



Chapter 2

The Witch Next Door

‘The old woman next door’s a bit odd!’ sighed the children’s mother, Helen Murphy, sitting at the dinner table that evening, a worried frown creasing her forehead. ‘I called around today, just to be neighbourly, with an apple tart and some of Granny’s home-made jam and a few flowers from the garden, and she wouldn’t even open the door. I could see her inside, moving around. But she didn’t bother to come to the door. Isn’t that strange?’

‘What about the apple tart, Mum?’ asked Rory, hoping they’d have it for dinner.

‘Oh, I left the welcome presents on the front step for her, but it just seems strange to move all the way out here to the country and not want to get to know your neighbours.’

‘She’s probably a very private kind of person who just wants to keep herself to herself,’ suggested Matthew, the children’s father.

Rory and Mia glanced at each other.

‘So you two keep out of her way, do you hear me!’ he added.

They didn’t need telling twice. Both of them had already made up their minds that the eccentric old woman was best avoided.

‘I don’t like her, anyway!’ said Mia softly.

‘How can you not like someone when you don’t even know them? Don’t be silly, Mia,’ said her mother.

‘I just don’t!’ Mia insisted stubbornly.

Granny Rose handed Mia the big bowl of mashed potato. ‘Why, Mia?’

Mia hesitated. She could never hide anything from Granny Rose and was about to say how she knew the old woman was really a witch when Rory winked at her and gave a sudden belch, loud and huge. Mia burst out laughing. Granny covered her mouth trying to disguise her own smiles, while Rory got a long lecture on good manners from his parents.



Jackie’s barking woke Rory early on Sunday morning. Their small Jack Russell terrier was going crazy, racing up and down the back garden in a frenzy. She was trying to jump up into the trees, hurtling her small body up in the air, and barking wildly at an amazing assortment of birds flying across the garden, that swooped down and skimmed the hedge before landing on next door’s lawn.

Magpies, crows, rooks, starlings, plump wood pigeons, sleek blackbirds, brown speckled thrushes and chubby little robins – Rory had never seen the like of it. Almost every piece of grass or earth was covered by some kind of feathered creature, and as Rory looked down from his bedroom window, he saw their new neighbour standing there in the middle of them all.

The old woman wore a loose, blue dressing gown, and her white hair streamed over her shoulders. The birds made soft cooing noises and throaty caws as she stepped daintily amongst them. She talked continuously to them and touched their smooth black, grey and blue heads. Their darting eyes were fixed on her as she spoke. Even the huge, grey heron that lived on the lake stood to attention, listening. Like a group of soldiers taking orders from a commanding officer, they waited patiently until, with a clap of her hands, she dismissed them. Then the flapping of hundreds of wings filled the air as they all lifted into the sky.

Rory watched in amazement as they flew off in different directions, in towards Glenkilty, out across the lake, up to the busy motorway and the city itself beyond, and back into the darkness of the wood. Jackie tried to launch herself after them like a small, white fur bomb, stopping only when the old woman was left standing alone in her garden. Rory sat on his bed wondering at the strange phenomenon he had witnessed. He decided not to mention it to Mia as she already had enough weird notions about their next-door neighbour, and was already frightened of her.

The grass began to grow long and wild in the old woman's garden. Weeds pushed up through the earth and through every crack and crevice in the gravel driveway. The tall, sprawling hedge which formed a barrier between the two houses was left unchecked. The Murphys longed for the familiar sound of Mr Hackett's lawnmower or clipping shears rather than the silence that enveloped the house next door for most of the day.

The flocking of birds early in the morning had become a regular occurrence – the Murphys now referred to their strange neighbour as the Bird Woman.

Mia worried about the Bird Woman all the time, and took the utmost care not to see, or be seen by the old lady.

'Why did *she* have to come and live beside *us*!' she said again and again. 'Why did *she* have to go and choose a house in Glenkilty, next door to *us*?'

Sometimes Mia shut her eyes as she walked by the house so she wouldn't catch a glimpse of the dark figure staring out at her from the upstairs window.



