

# WITCH GRANNIES



THE CASE OF THE EVIL SCHOOLMASTER

GARY J BYRNES



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# X

## The Case of the Evil Schoolmaster



*They went into another small room, this time more brightly-lit. The walls were whitewashed and a weak bulb hung from the rotting beams overhead. A single, long desk with a rusty metal top surface, sat in the middle of the room. On the desk was some sort of a box, which was covered with a dirty old rag so the children couldn't see what was inside. But they knew that something was alive in there, for the rag was moving.*

*Pulling a sharp knife from his pocket, their teacher smiled an evil smile, gleefully anticipating what would come.*

WITCH GRANNIES  
*The Case of the Evil Schoolmaster*  
By Gary J Byrnes

This edition first published in 2008.

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Cover concept by Bernadette Byrnes.

Cover design and page layout by Gary J Byrnes.

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Published by Gary J Byrnes, The Hermitage, Castleconnell,  
County Limerick, Ireland.

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# WITCH GRANNIES

## THE CASE OF THE EVIL SCHOOLMASTER

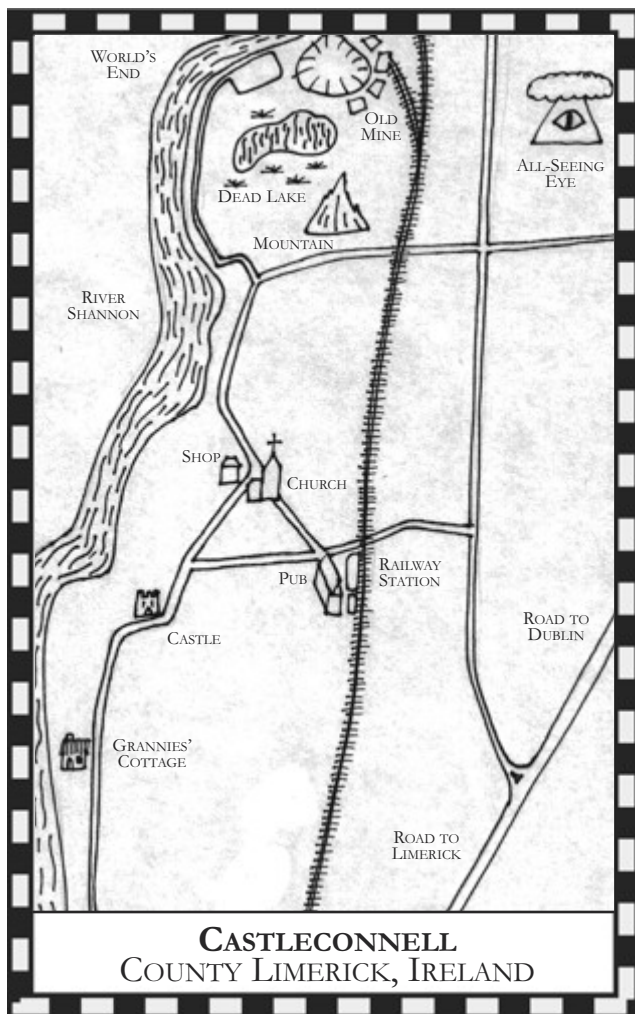
*For my wife, Bernadette.  
Thank you for your love,  
encouragement and inspiration.*



Special thanks also to Tara and Eden for their love of bedtime tales. And to Mary and Suzanne who, along with Bernadette, liked the Witch Grannies so much, you're now holding this book.

I owe huge gratitude to my mam, Maura, now a super granny in her own right. And Dad, you rock too!

And thank you, dear reader, for trying this story. Now turn the page and into the night with you...



# 1

## INTO THE NIGHT



The train went clickety-clack, clickety-clack, which is what trains usually do. Only tonight, the train seemed to be whispering "Go back", sensing danger ahead. Go back, go back, go back, go back.

Emily was tense, sitting rigidly to fight the motion, her hands gripping the table tightly. She was thirteen going on twenty-nine, pouty, dressed in black, but scared underneath her disinterested exterior. The last traces of the city had long since faded. The factories, office blocks and apartments had made way for relentless fields and hedges, with large farm animals and lonely houses occasionally breaking the monotony. Dusk raced west with the train.

Emily's brother, Malcolm, sat across the

table. He was reading a comic about The Matrix.

