



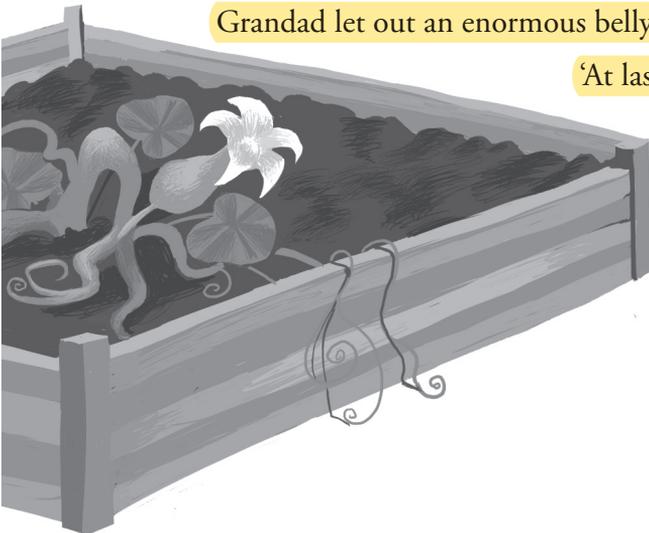
CHAPTER TWELVE

A week later, there was a bright yellow flower on the plant. Cheery and star-shaped. Fluted but enormous, glowing in the June sun. Its leaves had covered the whole of the raised bed by now and tendrils and vines all spiky and prickly were snaking through and over each other.

‘It’s a pumpkin!’ exclaimed Marty.

Grandad let out an enormous belly laugh.

‘At last!’ He clapped. ‘I thought you’d never guess! But this ain’t no normal pumpkin, my



boy!' he said. 'This is an Atlantic Giant Pumpkin that's going to grow to the size of a small family car!'

Gracie laughed.

'This, my dears, is going to be a pumpkin so large that they'll be able to see it for miles around. This will be the envy of everyone on this allotment and the whole city. This, my darlings, is our master plan!'

'Our master plan is that we're going to grow an enormous pumpkin?' asked Marty flatly.

Gracie giggled.

'Marty!' His grandad feigned disgust and puffed out his chest. 'Don't say it like that. We're not *just* going to grow an enormous pumpkin. It will be stupendous. Glorious. It will be the stuff of history. It will be –' he lowered his voice now and widened his eyes – 'the biggest pumpkin in the whole wide world.'

'The biggest pumpkin in the world?'

'Yes, Marty!' Grandad's whole body was quivering with excitement. 'What we're going to do,' he explained, 'is let it set fruit, and when it does we'll chop off every single one except the biggest and the strongest and the healthiest. We'll pick one and put all our efforts into it.'

Treat it like a king. Feed it till it's obese, massage it with oils, give it everything its little pumpkiny heart could desire and then, only THEN, will we start to have some fun! You see, growing the pumpkin is only step one . . .'

His eyes were shining now.

'It's step two I am really interested in . . .'

'What? What's step two?' asked Gracie, leaning in.

Grandad leaned even closer . . .

'Step two is the most glorious thing you've ever heard. Step two will blow your tiny little minds. Step two . . . will be le-gen-dar-y . . .'

Gracie was studying him, her face getting closer and closer to his, spellbound.

'And step two will be . . .?' she prompted.

She waited for an answer. Grandad held the drama a little longer until he confided . . .

'*That*, my kiddos, is a surprise . . .'

'Oh my goodness, Grandad! You can't do this!' said Marty, exasperated.

Gracie's shoulders dropped in disappointment.

' . . . but, suffice to say, it's going to be spectacularous!'

Marty rolled his eyes.

'You have to dream big, kiddies! Dream big! Now, come on!'

The allotment was bursting out all over now. Buds and saplings, sprouting bulbs and creeping tendrils. It was as if everything was setting out its plans for summer. Feeling its own potential.

'Well, stop standing around gawping! We've got work to do!'

Grandad led them to the back of the shed where he had a barrel. He gestured to Marty and Gracie to look in. Marty then noticed the smell. Gracie took one look before starting to retch.

'Oh my God!' she cried. 'What is that?'

'It's the basis for the pumpkin tea, my dear,' said Grandad proudly.

The barrel was three-quarters full of seaweed and slime and goodness knows what that had been stewing there for weeks since their visit to the beach.

'What it needs now is boiling up and a good stir.'

Marty and Gracie looked at each other.

'Are you *serious*?' they both exclaimed together.

