

Chapter One

Grandma

I'm going shopping in the village,' George's mother said to George on Saturday morning. 'So be a good boy and don't get up to mischief.'

This was a silly thing to say to a small boy at any time. It immediately made him wonder what sort of mischief he might get up to.

'And don't forget to give Grandma her medicine at eleven o'clock, the mother said. Then out she went, closing the back door behind her.

Grandma, who was dozing in her chair by the window, opened one wicked little eye and said, 'Now you heard what your mother said, George. Don't forget my medicine.'

'No Grandma,' George said.

'And just try to behave yourself for once while she's away.'

'Yes, Grandma' George said.

George was bored to tears. He didn't have a brother or sister. His father was a farmer and the farm they lived on was miles away from anywhere, so there were never any children to play with. He was tired of staring at pigs and hens and cows and sheep. He was especially tired of having to live in the same house as that grizzly old grunion of a Grandma. Looking after her all by himself was hardly the most exciting way to spend a Saturday morning.

'You can make me a nice cup of tea for a start,' Grandma said to George. 'That'll keep you out of mischief for a few minutes.'

'Yes, Grandma,' George said.

George couldn't help disliking Grandma. She was a selfish grumpy old woman. She had pale brown teeth and a small puckered up mouth like a dog's bottom.

'How much sugar in your tea today, Grandma?' George asked her.

'One spoon,' she said. 'And no milk.'

Most Grandmothers are lovely, kind, helpful old ladies, but not this one. She spent all day and every day sitting in her chair by the window, and she was always complaining, grouching, grumbling, griping about something or other. Never once, even on her best days, had she smiled at George and said, 'Well how are you this morning, George?' or 'Why don't you and I have a game of

Snakes and Ladders?' or 'How was school today?' She didn't seem to care about other people, only about herself. She was a miserable old grouch.

George went into the kitchen and made Grandma a cup of tea with a teabag. He put one spoon of sugar in it and no milk. He stirred the sugar well and carried the cup into the living room.

Grandma sipped the tea. 'It's not sweet enough,' she said. 'Put more sugar in'. George took the cup back to the kitchen and added another spoonful of sugar. He stirred it again and carried it carefully in to Grandma.

'Where's the saucer?' she said. 'I won't have a cup without a saucer.'

George fetched her a saucer.

'And what about a teaspoon, if you please?' 'I've stirred it for you, Grandma. I stirred it well.'

'I'll stir my own tea, thank you very much,' she said. 'Fetch me a teaspoon.'

George fetched her a teaspoon.

When George's mother or father were home, Grandma never ordered George about like this. It was only when she had him on her own that she began treating him badly.

'You know what's the matter with you?' the old woman said, staring at George over the rim of the teacup with those bright wicked little eyes. 'You're growing too fast. Boys who grow too fast become stupid and lazy.'

'But I can't help it if I am growing fast, Grandma,' George said.

'Of course, you can,' she snapped. 'Growing's a nasty childish habit.'

'But we have to grow, Grandma. If we didn't grow, we'd never be grown-ups.'

'Rubbish, boy, rubbish,' she said. 'Look at me. Am I growing? Certainly not.'

'But you did once, Grandma.'

'Only *very* little,' the old woman answered. 'I gave up growing when I was extremely small, along with all the other nasty childish habits like laziness and disobedience and greed and sloppiness and untidiness and stupidity. You haven't given up on any of these things, have you?

'I'm still only a little boy, Grandma.'

'You're eight years old,' she snorted. 'That's old enough to know better. If you don't stop growing soon, it'll be too late.'

'Too late for what, Grandma?'

'It's ridiculous,' she went on. 'You're nearly as tall as me already.'

George took a good look at Grandma. She certainly was a very tiny person. Her legs were so short she had to have a footstool to put her feet on, and her head only came halfway up the back of the armchair.

'Daddy says it's fine for a man to be tall,' George said.

'Don't listen to your daddy,' Grandma said. 'Listen to me.'

'But how do I stop myself growing?' George asked her.

'Eat less chocolate,' Grandma said.