‘I still don’t really get it,’ said Malcolm, putting the comic into his coat pocket, having folded it in half, twice.

‘Get what?’ said Emily. She honestly didn’t care.

‘The Matrix. Like, are we really just imagining this reality and having our true bodies milked by freaky robot aliens?’

‘I honestly don’t care.’ She dismissed his pointless question with all the derision she could muster.

Her little ten-year-old, annoying brother just got more annoying with every day that passed.

‘Well, I think this is some sort of parallel universe,’ he ventured.

‘You’re just a little geek with no friends.’

He blushed and didn’t reply. True, he was big into science and less into the pop charts, but he never had a chance to make friends: Emily was always there, criticising. And here he was, off again, all his possessions in a

bag at the end of the carriage. His sister putting him down again and an uncertain future at the end of the train journey, in a country village called Castleconnell. Neither of them had been there before. Emily expected a tiny kip, inhabited by freaks and layabouts, with no clue of anything that mattered.

Plus, there was the unknown quantity of her grandmothers. She'd last seen them when she was only four and had only hazy memories of a strange smell and a red cardigan, which felt nice and soft against her cheek. She supposed that she didn't really have too much to fear from them and they would probably just do the granny thing and mind them for a few weeks until her parents got the new house ready. Please get it sorted out, she prayed.

She looked around at the carriage. It was an ancient train, with dirty linoleum on the floor, moth-eaten seats and a squeak or groan for every centimetre of progress along the slow track. The ticket inspector called by to check on them again.

'We'll be getting in shortly, about a quar-

ter of an hour, I'd say. Are ye all right?'

'Yes, we're still fine,' answered Emily. 'You don't have to keep annoying us, you know?'

'Well, it's just, you know,' he shrugged.

'I don't know. What is it?'

'I can't say' he replied nervously, gesturing at Malcolm. He glanced around the compartment, letting his eyes rest briefly on the large, bearded man who sat alone at the far end, his heavy overcoat tied around the waist with baling twine. The lights blinked off, and stayed off for a few seconds. For a reason she couldn't explain, Emily felt fear, a cruel grip on her insides which caused her pulse to race and her hands to become ice cold. The lights came back on. The man with the beard was gone.

'I'll be back in a few minutes,' said the guard, as he ambled off, his body lurching with the train as it continued west, towards the Atlantic.

Malcolm didn't seem to know that anything was up. He was listening to the radio on his Walkman. Probably the BBC World Serv-

ice or something square, thought Emily, who was fairly sure that there was something nasty in the air. The only other passengers in the carriage were a group of deaf people opposite, three men and a woman. They conversed enthusiastically with their hands and other body movements, but their inaudible exclamations merely added a surreal air to the scene. The inspector returned, carrying packs of crisps and two bottles of fizzy orange. Emily was relieved to see him, grateful even, and Malcolm was asleep.

‘Here you go,’ said the inspector. ‘The shop is closed now.’

Emily smiled. ‘Thanks a lot. How much are they?’

‘My treat. Is he asleep?’

‘Yeah. What were you saying earlier?’

‘Look, you’re old enough to know, but I wouldn’t let my daughter travel on this train without me.’

‘Why not?’ she asked, a shudder running down her spine.

‘A kid was snatched off this line last

month. Just disappeared. Gone. No trace. I don't know what happened to him. There's police around nearly all the time. But not tonight. That's why I was keeping an eye on you and your brother there.'

'Okay. Now I'm a bit freaked out.'

'We're nearly there.'

Suddenly the lights went off again. And stayed off. There was a sudden screeching, as loud as a banshee, as the emergency brakes were applied and the train lurched horribly, sending every loose thing and person flying. Emily was thrown against the table, hurting her hip. She was panic-stricken, expecting the man with the twine belt to grab her in the darkness.

# 2

## SITTING DUCKS



Then the lights came back on. The inspector and Malcolm were on the floor.

‘You’d better come with me. I need to talk to the driver,’ said the inspector, nursing his badly bruised forehead with a shaking hand.

‘Where am I?’ groaned Malcolm.

‘You’re okay,’ said Emily, her hand holding his chin tenderly.

The deaf people were exclaiming silently, but they seemed fine.

