

Chapter One

Grandpa

Rain dribbled down Carla's neck as she slipped and skidded over the muddy river path. A few feet below, the River Dugg gushed and foamed, smelling sourly of mushrooms and oil. Half a mile downstream the Dugg ran into the Wich estuary, which then flowed out to sea. Grandpa said the source of the river was a spring up on Iron Knoll. He said if you drank a cup of the water, you got special powers for twenty-four hours.

It was on Carla's list of Things to Do.

She shoved aside the metal sheeting and entered Grandpa's garden. Pushing through dripping nettles, she raced up to the barn. "Grandpa," she called, "I've got

something important to tell you.” She knew something was wrong as soon as she stepped inside. Grandpa’s barn was usually full of noise. Drills whirred, saws roared and grinding machines buzzed as Grandpa worked. He was building a small boat and it was nearly finished. But today Carla heard only the rush of the river from the end of the garden and the rain drumming on the skylight.

Freya, the children’s mother, said the barn was like an exploded rats’ nest. There were crates of screws, nuts and bolts, and vast coils of wire were stacked against the walls. Grandpa had lengths of pipe and metal propped in the corners, and his stuff covered every surface: silver foil and pogo sticks nestled in amongst chainsaw chains, cans of spray paint and old paperback novels. A line of crystals hung in the dirty window, so when the sun shone the place was filled with rainbows. Napoleon, a large stuffed black bear, towered in one corner. He and Grandpa had been together since Grandpa’s navy days. Legend had it that the bear had once saved Grandpa from drowning. Napoleon had a singed back and a missing foot where Grandma had chucked him on the

bonfire before Grandpa had managed to rescue him. But the centre of the barn was dominated by *Valkyrie*, Grandpa's boat. Grandpa had been spending days and nights on her. She was a small, flat-bottomed sailing boat and was awaiting a final coat of paint. Other than that, she was finished. Or as finished as she could be, Grandpa said. He wouldn't know what needed doing until he took her out on the water – which might be this weekend. Carla hoped she'd be one of the very first crew. Grandpa had high hopes that *Valkyrie* would win the Gundy Bay boat-building competition.

Grandpa was Good with His Hands. He could mend anything, from backfiring cars to snowstorming televisions. He sorted out sputtering tractors, blunt lawnmowers and silent generators. And in return for a hot dinner delivered at seven o'clock every night, he fixed things for the members of Little Wichley Ladies' Baking Club.

But where was he?

Yesterday, after school, all three children had gone over to Grandpa's barn – he had a little cottage at the front

of the garden, but he only went in there to sleep, and not always then, as he had an old, dusty couch behind a mountain of used car tyres in the barn.

He'd looked up from a paint chart as the children had trooped in. "You're only here for cake! Why don't you get your mother to make one, instead of thieving from me?"

"She only bakes cakes when she feels inspired," said Penny. She took the paint chart and examined the colour he had circled.

Duck-egg Blue.

"If I only did things when I felt inspired, I'd never do anything," huffed Grandpa, removing the lid from a battered flowery tin to reveal half a thickly iced chocolate cake. He fished in his overalls for his penknife, wiped the blade on his trousers and cut four large slices.

"You haven't washed your hands," said Penny, eyeing his oil-grained fingers. At nine, she was particular about such things.

"I'll eat yours then," said Grandpa, giving her a piece anyway.

“Who made it?” asked Carla. “Not Mrs Davies?”

“No, this is Mrs Roper’s, thank God,” muttered Grandpa. He turned to Woody, who at twelve was only eleven months younger than Carla. His birthday was at the end of March and Carla’s was at the beginning of May. Every April, they were the same age. The problem, as far as Woody was concerned, was that as he was two inches shorter than his sister, everyone assumed he was much younger.

“You’re quiet,” said Grandpa, giving Woody the biggest slice of cake. “What’s up?”

“He’s being bullied,” said Penny.

“Am not,” said Woody, giving her a murderous look.

“He is,” said Penny. “He wet the bed when he stayed over at Gary Bradley’s. Now the whole school knows and Mikey Dobbs’s gang are harassing him.”

“I spilled my water,” protested Woody. “I never wet the bed.”

“Lots of sailors do wet the bed,” said Grandpa, ruffling Woody’s hair. “It’s to do with being surrounded by all that water. The water in their bodies wants to get out and join the ocean. When I was at sea, there

was a steady drip, drip on to the deck, and rivers of pee pouring out the portholes. And that's a fact. That's why sailors sleep in hammocks – so they don't have to wash out sheets.”

Penny stared at Grandpa. “Are you telling the truth?” she asked.

Grandpa stared back, deadpan. “Are you calling me a liar?”

“Yes, because—” began Penny.

“Have my chocolate cake,” said Carla, pushing it into her sister's mouth. “I'm full.”

Grandpa winked at Woody. “Your blood is full of sea salt,” he told him. “Just like mine.”

“I still didn't wet the bed,” grunted Woody.

Now Carla, wiping the rain from her face, looked round for her grandpa. She noticed a puddle of blue paint pooling over the floor from under *Valkyrie's* trailer. Grandpa was always in his barn, *always*. Unless of course he was out fixing something for the Baking Club, but that was unlikely as his dinner was due to arrive at the garage door in five minutes and Grandpa never missed

that. Maybe he was having a nap – something he'd been doing a lot recently. Carla crossed the barn and peeked behind the vast pile of tyres at the back wall.

“Grandpa,” she whispered. Because he was here after all, lying on his couch with his head tucked into his chest and his knees drawn up, like a little boy sleeping. But he was too still, and too quiet. And he looked so *small*. When Carla stepped over and touched his arm, he felt cold. “Oh,” said Carla. A white button hung by a single thread from his cuff. “Grandpa,” babbled Carla, “we’re getting a puppy. Mum finally said yes. Woody found an advert in the paper and tomorrow we’re going to look. It’s half-term, you see, no school. . .” Carla straightened Grandpa’s collar. “There are two boys and a girl. They’re a spaniel cross.” She stopped talking and a tear fell from her eye and landed with a plop on Grandpa’s shoulder, blotching his shirt.

Grandpa wasn’t breathing.

There was a rushing in her head, like the river was flowing from one ear to the other, as she crumpled to the ground.

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Someone was calling.

“Magnus? Magnus? Time to down tools, old man. Where are you? I nearly drowned bringing this over.” Carla sat up and watched as a short, plump woman with damp grey hair appeared with a steaming dish of food.

“Miss Hame,” whispered Carla – she couldn’t speak any louder – “Miss Hame, I think . . . I think my grandpa has died.”

“I doubt it,” said Miss Hame. “I’ve made his favourite, spiced lamb stew. He wouldn’t miss that.” Through blurry eyes, Carla watched as Miss Hame shoved aside an oil can with her elbow and set down the stew.

“He’ll be having forty winks,” she said, stepping closer and patting the rain from her coat. “Do get up, dear – this floor is so dirty.”

Carla shut her eyes.

There was a pause.

“Oh,” gasped Miss Hame. “Oh, *Magnus!*”

Opening her palm, Carla found a small white button.

“Grandpa?”