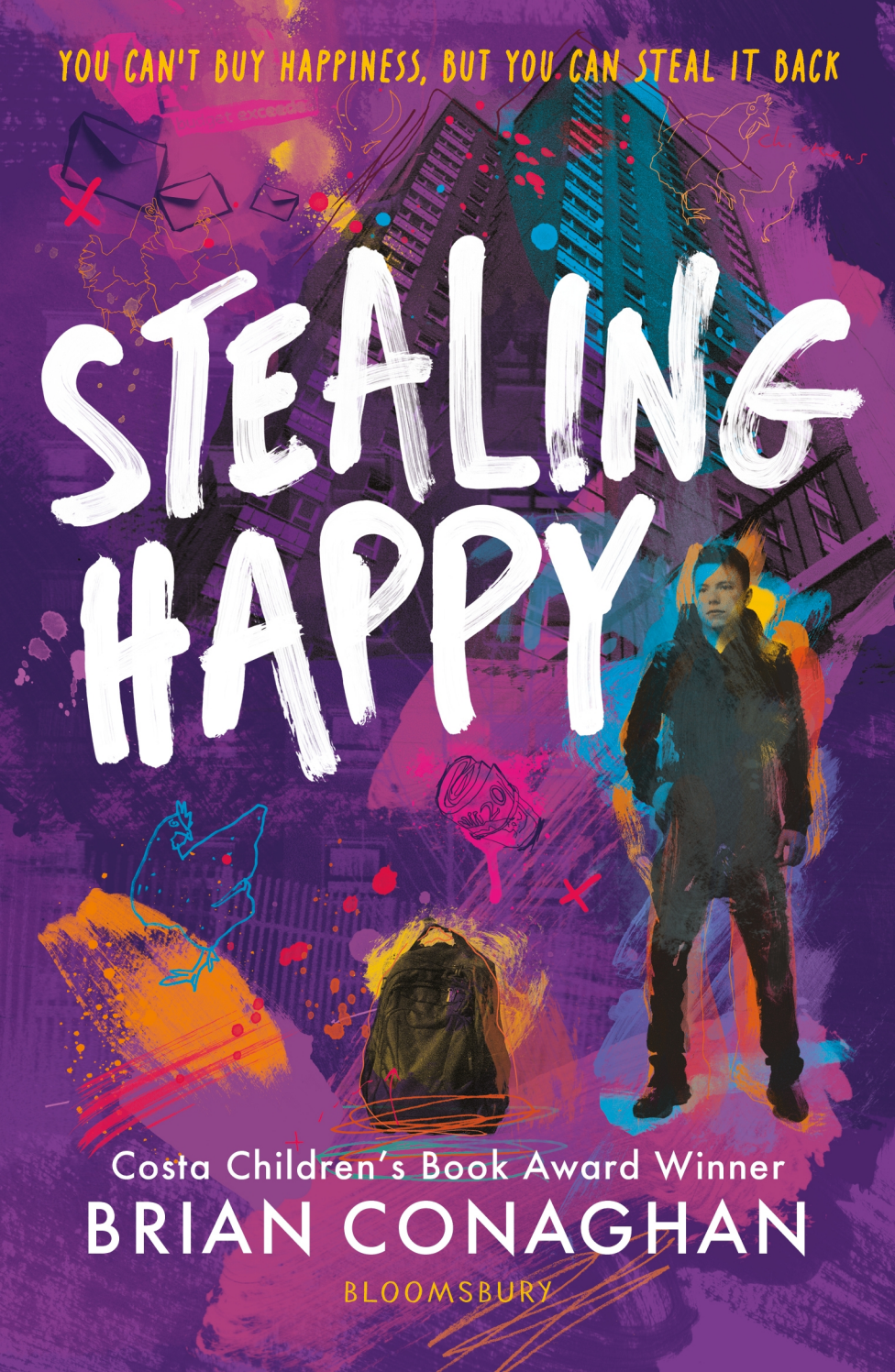

YOU CAN'T BUY HAPPINESS, BUT YOU CAN STEAL IT BACK
STEALING HAPPY
Costa Children's Book Award Winner
BRIAN CONAGHAN
BLOOMSBURY

STEALING HAPPY

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For P x

PART ONE

Friday

The Bit Before It All Begins

Squeak … Squeak … Squeak.

