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Opening extract from

The Mystery of the Man with the Black Beard

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Chapter 1
Two Strange Men

Annie's dad solved crimes. A sign on his office door said –

Bill Clark
Crime Buster

Sometimes Annie's dad stayed at home and hunted for clues on the internet. Sometimes he went out to look for clues. Whatever he did, all his work was top secret – and lots of strange people came to see him in his office.

One Saturday afternoon, Annie was doing her English homework. She was trying to write a poem about bananas when there was a knock at the front door.

Bang! Bang! Bang!

"Who's that?" Annie's gran shouted from upstairs. "I'm in the bath!"

Annie went to open the door. There was a very tall man outside. He was as tall as Annie's dad and he was wearing a long black coat and a big black hat. Most of his face was hidden by a thick, curly beard.

The beard was as black as night.

"Um – hello," Annie said. "Do you want to see my dad?"

"Yes!" the man said. "Where is he?"

"I'll tell him you're here," said Annie. "What's your name?"

"Never mind that," said the man. "Just tell him he's got a visitor."

Annie went across the hall and knocked on her dad's office door. "Someone to see you," she called.

"Who is it?" her dad called back.

But before Annie could reply, the man with the black beard marched into the house. He opened the office door and went straight in.

'What a rude man!' Annie thought, as the man with the black beard slammed the door behind him. She went back into the sitting room and started thinking about her banana poem again.

But she had only just begun to write when there was another knock on the front door. This time it was very quiet.

Tap, tap, tap.

Annie opened the door again. There was another man outside. He was much shorter than the first one. He was wearing jeans and a T-shirt and he had bright yellow hair.

And no beard.

The man grinned at Annie. "Hi," he said. "My name's Jed. I've come to see your dad."

"I'll tell him you're here," Annie said.

"No need," said Jed. "He knows I'm coming."

Jed pushed past Annie and ran across the hall. As quick as a flash, he opened the office door, slipped inside and shut the door behind him.

'That's odd,' Annie thought. 'He's totally different from the other man – but his voice is the same. And he's just as rude.'

Annie went back into the sitting room, but before she could pick up her banana poem the

office door opened again. Annie heard a very weird dragging sound. She ran into the hall to see what it was.

Jed was staggering out of the office and the man with the black beard was leaning on him.

"What's the matter?" Annie asked.

"He's ill," said Jed. "I have to take him home."

The man with the black beard was so floppy that Jed had to hold him up. Annie couldn't see whether he looked ill or not, because his face was hidden by the black hat and the black beard.

"Oh dear," she said. "Can I help?"

Jed nodded. "My van's outside," he said. "Go and open the back doors."

Annie ran out into the street. There was a small orange van parked by the kerb. She opened the back doors and Jed dragged the other man round to the back of the van.



"Now open the driver's door!" Jed snapped.

Annie ran round to the front of the van. There was a loud thump as Jed dumped the man with the black beard into the back of the van. Then Jed slammed the doors, came round to the front and pushed Annie out of the way. He jumped into the driver's seat and drove off at top speed.

'How rude!' Annie thought again. 'What's the big hurry?' Then it struck her that Jed might be taking the other man to hospital and she felt a bit bad.

Annie wanted to ask her dad about the two men, but when she knocked on his office door there was no reply. So she went back to her English poem. But it was VERY HARD to think about bananas. She kept watching the office in case her dad came out.

He didn't.

At 6 p.m., Gran came into the sitting room. "Tea will be ready in ten minutes," she said. "Tell your dad, Annie."

Annie knocked on her dad's office door. "Tea in ten minutes!" she yelled.

But her dad didn't come out.

Ten minutes later, she yelled again. "Tea's ready, Dad!"

Still no Dad.

"You'll have to go and get him," Gran said in a cross voice.

Annie went and banged on the office door. "It's tea time!" she shouted. She pushed the door open. "Come on, Dad!" she said.

But Dad wasn't there.

The office was empty.