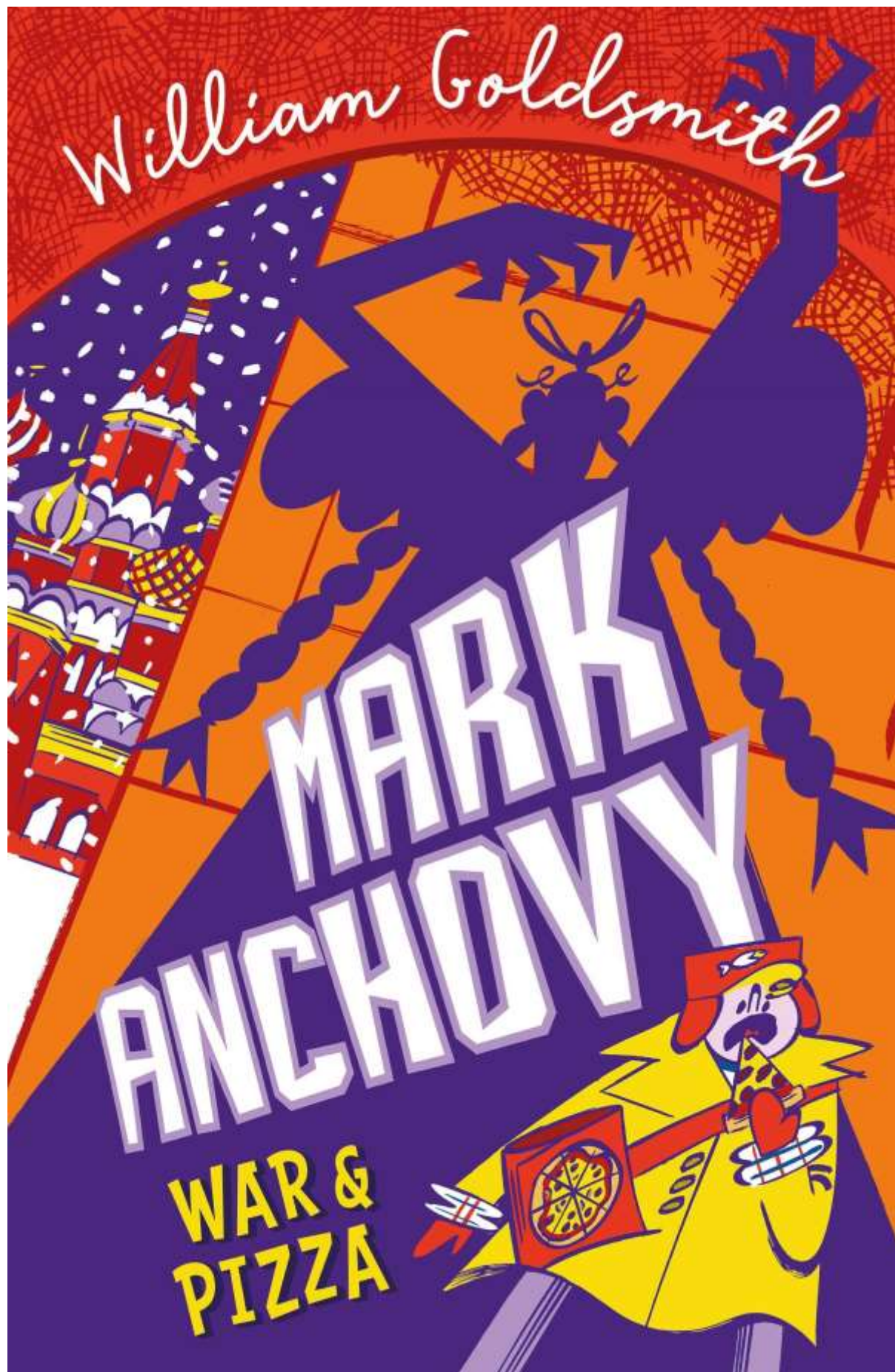


William Goldsmith



WAR & PIZZA BY WILLIAM GOLDSMITH

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CHAPTER 1

My employers, the Golden Spatula League, promise their detectives both luxury and danger. Interpreting 'luxury' as a secret office with a hot tub, I glossed over the 'danger' part. I didn't think I'd be chased by an actual wolf. Or get ejected from a plane. Or have my eyebrows singed off. Plus, there was no hot tub. If I'd known then what I know now, I might never have answered the pizza-phone when it angrily tootled one night in December. 'Yes?' 'Since when is "yes?" how you answer the phone to a superior?' It was my boss, Princess Skewer. Skewer, because of the kebabs she sells. Princess, because she acts like one. 'I mean . . . Mark Anchovy spea-

'Did you get the assignment?'

'Which assignment?'

I capsized the tower of light-blue envelopes sprouting from my desk. My training had recently gone from intensive to turbo. Here was a questionnaire on the league's founding (1867); here were certificates for elementary contortion, calligraphy and fencing. Here was a pamphlet titled 'How to Spot a Criminal of the Catering Underworld'.

'Anchovy. If you plan to stay in a G.S.L. job – which many would give their right arm for – I'm left-handed, so this was lost on me – 'I suggest you get a filing system.'

She sounded just like Mr Hogstein, my crusty history teacher.

'It's okay, I've found it.'

'There's no time. Head up to Caesar Pizza. Over and out.'

No sooner had I twisted the tomato can that activated the fake door, shot up the ladder and casually strolled into my parents' pizzeria, than the main line rang. My mum answered in her super-polite, highpitched voice. 'Yes yes, a Mark Anchovy pizza with *extra* anchovies? Yes yes, right away.' My dad's monobrow wiggled like a bellydancing slug. He picked up a rolling pin and set to work. 'Odd,' said my mum, handing me the address.

'He wants it delivered to a houseboat.'

Something tugged on my apron. Something with a wonky fringe and laser-like gaze: Alicia, my sister.

'Colinnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnn,' she chanted. Sometimes I get so used to my codename, Mark Anchovy, that I blank out my less exciting real name.

'What now, Alicia?'

'Who were you talking to in the storeroom?'

'Er . . . myself.'

'Yourself?'

'Uh-huh.'

'Right. I thought you were, you know, talking to friends or practising your lines for that arty-farty school play. But you were talking to yourself?'

'Yep.'

'Weirrrrrrrdooooooooooooooooooo!!'

She climbed onto a high stool and began shredding napkins. When Alicia wasn't climbing things, she was cutting things. Like her own hair. Or family albums. Or *my* comics. And when she wasn't doing this, she was twanging a double bass, when tinkling a nice, quiet triangle would have been fine. The cheesy, salty-fishy waft of a cooked Mark Anchovy pizza tickled my nostrils.

'No faffing,' was my dad's pearl of wisdom as he packed up the pizza.

'Is your bike light working?' fretted my mum.

Considering what lay ahead, worrying about a bike light was like questioning your choice of swimming trunks in the face of a tsunami.

Apart from a seagull maiming a bin bag, the streets were empty. I left town via the long dark gullet of Saltpan Lane. I passed the abandoned windmill, its tired sails groaning. River reeds moshed. Mud replaced tarmac. Marsh replaced mud. Finally, in the bottle-green blackness, the light of a boat bobbed up ahead. I slugged down the bank.

My pizza watch beeped with instructions from Princess: Let me know what he wants.
P.S.

I drew up the collar of my trench coat – well, my mum's trench coat – and rapped on a porthole. No answer. I heard a radio tinkling and a kettle reaching boiling point. It wasn't the only one. Dodging a scabby rope, I knocked on the cabin's hobbit-door.

'Mark Anchovy Pizza!' I scanned my mum's note. 'For a Mr . . . Swirly Ben?' Was that even a name?

'Helloooooo?'

Nothing. Apparently, we now delivered pizzas to corpses.

No one home, I typed to Princess.

Weird, she replied. Have a quick snoop then get out.