That's the sound my trainers make with each step. The destination is at the end of the corridor.

Point A (my starting position) to Point B (Mr Kalinski's office) is fifty-six steps. Probably forty if you're big Jimmy Wide Stride. But these legs of mine aren't that long, so I'm afraid it's fifty-six squeaks. At least it's an even number, my favourites. Sometimes I have to turn around to make sure a squad of mice aren't following me. I don't actually. That's a joke. My dream is to be a stand-up comedian so jokes are always floating around in my mind, along with a billion other things. My brain is like a scrapbook of jokes and ditties, I'm always making them up.

Reason 1: it settles down everything that's going on in there.

Reason 2: not being big-headed, but some would make your ribs explode.

I'm only thirteen so I've a long way to go before I reach any decent standard, but I've been working on a banging intro. Check it out: *Good evening, people, my name's Sonny Gilmour … I know … I know … I haven't heard of me either.*

Giggles!

Applause!

OK, so one stingy line isn't gonna be enough to have them rolling around the aisles, but it's a start. And that's where everyone has to, well, start from.

Obviously, I'll have to write a belter of a routine if I'm to launch myself successfully into laughter land. I'm determined to do it; a five-to-ten-minute set is all I need. Look at the top comedians, their patter's about real-life events, so why can't I do the same? Tough for a dude like me, but when I told Mr Kalinski, who is one of the only people who knows about my ambitions, he pressed one of my reassurance buttons: '*You know, Sonny, from deep despair and sadness great hope and happiness can arise.*' Those were the exact words he said. And once I chewed, swallowed and let them sit in my stomach I agreed with him.

I guess the first thing I need to do then is find hope and happiness. And when I do, I'll have them in teary-eyed hysterics. Good tears. Not the ones sopping with salty sadness.

When I reach Mr Kalinski's door I stop and do eight rapid blinks. If the coast is clear this could hit sixteen. My record

is sixty-four. Anything above that gives me a belter of a sore head. After the rapids I open my jaw wide and make a silent roar. More a hyper yawner than a fierce lion to be fair. Then it's face scrunch (and de-scrunch) time. When all the physical stuff is out, I carefully clock the handle in case it's dripping with other people's fingerprint muck. Let's just say the St Bernard's door handles and me aren't the best of pals.

The coast *is* clear.

I check the handle a second time … cos welcome to my world! And a third. Then a stupid fourth, cos if I stop on an odd number then it's basically *the end of the world as we know it*. Like that song Mum plays too loud when she's making the Sunday soup. No offence, Mum, but your singing is ear abuse.

When everything's calm I dunt on his door. Twice at the top and twice in the middle. Always the same. Wish I could do a random knock rhythm, but me and the door both know that isn't happening. Ever.

Plus, the man behind the door knows my knock.

*

I have TWO reassurance buttons: one in my heart and the other in the middle of my forehead. Press either of those and I'm good to go.

*

Mr Kalinski's office has comfy chairs, and, get this, there's a giant beanbag in the corner.

*

Mr Kalinski isn't a teacher as such. He's way better. I secretly call him Special K, like the cereal. Special K doesn't really teach anything at St Bernard's. If pushed, you could say he teaches a combination of people's hearts, minds and feel-goodness. To his face I call him Mr K.

Simple.

Clean.

Ticks all the boxes.

'Door's open, Sonny,' he shouts.

I fold the sleeve of my jumper over my hand, press down on the handle and enter like a burglar. Always head first. Hips, body and legs remain on the outside. Just in case … you know … there's a maniac in there robbing all his pencils, or something worse. 'It's OK, the coast is clear, you can come in,' he says with a giant smile.

