Helping your children choose books they will love

I reading

Lovereading4kids.co.uk is a book website created for parents and children to make choosing books easy and fun

Opening extract from

Claws

Written by

Mike Grinti, Rachel Grinti

Published by

Chicken House Ltd

All Text is Copyright © of the Author and/or Illustrator

Please print off and read at your leisure.

Lovereading4kids.co.uk


CLAWS

From the Chicken House

My cat does such strange things sometimes that it makes me suspicious of what he's really up to. Quite rightly in view of what happens in this brilliant first novel by Mike and Rachel Grinti. In the world they've created, talking cats and other strange and magical creatures live side-by-side with us humans. Imagine having a harpy as a friend or having dangerous dealings with social-networking ratters. I want to go to a glamorous faerie nightclub! But, wait, here's my cat with that funny look again.

Barry Cunningham
Publisher



mike and rachel grinti



2 Palmer Street, Frome, Somerset BA11 1DS
www.doublecluck.com.

Text © Mike and Rachel Grinti 2012
First published in Great Britain in 2012
The Chicken House
2 Palmer Street
Frome, Somerset BA11 1DS
United Kingdom
www.doublecluck.com

Mike and Rachel Grinti have asserted their rights under the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act, 1988, to be identified as the authors of this work.

All rights reserved.
No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted or utilized in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying or otherwise, without the prior permission of the publisher.

Cover design and interior design by KennedySimpson
Typeset by Dorchester Typesetting Group Ltd
Printed and bound in Great Britain by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon, CR0 4YY
The paper used in this Chicken House book is made from wood grown in sustainable forests.

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

British Library Cataloguing in Publication data available.

ISBN 978-1-908435-12-5

To Joe Monti, for believing in cat magic.



Chapter 1

Crag Fact of the Day:

'The word "crag" was first used as slang to refer to trolls because of their gray, rocky-looking skin. Today, it's popularly used to refer to any magical creature such as dwarves, ratters, hags and cats.' CragWiki.org

'Is that it?' Emma asked as they pulled up in front of a rusty gray trailer. The yard was overgrown with weeds and surrounded by a rotting wooden fence. Behind the trailer, a line of oak trees marked the boundary of the magical forest.

'That's it,' her dad said. 'That's our new home.'

Emma's stomach dropped. She couldn't think of anything to say. Their old house hadn't been big, but it was near her friends, and there'd been a library and park Emma could walk to. She missed it already. The trailers here all looked beaten-up, the roads were full of potholes, and the only thing she could walk to was the forest.

The trees grew close together, and between them were huge bramble bushes and weeds as tall as Emma's waist. Years ago, before Emma was born, the forest had magically grown and swallowed up half the city, but now it just sat there, still and menacing.

It was all her sister Helena's fault. They wouldn't have had to move if Helena hadn't disappeared three months ago. But Emma tried not to think about her. She was tired of crying. It never made anything better. It didn't bring her sister back. And she tried not to think about what her friends would say when they found out she was living in a trailer park with a bunch of crags. She'd tried to explain it to her parents, but they didn't listen. Some days it felt like they'd forgotten she was still there.

'Does it even have running water?' she asked. 'We're not going to have to put out buckets when it rains, are we?'

'It's got water and electricity and everything,' her dad said. 'It won't be so bad, I promise.'

Her dad had also promised the police would find Helena. Then he'd promised that the private investigators he'd hired would find her. He hadn't kept either one of those promises. Emma knew it wasn't his fault, but still. You were supposed to keep your promises.

'It's only temporary,' her mom insisted. 'Just until we get our finances together and your dad takes care of a few things.'

'Think of it as an adventure,' her dad added. 'The police told me it's safe enough for humans as long as we stay out of the forest.'

'As long as we stay out of the back yard, you mean.'

'Nope, just you,' her dad said. '*We're* still allowed in the yard.' He glanced back at her from the passenger seat, smiling.

It wasn't a very convincing smile. Emma knew he was trying to act like everything was okay. But every day that Helena didn't come home, his face looked thinner and more of his hair turned gray.

