



## CHAPTER 1

**Z**ac Wonder sprinted through the forest, the carpet of frozen leaves crunching beneath his bare feet. Whatever was chasing him was gaining.

He leapt over a fallen branch and skidded to a halt at the edge of a deep ravine. There was no way across. He was trapped. The trees rustled, and he whirled round.

A tall figure in black stepped out into the moonlight. In place of a face was a gleaming silver skull. Its arms, encased in bone-shaped silver armour, were folded across its chest.

Zac felt panic rise in his throat as the terrifying apparition advanced towards him. Without thinking, he took a fatal step backwards, and fell, tumbling into darkness . . .

He landed with a thud on the living-room floor.

‘Another one, lad?’

Zac sat up with a start at the sound of his grandmother’s voice. Perched on her rocking chair by the fire, she was gazing at him over her newspaper.

He nodded, rubbing his eyes.

*Another one.* Another bad dream.

‘You all right?’ she asked.

‘I dreamt I was being chased by a skull and crossbones. How stupid is that?’ he said, trying to sound casual, but his heart was racing.

She stared at him hard for a second, then turned back to her paper. Zac could have sworn her hands shook slightly.

He clambered clumsily back onto the couch, and lay there, thinking. Tall and gangly for an eleven-year-old, Zac had large, awkward feet, crystal-blue eyes, and a mop of messy brown hair that always tickled his forehead.

Tonight was the sixth time in a week he’d woken up shivering and afraid. These days it seemed to happen every time he went to sleep. And he wasn’t alone. Every day the television news reported the spread of bad dreams. It was like an epidemic.

The world was changing. People were scared.

Zac cast a sideways glance at his grandmother.

Granny Wonder was tiny and round, with a cloud of silver hair. She always kept two pairs of golden spectacles on a string of pearls around her neck – one for reading and the other for distance. Puffing away on her favourite pipe, she was squinting at the paper with such concentration it looked as though she were trying to read using the wrong glasses. Zac took a peek at the front page to find out what was so fascinating. ‘SCARED TO DEATH’ screamed the headline: ‘NIGHTMARES ON THE INCREASE AS CRIMEWAVE BATTERS BRITAIN’.

When she’d finished reading, Granny hissed through her teeth and tossed the paper into the fire, shaking her head. The pages wrinkled and blackened in the flames.

Granny had never been completely normal. She’d always whispered to the birds in her garden and smoked that awful pipe. The other children were scared of her. They said she was a witch. A witch! Zac shook his head at the thought, and rubbed the ugly bruise under his eye – the latest result of defending Granny’s honour at school. He didn’t care how many black eyes he got, or that his classmates whispered when he walked past. He wouldn’t swap Granny for a hundred friends. She was all he’d ever known. After Mum had died, and Dad had ditched him, Granny

had given him everything. Even so, Zac couldn't deny she'd changed these past few weeks.

It had started around the same time as the reports about bad dreams began. She'd become extremely quiet, and though Zac would have been the first to admit Granny had never been a chatterbox, this was different. She'd barely said two words for weeks.

She'd also begun exercising. She only did it when she thought nobody was watching, of course, but Zac had caught her doing star-jumps in the back garden twice that week. He'd even seen her trying one-armed press-ups.

Lastly, and most intriguing of all, Granny Wonder had been disappearing every single night on the stroke of midnight.

What was she *doing*?

Zac had made up his mind. Granny was up to something, and he was going to find out what.

Tonight.