One Saturday afternoon, Dad had taken over the sitting room and was rehearsing his latest magic trick for the hundredth time – how to make a bunch of silk flowers change into Snowy, their rabbit. Snowy was being difficult and kept popping out ahead of time, showing a twitching nose or fluffy tail where it

was not meant to be. Rory and Mia had to sit, squashed alongside Mum and Granny on the couch, pretending to be the audience – and trying not to notice Snowy’s bad timing. Rory sighed to himself. Why did his father have to have such a stupid hobby? Why couldn’t Matthew Murphy join a golf club or play tennis, or even go jogging around the lanes of Glenkilty like other boys’ fathers, instead of being a member of the Celtic Amateur Magicians’ Association? It was dead embarrassing.

‘If you two are going to keep giggling and putting your Dad off his stride you should go outside and play,’ warned Granny, who often boasted proudly of having bought Dad his very first magic set.

Not waiting to be told again, Mia and Rory jumped up, glad to leave the rehearsal. Grabbing the football from the under-stairs cupboard, they raced outside to the back garden, into the fresh air and sunshine.

‘Kick it hard!’ Rory yelled at Mia. ‘Try and score a goal past me.’

The two of them kicked the ball back and forth to each other. Mia was good at football. Living so far out of town, she usually ended up playing with Rory, and she could play football and rounders and cricket as well as most boys her age. Rory tried to tackle her now as she dribbled the ball past him. Mia gave the ball a mighty kick, sending it flying across the garden, high over his head. He stared, disgusted, as the heavy

ball soared over the thick, green hedge and straight into the jungle of grass and weeds next door.

‘What did you do that for?’ Rory yelled.

‘I didn’t mean to! It just went high and...’

‘You get it!’ he shouted at her.

Mia stood shaking her head vehemently, her long, wavy tossing hair from side to side.

‘I’m not going into the witch’s garden!’ she said fiercely. ‘You go!’

‘*You* kicked it in!’

They argued back and forth, neither of them wanting to go through the narrow gap in the hedge.

But Rory loved that leather ball and wasn’t prepared to lose it.

‘Come on, then!’ he said, ‘we’ll both go!’

Time had worn a hole in the hedge, leaving a gap which the children had used regularly to visit Mr Hackett. They could still just about squeeze through it. The garden was in a mess and wildly overgrown. They searched through the weeds and nettles and thistles, but there was no sign of their ball. It must have rolled up near the house. Holding their breaths and treading quietly, they began to search nearer and nearer to the house. They could see the drawing room and the kitchen, and the round glasshouse which clung giddily to the back of the house. Mr Hackett had loved cacti and rare plants, and he had practically lived in his glasshouse. Heavy blinds covered the glass today.

There was no sign of the football and they were just about

to give up and leave when they heard a voice.

‘The children! The children from next door!’

The old woman stood in front of them. Neither of them had heard her come into the garden. Mia gasped and jumped behind Rory, trying to hide.

Rory held his ground. He stared at the old woman. She looked different today, ordinary almost. Up close, she was just like anyone’s granny or favourite old aunt, in her pale blue tweed suit, hushpuppy shoes like their own Granny Rose wore, her white hair pulled back in a soft bun, her face powdered slightly, and a pair of gold-rimmed glasses.

‘Welcome, my dears! You’re both very welcome. I knew there were children next door, and it’s so nice to meet you at last. I must thank your good mother for the gifts she left on my doorstep. It was kind of her.’

Mia smiled shyly. Rory felt uneasy.

The Bird Woman laughed, a soft, tinkling kind of laugh. ‘Oh, goodness, I must introduce myself. I’m Mrs Blackwell. Bella Blackwell.’

‘And I’m Mia, Mia Murphy. I’m eleven,’ volunteered Mia, much to Rory’s amazement. She stepped forward. ‘And this is Rory, my brother, and he’s twelve.’

‘We were just looking for our football,’ stammered Rory, anxious to get out of the place and wondering what on earth had come over Mia.