'What kinds of crags live here anyway? Are there trolls and stuff?' She'd read about trolls on CragWiki, but she'd never seen one in real life. They mostly stayed in the forest these days, like a lot of crags that were too strange or dangerous to fit in with humans. But not too dangerous to live in Emma's new back yard.

There hadn't been any crags at all in their old neighborhood. She'd only ever seen any when they went into the city or drove past the forest, and then only through the car window. Meeting a troll or a harpy sounded a lot more exciting when you were reading about one on CragWiki than when you might have one as your next-door neighbor.

She looked past the trailer, trying to see into the shadows of the forest, but she didn't even know how to tell if a troll was lurking. From the pictures she'd seen, trolls were huge and had rocky-looking skin with plants growing all over it. Maybe they just blended into the trees until it was too late . . .

'Your father says it's just dwarves and some satyrs and dryads,' her mom said.

'Mostly just dwarves,' he said, though something about

the way he said it made Emma wonder what he wasn't telling them. 'That's not weird, right?'

'Uh-huh. Maybe not if *we* were dwarves,' Emma said. But it made her feel a little better. Dwarves, satyrs and dryads were supposed to be pretty safe.

They got out of the car and her mom popped the trunk open. They all grabbed a box and walked up the metal steps to the trailer's front door.

'So you weren't scared off after all,' someone called from the neighboring trailer.

Emma looked over to see a man sitting in a hot tub. Well, the top half of him was a man. She was pretty sure the bottom half was all snake. The end of his scaly tail hung over the side of the hot tub. The way the scales glistened grossed Emma out, and she couldn't help shuddering even though she knew it was rude. She tried to focus on his face instead.

'I saw you moving boxes earlier, and I thought, *that human can't possibly be moving in here*. But here you are, with a family and everything.' The way he said it was almost a question, as though he found it just as odd to have a human neighbor as they did living with crags.

'Yes, here we are,' Emma's dad said, trying to sound friendly. 'I'm Chien Vu. This is my wife, Hanh, and my daughter, Emma.'

'George. George Simbi,' the snake man said.

'Well, it's nice to meet you, George,' her dad said. There was an awkward pause. 'You're a naga, yes? I used to see your, ah, your people back when I was a kid in Vietnam. I've never met one though.'

'And you still haven't,' Mr Simbi said, just a little frostily. 'The naga, though similar in appearance, originated in Asia. The coatl, which is what *I* am, were native to what you think of as Central America, and a few parts of South America.' He sounded like one of Emma's teachers.

'Oh,' Emma's dad said. 'I didn't know that.'

'Please don't mind him, George,' Emma's mom added quickly. 'He tends to put his foot in his mouth sometimes. I think he likes the taste. I'm sure we'll all get along just fine, though.'

'Oh, it's all right, I suppose,' Mr Simbi sighed. 'Humans can never seem to be bothered to learn about us. Not that you can really blame them. Most crags you'll meet here are respectable citizens like me, but there are some in these partssss . . .' He trailed off, hissing the last part of the word, and stared past them to the trailer on their other side.

Emma followed his gaze. She thought she could see something peering out from between closed blinds – a pair of eyes and wrinkled skin – but then she blinked and it was gone.

Her mom put a hand on her dad's arm. 'Chien, what does he mean by that?' she asked in a low voice.

'Nothing, nothing, just . . . you know how it is, the forest nearby and all that,' Emma's dad said. Mr Simbi looked like he was about to say something, but her dad went on quickly. 'It was nice meeting you. I'm sure we'll talk more later. Come on, Ems, I want to put this stuff down before my arms fall off.'

He opened the door for Emma and her mom, then

propped it open with the box he'd been carrying. Emma wondered about the eyes next door as she walked in. They'd looked like human eyes, she thought. But then again, Mr Simbi's eyes looked human, too, if that's all you saw of him.

Inside, the trailer had a heavy, musty smell. The carpet was torn and stained, and black specks of mold dotted the edges of the ceiling. The curtains were old, the bottoms in tatters. Her parents had already moved in most of the stuff from their old house, and boxes were piled up all over the living room. It felt cramped.