I heaved a sigh and opened the door. It was a narrow, coffin-like space, with a knotty pine table and a mounted lamp. Opposite this was a cuckoo clock, of all things. A saucepan was bubbling on a dinky hob. Inside, an egg was going berserk. And on the sideboard lay a chipped flowery plate with fingers of toast spread like sunbeams. A boiled egg and soldiers? *And* pizza? Was Swirly Ben some kind of unstoppable eating machine?

I went snooping. There was a bathroom with a bucket, and a bar of soap that looked like it would actually make you *dirtier*. There was a cabinet with brown glass pillbottles. A bedroom with a fat fur coat on a skinny bed. An old brick phone. A book on antiques. A pamphlet with the title 'Baltic Cruises'. An empty, teal-coloured glasses case that snapped like a clam. A torn sepia photograph of some kids on a pier, posing in smocks and sailor suits. And a postcard of a church, with a note in an unfamiliar alphabet. This, I pocketed. There was nothing in the way of a wallet. And nothing in the way of Swirly Ben.

Well??? beeped Princess.

I returned to the main cabin. I needed to sit – and eat – and think about all this. If there was a newly boiled egg, a phone and a fur coat, then this hungry, loopy old antique-lover couldn't have got far. I opened the satchel and took a slice of pizza. An anchovy plopped off and I bent down to get it. But when I came up, the slice of pizza where my head had been was now a mere crust. The rest of the slice was splatted on the wall behind me in several explosive blobs. It was pinned there by an arrow.

Earth to Anchovy???!! Princess texted again with impeccable timing.

My mission in Rome taught me that when pizzas explode where your head just was, you don't reply to a text message. You duck under a table and reach for your molten-tomato-purée gun. Any worries I used to have about using this deadly weapon vanished.

Cycling along a marsh in winter, delivering a pizza, not getting a tip, being interrupted while eating, and now assassination! Who did this Swirly Ben think he was? I stuck out a hand and fired a jet of lava-like tomato. There was a *hiss* as it scorched a hole somewhere. Then a cartoonish squeak. I jutted out an eyebrow. It was the cuckoo clock. Something was winding out. Only it wasn't a merry little wooden bird. It was some kind of mechanically powered crossbow. Pointed at *me*. I just ducked in time. *THUNK!* went the arrow.

The raggedy bits of pizza took another pasting. *THUNK!* went another arrow. Pizza bits rained down. *THUNK!* Went a third arrow. An olive beetled down my neck. I had to stop that clock! I slid on my belly and molten-tomatoed it from the end of the table. The good

news was, it clogged up the machinery. The bad news was, the lamp exploded. It happened too fast to take everything in, but I think it sparked, and the sparks decided to bounce all over the oven. It would have been very simple to have turned off the gas when I looked in the pan. But I didn't. And we all know what happens when a spark meets a lit gas hob. They get on like a houseboat on fire. The next thing I knew was that the space – which I mentioned as being appropriately coffin-width – was filling up with smoke. Not wanting to be left out, a few tea towels had also lent themselves to the inferno.

Erm . . . message me, please????!! Princess rata- tatted on my watch.

Can't talk right now . . . I'm kind of being assassinated by a booby-trapped boat.

I immediately regretted my lack of economy. The flames were now breakdancing in a hot orange cyclone. I got off my belly and made for the hobbit-door. But as soon as I stood up, I was flung back down. The boat was spinning. Spinning, I realised, because it was no longer tied to the bank. Which meant that this floating incinerator was in the middle of a river with only one very wet means of exit.

Sometimes, on long car journeys, after she's stolen my last fruit pastille (which is always a black one) Alicia and I ask each other random questions like, 'Would you rather burn to death or freeze to death?' It now seemed I was a fan of the second option.

Somehow, I charged out of the spinning cabin, didn't puke, half-dodged a wall of fire, and jumped into the river, trench coat and all. When I'd wiped the algae off my eyeballs, I watched the burning carcass slip below the surface. Whatever evidence I could have gathered about Swirly Ben was wasted. Along with a perfectly good pizza.