'I am absolutely one hundred per cent serious!'

Gracie and Marty set about finding sticks for the fire. Grandad had an old tyre inner on which to start fires, so they piled them into that. Then they set about finding anything that could burn. Marty found the matches while Grandad rolled the barrel on its bottom edge carefully towards the fire and hoisted it up with great difficulty onto the pile, puffing heavily.

‘*Woohoo!*’ He exhaled, straightening up, his eyes sparkling. ‘Let’s brew some tea . . .’

Grandad lit the fire and they watched as the smoke rose in black columns upward before thinning out as the flames caught hold. They listened as the kindling sparked and crackled.

‘It’s going to take forever!’ said Marty.

Grandad tapped the side of his nose before retreating to his shed to fetch his trusty bottle of petrol. He threw a glug on to the fire, making the flames jump up three metres.

‘Oh my God, Grandad!’ shouted Marty, feeling his face flush with heat.

‘I think I’ve lost my eyebrows!’ shouted Gracie, laughing and covering her face with her hands.

Before long, the barrel was bubbling like a cauldron. Grandad watched, rubbing his hands together in glee.

‘Heh heh!’ he cried. ‘Come on, you two!’

It was only then that Marty and Gracie saw that Grandad had lined up some things to put into the tea. There were piles of stinging nettles, some banana skins and a bottle of yellow liquid that looked to Marty suspiciously like wee. Grandad plopped them into the barrel one by one, making weird-coloured smoke poof up like it was sending smoke signals. Then, as a *pièce de la résistance*, Grandad fished out a contraption from the shed. Gracie looked at Marty. Marty put his hand to his head . . .

‘Oh, no . . .’

Gracie looked worried. ‘What *is* that thing?’

They watched as Grandad wrestled what looked like a giant dead spider over to the barrel.

‘This, my dear, is the tea stirrer 300. The new and improved version!’

He kind of threw a few of its legs over the barrel so that it was sitting on top of the liquid. Then he retreated to the shed, and after much searching and fumbling came

back with a spade. He eased the spade into the barrel and slotted the handle top into the underside of the spider. He looked over at Gracie and Marty and winked. Then, he motioned to them to stand back.

‘Right, then, let’s see if this baby works . . .’

As he clicked the switch, the barrel shuddered. Marty grimaced and looked away. Then the spidery legs seemed to grip on to the sides of the barrel and the spade clunked against the metal.

‘Oh God,’ said Gracie, backing away.

‘Don’t worry! It’ll be fine!’

The tea stirrer started to turn, slowly at first, making a whooshing sound. Then faster and faster.

The smell was brilliant. As in brilliantly, throat-scratchingly disgusting. And every now and again bubbles of a petrol-green fizz would rise to the surface and pop with rather impressive belches.

Grandad watched, his eyes shining with glee.

‘Shall I turn her up?’ he asked.

‘No!’ cried Marty, who hadn’t forgotten his own mug of tea flying off sideways and spraying him with a scalding brew.

Slowly, the mixture started to boil down and get thicker. Darker. It changed in colour from a weak yellow to red to brown to an almost-black with a blue undertone. Grandad took a sniff of it as if he were a wine connoisseur checking his latest vintage. He turned off the tea stirrer 300 and scooped one of his enamel mugs into the brew and looked at it. To Marty and Gracie's horror, he started to lift the mug to his lips . . .

'Grandad! Don't!' shouted Marty.

Grandad's face creased in laughter.

'I wasn't going to! I wasn't going to!' He took a deep and satisfied sniff, then smiled. 'I think it's ready, short stuffs!'

Grandad hauled the barrel off the fire and Marty found some more wood to throw on it to keep it going for a while.

It was getting quieter on the allotment now. The sounds of doors closing. People shutting up for the evening. The barrel of pumpkin tea was steaming quietly in the evening air.

'You sure you don't need to be home for supper?' Grandad asked Gracie.

Gracie looked over at her house. It was dark. There was no one home.

‘Nah, I’m all right.’ She shrugged.

Grandad studied her through narrowed eyes for a moment before letting it go.

‘OK, well, you asked for it . . .’

It was then that he brought a packet of lukewarm and probably highly dodgy sausages from the shed and started to grill them on a long fork over the fire. He’d swear every now and again as the fat spat back on his arm, then he’d giggle and apologize to Gracie. They all ate, burning their lips and risking food poisoning, but Marty thought those were the best sausages he’d ever tasted in his life.