Emma set the box she'd carried in on top of the nearest stack. 'This isn't so bad, I guess,' she said, even though it was pretty bad. 'Once you guys clean it up.'

'Once *we* clean it up,' her mom corrected.

Maybe it really wouldn't be as terrible as she thought. Maybe it really would be an adventure. Their old house had been almost too big and too quiet without Helena. She might have been loud and obnoxious sometimes, but she had filled the space with fun and clothes and magazines and interesting bits of junk.

'Do you want the grand tour?' her dad asked. He waved a hand at the kitchen. It was separated from the living room by a wooden counter. 'Here's the kitchen. Not exactly professional, but it'll do. Go through it and you'll find your bedroom on the right, then the bathroom, then our bedroom at the end.'

Emma headed towards the narrow hallway past the kitchen, then stopped. Some of the boxes in the kitchen had been torn open, and huge piles of cereal flakes were

strewn across the tiled floor.

'Mom! You didn't tell me this place had mice.'

Her mom hurried to look, and her eyes widened as she took in the mess. She leaned down and ran her finger over a wide slash across the top of one box. Claw marks. 'That looks too big for mice . . . I hope we don't have to call an exterminator, we really can't afford—'

'Is it ratters?' Emma asked. 'I bet it is. Big, giant ones from the forest.'

'I'm sure it's not ratters,' her mom said, uncertainly. 'We don't have any secrets they'd be interested in. Certainly not in our cereal. It's probably just a raccoon, and I'm sure we've scared it away by now. Why don't you start moving things into your room while I clean up, okay?'

'I still think it could be ratters,' Emma mumbled as she went back for the box she'd brought in, and carried it down the hall.

As she got near the door of her new bedroom, though, she heard a scrabbling sound that made her freeze. She heard it again, a faint scraping of . . . claws on metal?

'Um, hello?' she whispered at the door. 'Is someone in here?'

Emma braced the box against the door frame and put her hand on the doorknob. Her heart was pounding. She wasn't actually sure she *wanted* to see whatever it was. But it was in her bedroom, and she couldn't stay outside the door for ever.

She took a breath and turned the knob. The door swung open, and at the same time a metal vent cover in the corner of the room fell back into place. Emma

dropped the box and ran over to the vent. She sat on the floor and peered through the slits, hoping to see something, but it was too dark.

'And don't come back!' she called through the vent, feeling shaky and ridiculous.

A sound that could only be laughter echoed back at her, then all she could hear was her own breath. She sat stock-still for several moments. Obviously it wasn't just a raccoon. Raccoons don't laugh at you. And it was probably too small to be a ratter. Ratters were the size of a short human, according to CragWiki, though Emma had never seen one. They stayed in the forest because no one liked having them around. Not just because they were huge rats that could talk, either. Everyone said ratters could find things out about you, things nobody was supposed to know.

But at the moment that seemed less scary than whatever was hiding underneath their house. Who knew what creatures lived in the forest? Things CragWiki didn't even know about, things that might come crawling back at night while she slept . . .

She pulled the box over the vent. What if it wasn't heavy enough? She'd need something heavier. More boxes, maybe some duct tape.

The room was barely six feet across. The hardwood floor was stained and scratched, and the window frame was warped and yellow with grime. She wrinkled her nose. It smelled like some kind of animal had been living here. Clumps of dirty white fur had collected in the corners.

'Emma, what are you doing in there?' her mom called. 'Didn't I just tell you to start carrying things into your room?'

Emma edged out of the bedroom, keeping an eye on the box to make sure nothing was trying to move it, and walked back through the kitchen into the living room. 'I want to get my stuff out of the car first,' she said, though really she just wanted to get out of the trailer *right now*.

'Just as long as you're carrying something somewhere useful,' her mom said. She was still trying to clean up the mess in the kitchen. 'And don't go wandering off, all right?'

'I think I can manage to walk to the car and back without getting lost,' Emma said.

Her mom looked up at her. 'I'm serious, Emma. Don't go off on your own, don't go near the forest, don't talk to anyone you don't know. You mustn't be rude, but try to be smart, okay? If something doesn't feel right, come right home.'