'BIG JOHNNY GNASHERS!' I belt as soon as I see him. 'Sorry …'

I try saying more but nothing else comes out. I can't stop looking at his mouth. Special K's definitely had his teeth whitened, I can tell. They're like elephant tusks; I make a pact with myself not to mention them though. He's got a wee candle burning on his table, which makes the place smell like our toilet after Mum's baths. She loves nothing more than a steamy soak; the woman lights about twenty-four candles as well. That's twenty-four naked flames. I don't want to put a damper on her baths, but my mum and risk assessment are strangers to each other. Toilet paper and net

curtains are HIGHLY flammable … Just saying.

Sometimes Special K has music playing from his Bluetooth speaker. I never know any of the tunes; lots of songs by people who are dead old, or just plain dead. He used to be the drummer in a ton of bands, lots of very unsuccessful ones.

'Sorry, was that knock too loud?' I ask him.

'It was a perfect knock, Sonny.'

Special K points to the beanbag, and before plonking myself down I fire, 'Where have you been, bag?'

'Good one.' He winks.

I'm here for the week, people … here for the week.

Beanbags have something special going on: the crunchy sound the wee balls make when you crash down is pure Heaven on a bum. I asked Mum if I could get one in my room once, but according to Argos they cost a fortune. '*You think I'm bloody Jeff Bezos, Sonny?*' she told me. I remember I twitched, cos I wasn't sure who Jeff Bezos was, and if this was a real question that required a real answer or just one of those rhetorical ones. Four times my neck jerked to the ceiling as I thought: how can you be Jeff Bezos when you're already Jackie Gilmour? See, that's the direction my brain travels to. Everyone else's goes east or west, mine heads north or south.

Before hitting the beanbag, I have to check that both sleeves are still over my hands. Just cos we basically live in a massive bacteria-filled bubble. You can't be too careful.

'TUSK TEETH!' I shout, which can happen when I'm caught off guard. Then it's welcome to Mr Random Shouty

Fella. To be fair, it can catch me when I'm *on* guard too. But Special K's gnashers do catch me well off guard. 'Sorry, Mr K, it just popped out,' I say.

Special K smiles a mouthful of bleached tusk. I know that he knows that I know about his teeth. But the truth is I don't really know for sure cos I don't want to start asking probing and personal questions. He leans over and presses the minus sign on the Bluetooth speaker. Eight times his finger taps it, until the music fades to nothing. And that means our session is in full swing.

It begins with 'How are things?', then moves on to 'Any hassles or issues in class?', then there's a wee curveball: 'Are you still friends with Carolina Swift, Sonny?' He wiggles his eyebrows up and down, which makes my face burn and my mouth sandy. I click my molars too many times to count. Of course, my shoulders tense and legs jiggle, cos Special K has placed a picture of me and Carolina Swift holding hands into my mind. Skin on skin, fingers looping fingers, my biggest dream and worst nightmare. When the topic of 'old and new coping strategies' is over I think the session's done, but how wrong am I?

The beanbag balls are dancing under my bum as I try to get up when Special K asks:

'And how's your dad getting on, Sonny?'

I sink back down.

'Aye, good … DOUGHBALL … he's good, tip-top form,' I tell him.

But when it comes to lying, I'm a complete rocket. My face may as well have LIAR scrolled across its forehead. The screaming voice in my head is desperate to blast KEEP YER HOOTER OUT, TUSK BOY! at the top of the lungs. I bite my tongue to imprison the wee bampot.

'And is *he* coping?'

I'm terrified to release my tongue from my teeth in case I can't control the words. I clench my fists. Try to think of a joke. *Everyone laughed when I told them I wanted to become a comedian … Well, they're not laughing now!* No use.

'SHUT IT, YA MUPPET! Sorry, Mr K, I didn't mean—'

'That's OK, Sonny,' he says. 'I think we'll call it a day there.' This is known as cutting me some slack. Even still, I want to do two things:

1. Bolt.
2. Ask what day we should call it.

*

Don't worry, I googled Jeff Bezos. Man alive! The amount of dosh that fella has in his bank would melt a calculator. I did a rapid 1-to-50 count in my head and screamed HOW MUCH? before I got to 51. It wasn't even a Tourette's scream either.

*

On the way home from Mr K's I pop into the wee shop next to the school to see what I can get for thirty pence. Honest answer: a packet of crisps from the *Best Before* bin. Bargain if

you don't mind eating flavourless soggy things, but a crisp without the crunch is like Lanzarote without the sun. Or Lanzahottie as Dad used to call it, back in his joke-cracking days.

