have The Conversation. The sadness jabbed deeper into my brain, turning it numb. Mum and Dad together was … well, it was my life. Me, Mum, Dad and our cat, Purrito. We'd always been together. And I'd assumed we always *would* be together.