'Okay. I'll be careful,' Emma said. Her mom hadn't been this paranoid about letting Emma go somewhere alone since Helena had first disappeared. It was broad daylight outside, and Mr Simbi seemed more likely to lecture Emma to death than to hurt her.

She went outside, staring at her feet as she walked down the steps of the trailer to their car.

'What're you doing here?' a voice croaked to Emma's right. Emma jumped and spun around, nearly tripping on the last step. A hunched old woman stood in the other neighboring yard, staring at Emma and gumming her

lips. 'They said human childrens don't come to crag places.'

The eyes were the same ones she'd seen peeking out of the neighboring trailer. And there was something strange about this old woman. Her small, wrinkled face looked somehow familiar, even though Emma was sure she'd never seen her before. Her eyes were bright and clear.

'I'm not a child. I'm twelve,' Emma said.

The old woman sniffed at the air. 'Still a child, still a child,' she sang softly.

There was a gentle breeze, and Emma smelled cinnamon and baking cookies. 'Are you baking something?' she asked. She leaned forward, inhaling the delicious smell.

The old woman laughed. 'Can't be helped, can't be helped. We both smell food, but we'll both go hungry.'

Then the smell changed. Instead of cookies Emma smelled Vietnamese pudding – coconut and banana and ginger. Her mouth watered and her heart ached. She loved that smell. It was her only memory of her grandfather, who had died when she was a little girl. The old woman seemed so kind and sweet. Emma wondered if she could go inside her trailer and have some of the pudding.

She found herself taking a step forward.

'You stay away from her, hag!' Mr Simbi shouted from his hot tub.

Emma reeled away until her back was against the car. 'You're a hag?'

'Snakes.' The old woman spat on the ground. 'Snakes is always hissing, always slimy, always underfoot.'

According to CragWiki, the only way to recognize a hag was to look for double rows of shark-like teeth hidden behind their gums. Emma now realized that if you were that close, it was probably already too late.

Emma noticed now that the hag wore a long, shapeless brown dress stained with dirt, and a gray shawl wrapped around her head. She wasn't wearing any shoes, and her yellow toenails were long and curled. She no longer looked kind or sweet.

'You should stay away from her, especially at night,' Mr Simbi said. 'The government took her teeth so now she can't eat children any more, and she's allowed to live here for free. But you can't trust hags. I bet she couldn't resist cooking someone's child even if she couldn't eat them afterward.'

'Yes, yes, listen to snake man's hissing,' the old woman said. 'Very dangerous is hags, can't be trusted.' She sniffed the air again and smacked her lips, then dug around in the pockets of her shapeless dress and pulled out two cotton balls and a small bottle of clear liquid. She unscrewed the bottle's plastic cap, and the smell of alcohol and mint made Emma's nose twitch. Then, grumbling to herself, the hag soaked the cotton balls in the liquid and stuffed one up each nostril.

Emma slid along the car towards the front door of her own trailer. Her mouth felt dry and her heart was beating quickly. She imagined herself going inside the hag's trailer and never coming out. The sweet smell of dessert faded as Emma began wondering exactly how hags cooked children.

'You're scared now, yes?' the hag said in a slightly nasal voice, her eyes watering. She grinned her toothless grin and took a step forward. 'Now you'll change your mind, move away. Won't have to smell you any more, won't have to feel so hungry.'

'Ha! You think they'd be here if they had any other choice?' Mr Simbi said. 'Why should they care about your hunger anyway? No, you're stuck with them now!'

'I'm not scared,' Emma said, but her voice shook. 'Not if you don't have any teeth.' She could run at any second. The trailer, her parents, they were right there.

The hag scowled at her.

'It's not like I want to live here either,' Emma said, and suddenly the words came pouring out of her, as if the hag really was her kindly old grandmother. 'My dad wanted to move here because he thought maybe the crags would help him if he was one of them. Like they could help him find Helena. That's my sister. She ran away from home and the police couldn't find her, so my parents hired private detectives. Only they couldn't find her either, and then my dad lost his restaurant. We don't have any money for anything and my mom says it's cheaper here and—'

'How old was she?' the hag asked.

'What? Sixteen. Almost seventeen.'

