



## Chapter 1

# Stormy Winds

The wild west wind gathered its strength out over the Atlantic Ocean, churning up huge waves and crashing against the rocks along the Irish coastline, before gusting across the rich, green countryside. The fierce wind roared its way through city and village streets. In the small town of Glenkilty it lifted the tiles and slates off the roofs, rattled the window panes and gates, set the dogs to howling and the cats to hissing, and made the babies and children stir, restless and uneasy, in their sleep.

Mia Murphy snuggled up in bed, pulling the quilt about her, too scared to sleep.

‘Are you all right, pet?’ asked her grandmother, getting up and checking the window-catch one more time before pulling the curtains firmly closed.

‘’Tis only a storm. It will blow itself out in a few hours and be gone by morning, I promise.’ Granny Rose stood listening

to the wind and muttered thoughtfully, 'Although storm winds do bring change.'

She turned back to Mia. 'Will I sit with you for a while longer and finish reading the story?'

Mia nodded. She was glad of her Granny Rose's voice as she read from the book of fairytales. It comforted her and distracted from the wailing of the wind.

Tired, Mia tried to concentrate on the words of the story. In the woods behind their house, the huge trees tossed and bowed all night, groaning as the wind caught their heavy branches. She closed her eyes, listening to the wind whistling through the tree tops until she eventually fell asleep. Granny Rose slowly closed the book and crept from the room. She could sense the change in the air already.

Rory Murphy was woken by all the hullabaloo, and peered out his bedroom window in the grey, early morning light. What a storm!

Light shone from the windows of the house next door and he could hear the crunch of gravel in the driveway. He ran into his sister's bedroom at the front of the house and pulled the curtains apart.

'Mia, wake up! Quick!'

Mia opened her eyes and saw her brother standing at the foot of the bed, his brown hair standing on end.

'Look! There's somebody moving in next door,' Rory whispered.

Mia jumped out of bed and joined him at the window.

Months ago, after poor old Mr Hackett had died, a large, square 'For Sale' sign had been put up outside the house. Then, just a few days ago, a red banner was pasted across it with the word: 'Sold.' Then nothing. Until now.

Curious, they peeped from the window, trying to get a glimpse of the comings and goings down below. In the half light, they watched as two small, bulky looking men carried furniture and packing crates from the van, up the driveway and into the house next door. The wind seemed to catch the men and lift them off their feet and deposit them on the doorstep.

'How strange!' thought Mia.

They stared open-mouthed as a procession of rather ramshackle-looking household goods seemed to fly up the driveway by themselves. The removal men seemed to be almost running after them! A lampstand, a small round table, a comfortable-looking chair, a dozen fat, red cushions.

Mia jumped up and down with excitement.

'Crazy!' said Rory.

A black jalopy of a bicycle, with a wicker basket and bell on its front, seemed to pedal itself up the driveway. Now, who could own that? No kid would be seen dead on such an ancient bike. Still, what a marvellous contraption! It was followed by a hatstand, an enormous vase, a bright, multicoloured patchwork quilt, a mop and a sweeping brush, each one in turn caught by the wind, swooping and twirling as it was lifted up and carried towards the house.

‘How did they do that?’ murmured Mia, crouching up on the window seat.

By now, they were both really curious about who was moving in next door. Rory could almost read his sister’s mind – she was hoping for a family of girls. He, of course, wanted it to be a boy his own age, so that they could play football together, or go exploring in the back woods. Judging by the assortment of ancient clutter being carried into The Elms, neither of them was in luck. Rory shrugged his shoulders. Sensing Mia’s disappointment, he gave her a clumsy hug.

‘You’ve still got me!’

She barely nodded. He guessed having a twelve-year-old brother wasn’t much fun for a eleven-year-old girl.

The removal men stepped back into the van and emerged from its shadows with what seemed like a metal box or cage, covered by a black blanket. An old lady suddenly appeared from nowhere, darting in and out beside them. Caught in the wind, she flew around the men, giving orders, directing them up the driveway. She was small and dainty and clad from top to toe in black, the wind catching her long skirt and wrap-around jacket. Her face was hidden by a wide-brimmed, black hat which was tied firmly to her head like a bonnet. Her tiny legs and feet, though encased in clumpy black boots, fought to stay on the ground as she was tossed about and lifted into the air.

‘She looks like she’s about to blow away,’ murmured Mia.

Rory gazed at her too, and wondered what on earth she had

in that big, black covered box of hers. Whatever it was, the men were handling it very carefully, as if it was precious glass.

The two children watched as the men struggled to manoeuvre the black box, trying not to let it fly away in the wind or get bumped as they trundled up the uneven gravel of the driveway. The old woman jumped in and out between them, shouting at them and checking the load.

Suddenly she stopped. Her head spun around and tilted upwards. Rory and Mia could see her face clearly.

‘She’s ancient!’ gasped Rory, shocked by the strange, withered face and piercing, grey eyes that looked in their direction.

Mia stood transfixed. The old woman was staring right up at the window, right up at *her*. Her gaze was unflinching, as if she had expected to find Mia there, waiting and watching.

Rory pulled at his sister’s sleeve, dragging her away from the window. Something in the old woman’s gaze had unsettled him, too.

‘She’s just weird.’

‘She’s like a witch, Rory!’ said Mia, anxiously. ‘A witch in a story, in a book. She was staring at me. I could feel her eyes right on me.’

They stood hidden behind the blue-and-white gingham curtains as the old woman seemed to sniff the air, almost like a bloodhound. Then, with what looked like a smile, she turned away and set about the rest of her moving, the wind lifting her on to the doorstep.

By the time bright shafts of early morning sunshine lit the sky, the mysterious wind had softened to a gentle breeze. It was breakfast time in the Murphy household, and time to get ready for school. The brown van had disappeared along the lake road, back towards Glenkilty and their new neighbour had moved in, shutting her hall door firmly.

‘She’s a witch,’ thought Mia to herself, sitting at the table in her school uniform, eating her breakfast, ‘and she’s come to live next door!’