'Does chocolate make you grow?'

'It makes you grow the *wrong way*,' she snapped. 'Up instead of down.'

Grandma sipped some tea but never took her eyes from the little boy who stood before her. 'Never grow up,' she said. 'Always down.'

'Yes, Grandma.'

'And stop eating chocolate. Eat cabbage instead.'

'Cabbage! Oh no, I don't like cabbage,' George said.

'It's not what you like or what you don't like,' Grandma snapped. 'It's what's good for you that counts. From now on, you must eat cabbage three times a day. Mountains of cabbage! And if it's got caterpillars in it, so much the better!'

'Owch,' George said.

'Caterpillars give you brains,' the old woman said.

'Mummy washes them down the sink,' George said.

'Mummy's as stupid as you are,' Grandma said. 'Cabbage doesn't taste of anything without a few boiled caterpillars in it. Slugs, too.'

'Not, slugs!' George cried out. 'I couldn't eat slugs!'

'Whenever I see a live slug on a piece of lettuce,' Grandma said, 'I gobble it up quick before it crawls away. Delicious.' She squeezed her lips together tight so

that her mouth became a tiny wrinkled hole. 'Delicious,' she said again. 'Worms and slugs and beetle bugs. You don't know what's good for you.'

'You're joking, Grandma.'

'I never joke,' she said. Beetles are perhaps the best of all. They go *crunch!*'

'Grandma! That's beastly!'

The old hag grinned, showing her pale brown teeth. 'Sometimes, if you're lucky,' she said, 'you get a beetle inside the stem of a stick of celery. That's what I like.'

'Grandma! How *could* you?'

'You find all sorts of nice things in sticks of raw celery,' the old woman went on. 'Sometimes it's earwigs.'

'I don't want to hear about it!' cried George.

'A big fat earwig is very tasty,' Grandma said, licking her lips. 'But you've got to be very quick, my dear, when you put one of those in your mouth. It has a pair of sharp nippers on its back end and if it grabs your tongue with those, it never lets go. So you've got to bite the earwig first, *chop chop*, before it bites you.'

George started edging towards the door. He wanted to get as far away as possible from this filthy old woman.

'You're trying to get away from me, aren't you?' she said, pointing a finger straight at George's face. 'You're trying to get away from Grandma.'

Little George stood by the door staring at the old hag in the chair. She stared back at him.

Could it be, George wondered, that she was a witch? He had always thought witches were only in fairy tales, but now he was not so sure.

'Come closer to me, little boy,' she said, beckoning to him with a horny finger. 'Come closer to me and I will tell you secrets.'

George didn't move.

Grandma didn't move either.

'I know a great many secrets,' she said, and suddenly she smiled. It was a thin icy smile, the kind a snake might make just before it bites you. 'Come over here to Grandma and she'll whisper secrets to you.'

George took a step backwards, edging closer to the door.

'You mustn't be frightened of your old Grandma,' she said, smiling that icy smile.

George took another step backwards.

'Some of us,' she said, and all at once leaning forward in her chair and whispering in a throaty sort of voice George had never heard her use before. 'Some of us,' she said, 'have magic powers that can twist the creatures of this earth into wondrous shapes...'

A tingle of electricity flashed down the length of George's spine. He began to feel frightened.

'Some of us', the old woman went on, 'have fire on our tongues and sparks in our bellies and wizardry in the tips of our fingers...

'Some of us know secrets that would make your hair stand straight up on end and your eyes pop out of their sockets...'

George wanted to run away, but his feet seemed stuck to the floor.

'We know how to make your nails drip off and teeth grow out of your fingers instead.'

George began to tremble. It was her face that frightened him the most of all, the frosty smile, the brilliant unblinking eyes.

'We know how to have you wake up in the morning with a long tail coming out from behind you.' 'Grandma!' he cried out 'Stop!'

'We know secrets, my dear, about dark places where dark things live and squirm and slither all over each other...'

George made a dive for the door. 'It doesn't matter how far you run,' he heard her saying, 'you won't ever get away...'

George ran into the kitchen, slamming the door behind him.