‘I’m sure we’ll find it,’ smiled Mrs Blackwell. ‘But why don’t you come inside first and have some blackcurrant juice

and one of my oatmeal cookies?’

Before Rory had a chance to say anything, Mia was already ahead of him, following the woman inside the house. He had no option but to go after them.

They had been in this house many times before, but without Mr Hackett’s furniture and old ornaments it looked different and felt strange. Rory sat on the edge of a lumpy, red couch in the sitting room. Mia had gone off into the kitchen to help Mrs Blackwell. Rory wondered why there were no photos of Mr Blackwell, or any family members on top of the bureau or sideboard. Old people usually liked to have photos around them.

Mia was chatting away happily when she reappeared carrying a plate of cookies, the old woman following her with a jug and three glasses.

‘I feel I know your family already,’ said Mrs Blackwell, looking quizzically at Rory as she poured out a glass of purplish juice for him. ‘Mia has told me so much about you all.’

Rory glared at his sister, wishing that she would keep that big mouth of hers shut. Mia smirked and wrinkled her nose to show that she didn’t care what he thought, before nibbling her cookie. Rory decided that he wasn’t hungry, and he found the drink too sickly sweet for his liking. He sipped unenthusiastically.

‘Just imagine, a magician living next door!’ the old lady exclaimed. ‘Mia told me your father is a magician, Rory. How wonderful!’

Rory stared at the patterned rug on the floor. How could Mia be so stupid!

‘Actually, Dad’s a bank manager, Mrs Blackwell. He works in town. The magic stuff he does is just a sort of hobby,’ he corrected her.

The old woman smiled knowingly. ‘A hobby,’ she laughed, leaning forward towards him. ‘Is that what he calls it?’

‘Honestly,’ protested Rory, ‘it’s just party tricks and stuff like that. He’s just an amateur.’

‘I think Daddy’s quite good at magic,’ interrupted Mia, ‘and he’s getting better.’

The old woman and the girl smiled at each other as if they shared a secret, leaving Rory feeling left out and jealous. He remembered the football.

‘If you don’t mind, Mrs Blackwell,’ he said, ‘I want to try and find my ball.’ He stood up, putting his glass on the wobbly-looking side-table. ‘Thank you for the drink. Are you coming, Mia?’

His sister seemed to hesitate for a second, but then sensing his mood followed his example and stood up too.

‘Good gracious!’ murmured Mrs Blackwell. ‘It’s been so nice meeting children again, it’s been such a long time ... I mean, such nice children...’

‘Thank you, Mrs Blackwell,’ said Mia. ‘I’m sorry we have to go.’

‘You’ll come again, Mia, now that we are friends,’ said the old lady. ‘Promise?’

Mia nodded. 'I will.'

Mrs Blackwell led them back outside. Three magpies sitting on the branch of a tree watched them as they stepped back out into the open air.

Rory glanced around the garden, wondering how far the ball could have rolled. He nearly jumped with surprise when he spotted it almost immediately, sitting in front of them on the lawn.

'Oh, there it is, Rory!' said Mia.

I don't believe it, thought Rory. That's weird. There's no way I could have walked past it earlier without seeing it.

'You'll come back soon,' stated Mrs Blackwell, smiling and handing him the ball. But Rory knew that it was Mia she really wanted to see again, not him. Annoyed, he pushed his sister ahead of him through the gap in the hedge.

'Why did you have to go tell her things?' he asked Mia angrily. 'She's a daft old woman and now she thinks we're her friends.'

Mia looked puzzled. 'I like her.'

'What about all the things you said – about her being a witch and how she scared you?' he reminded her.

'Did I?'

'Yes, you did!' he insisted.

'Well, I was wrong. She's just a poor old lady with no family of her own. I think she's lonely. She said I'm a magician's daughter ... that's something special.'

There was no point in arguing with Mia once her mind was

made up. Disgruntled, Rory went inside, leaving his sister standing in the garden, the three magpies who had followed them home perched in the cherry tree above her head.