'You can get two packets for forty,' Zoran tells me. I want to ask him if they also eat soggy crisps in Kurdistan, but I hold back in case it comes out rude.

'I've only enough for one.' I put my best cost-of-living-crisis face on. Zoran's eyes are steel. He's heard every sob tale from the people in our school. Poor guy has had to put up with some amount of poison from teenagers' mouths too. Must be a nightmare in Kurdistan if he chose to come here, is all I'm saying.

'Just the one then,' he goes.

'Aye … OUT OF DATE!' I blurt. He raises an eyebrow. Think he's gonna chuck me out. 'Sorry, I've got …'

'Here's two bob, wee man.' A voice joins us from behind. A shiny ten-pence piece is lobbed on the counter. 'Get another packet if you want.'

I feel his presence. Smell his body. Sense his power. Something tells me that if I don't accept the two bob all the fire in Hell will engulf me. My shoulders shudder and I do four tongue clicks cos I know before laying eyes on him that Archie Burns, the hardest nut in our school, is hovering behind me.

'TWO BOB!' I bark when I turn to him. 'TIGHT ARSE.'

Archie's face shifts into fight mode.

'You trying to be wide, ya wee nugget?' His voice sounds croaky, as if he's got a sixty-a-day habit. But it's the perfect hard-man tongue lash. Very intimidating.

'No … erm … I'm just not that hungry,' I go. All his intimidating skills are working a treat.

He leans over me and rescues his two bob. Then he drops it into the counter's charity box.

'That better get to those cancer people,' Archie fires at Zoran. 'Or it'll be all over my socials.' Zoran just nods his head.

Fortunately, I'm able to help out Archie here as our class back in primary school collected for a cancer charity once. It isn't a case of just sticking a plastic box on shop counters. This is my moment to shine.

'If you scan the QR code on the side,' I go, 'it tells you—'

'Did I ask you, ya bam?'

If I puckered my lips I could kiss Archie Burns, that's how close he is. I've lost my appetite for soggy crisps. I have to tense every muscle, ligament and cell in my body to stop me from puckering. The compulsion to do the worst thing ever is what my Tourette's does sometimes. Instead, I say *square sausage* over and over in my head and breathe relief when Archie pulls away.

'A mustard and watermelon vape,' he snarls at Zoran. 'And a half-ounce of Golden Virginia.'

Zoran looks at me. He knows that I know that he shouldn't be selling tobacco to under-agers. I glance at Archie, who

knows as well. We all know. There's a kind of stand-off. I'm just confused about the vape *and* tobacco combo. Zoran goes to a drawer behind him and whips out what Archie Burns has asked for. Archie Burns takes out a wad of cash. Tenners and twenties mainly. He licks his thumb and flicks through it.

'UNDER AGE … Sorry … I didn't …'

Archie Burns moves in on me again. I can almost taste the fags and school dinners in his mouth. His forehead touches my forehead. We're like a couple of buffalo seeing who's top dog. Well, he's the buffalo and I'm a kitten. He grabs the crisps out of my hand.

'Want done in?' he asks. Not being the biggest fan of head-to-head touching and definitely not wanting to get done in, I close my eyes and start counting in doubles. *Two, four, eight, sixteen, thirty-two* … 'Another word and I'll smash these crisps into that glaikit gub of yours.'

Two hundred and fifty-six.

Five hundred and twelve.

One thousand and twenty-four.

'OK,' I manage to say. Now isn't the time to explain that Tourette's is a syndrome and unrelated to the … Oh, what's the point? Archie Burns wouldn't have the brain capacity for all the science.

Without taking his eyes off mine he crunches my packet of crisps into a million pieces and shoves the bag hard into my chest.

'Beat it!' he growls.

I scarper out of the shop with my gub just about intact, but my insides turbocharged and knotted. Offers of two bob or not, Archie Burns isn't a person to be messed with. In fact, he's a person to hide from.

*

My name is Sonny Gilmour and I hide myself. But in my world, there are no hiding places.