'Mmm, no, didn't eat her,' the hag said. Her words sounded comforting, even though they shouldn't have been. 'Never liked hunting ones that old. Not scared enough when they get lost. Hard to smell. But there was one, all scared and alone . . . so long ago, but I still remember how his bones crunched, and the marrow . . . oh yes,

so sweet. It was a ratter child, with so many little crunchy bones.' She sucked on her gums. 'They're a lot like human childrens, once you're past the fur and the squeakings.'

A shiver ran up Emma's spine and she felt sick. She clutched her stomach and took several deep breaths. She might have read about hags on CragWiki, but hearing it from a real hag, hearing the way she said it, that was a lot worse. 'What, um . . . what do you eat now that you don't have any teeth?'

The hag made a disgusted face. 'Cans. With meats in them. Tastes like chalks and gives me gases and bellyaches, but I never, ever, ever feels full.' She sighed and rubbed her stomach. 'But at least no one hunts me. Hard for old hags, with ratters and howlers in the forest, humans everywhere else. So I eat cans, and I live in peace, until today.'

'Don't you feel bad for her!' Mr Simbi called out. 'I never understood how you humans can treat honest, hardworking people like me so badly, but let monsters like her have a free place to live.'

'Never did like snakes much,' the hag said, louder than before. 'Their eggs is disgusting inside, and the little ones is like eating worms.'

'Like you could ever get near a coatl egg-room. Back when my people ruled the Aztec Empire, we hunted your kind for sport until every last one was dead and burned!'

'Emma, what is going on out here?' her mom said, walking down the metal steps. 'What've you been saying to Mr Simbi to get him so—' She stopped abruptly when she saw the hag. 'Oh! I'm sorry, I didn't see you there. Do

you live in the other trailer? I thought there weren't any other humans living here.'

'She's not a human. She's a hag,' Emma said. 'But her teeth are gone, so I don't think . . .'

Her mom gripped the handrail so tight that her knuckles turned white. 'I see. Emma, get inside, now.'

'But—' Emma started to protest, even though she wanted nothing more than to run away from the hag.

'Now!' Her mom turned back towards the trailer. 'Chien! Get out here!'

Emma could hear her dad's footsteps thudding through the kitchen, then clanging as he ran out on to the steps. 'What? What happened?'

'*That*,' Emma's mom said, pointing towards the hag. 'That happened. Would you mind explaining what that . . . that *thing* is doing living next to our daughter?'

The hag nodded and hobbled towards Emma's parents. 'Not safe, not safe for human child. You will have to move away, yes, must keep child safe from horrible monsters.'

'Hanh, calm down,' Emma's dad said, holding up his hands. 'The police said she's completely harmless, and she mostly stays inside during the day anyway. I was going to tell you, but I only found out two days ago, with the house practically sold already, and—'

'Don't you dare tell me to calm down!' her mom shouted, and then she switched to Vietnamese to continue yelling. It was almost always bad when they switched to Vietnamese.

This was supposed to be her life now, Emma realized. She wanted to get away – from Mr Simbi, from the hag,

from her parents yelling most of all – but where could she go? Down the road? Into the forest?

For once, she did what her mom said and went back inside. Not that it was much better inside the trailer, with her smelly room and the thing inside her vent, laughing at her. Her mom was busy worrying about the toothless old hag, when something else was living right under the trailer. They'd be lucky to survive the night.

There was nowhere to sit in the living room, so she sat down on one of the boxes. What would Helena have done? She always seemed to have an answer for everything. Emma thought about what things used to be like, what *normal* used to be like. Her old house, her old room. Her sister.

Helena probably would have said something sarcastic, like she didn't care that their parents were fighting or that they'd lost the house. Then she'd have lounged around, reading her glitter-covered faerie magazines and gushing over the descriptions and illustrations of their fancy clothes and expensive parties.

Emma always thought Helena was just pretending that she didn't care when she acted like that, but maybe she really hadn't cared at all. Otherwise, why would she run away, and not tell Emma anything? Why didn't she call or leave a message on Emma's HangOut wall or something?

She wished Helena would come back. Then everything would be right again. Then she wouldn't feel so alone.