Emily and Malcolm, who had escaped the sudden stop without injury, followed him down the empty carriage. They crossed over the weird part between carriages that shakes like mad when the train is moving and entered

the carriage nearest the engine. It was a wild scene, one of pandemonium. About twenty people had been in the bar, drinking bottles of beer and cider, as well as cups of gone-cold tea and packaged sandwiches. They lay in heaps, some knocked out, others moaning from pain and shock.

‘Jesus, Mary and Joseph!’ said the inspector. ‘What a mess!’

‘What a stink,’ said Malcolm, noticing the spilt drinks all over the floor.

‘Come on.’

They followed the inspector forward, passing the bar counter, all broken and twisted. Up a narrow passage, noisy with steam, to an intercom system. The inspector pressed a button and spoke. In return, just static. He tried again. And again.

‘No good. We’ll have to get out to check the engine. Stick close and take your time.’

He unlocked and opened the top door of the train and climbed out on a collapsible stair. There was no platform, the train had stopped in the middle of the countryside.

Emily and Malcolm followed the inspector. It was dark and quiet. The train lay still, trapped in a valley of trees and shadows. Animal sounds came from not too far away. Emily shivered.

They went forward, trudging awkwardly on the large, oil-covered stones that made a bed for the railway tracks. The engine stood brooding, its huge diesel engine making a low, steady rumble, steam hissing from pipes. The inspector climbed up and reached the door into the driver's compartment. He looked in, then twisted the handle and went inside. Re-emerging a few seconds later, he shook his head, downcast. He climbed back down and was pale as the moon.

'He's gone. I don't know where. He must have gone back for me on the other side. Come on.'

They passed in front of the engine, a mighty hulk not something that would normally be seen up so close. Its front lights glowed red like the eyes of a demon, dull but cunning. There was no sign of the driver on

the other side.

‘I’ll check the train for him,’ said the inspector, his forehead dripping with sweat. ‘Now, I want you two to climb up this embankment. Go as high as you can and stay put. I’ll get the other passengers out to follow you.’

‘Why can’t we go back inside?’ asked Malcolm. ‘I’m freezing.’

‘It’s the little matter of the 10.10 express to Dublin,’ replied the inspector. ‘We’re on single track here and the train is due to pass through in about five minutes.’

‘What? Won’t they know we’ve stopped?’ asked Emily.

‘No coverage on my mobile, it’s the valley. Until I have some clue what’s going on here, I have to assume the worst,’ he said.

This made perfect sense to Emily.

‘Come on, Malcolm. Let’s move.’

‘Good girl. Go on, Malcolm. Stay with your sister.’

Luckily, there was no high barrier to negotiate. A low wall, just over a metre high, met a gradual embankment with trees at the top. In

the moonlight, a blanket of silver grass led up to safety. Thankfully, it was dry. They scrambled upwards, grabbing clumps of grass, slipping, panting. Emily stopped to look back. The train sat on the track, still rumbling, still mysteriously missing its driver. Doors along the train opened and bedraggled passengers poured out, some twisting their ankles as they stepped out into thin air.

‘This way,’ called Emily. ‘Up here!’

She waved and they began to climb the embankment too. After a few minutes, the Emily and Malcolm had reached the tree line, well up from the track. The train seemed a safe enough distance away. They stopped and sat and looked. About thirty passengers had gotten off the train. All were climbing up the embankment. There was no sign of the inspector. Then his face appeared at the first door, the one they had left the train by. He looked up and waved. It seemed to Emily that he waved at her. He shouted something, but she couldn’t make it out. She heard his sound, but not his words. Then, the quiet of the still night was broken by

a distant clickety-clack. It grew louder. A horn sounded, echoing up the valley like a whale ordering the little fish from its path.

“The train!” cried Emily. “Quick, get up!” she shouted at the passengers nearest the track.

Some of the stronger passengers sensed what was happening and went back down to help the less fit. Some elderly ladies struggled on the grass and welcomed the assistance. Their heels didn’t help, so they took them off and carried them, cursing the grass stains that would inevitably destroy their tights. An injured man and woman were also helped; they didn’t look well and were in serious need of some first aid.

The rumble turned into a roar. The oncoming train had not slowed. Emily guessed the signals must have been tampered with. The inspector was still inside the doomed train. Emily shouted to him. He reappeared and looked up the embankment. He lifted his right hand to his mouth and then the express train struck with a boom like thunder.

# 3

## WELCOME TO FREAKSVILLE



The house was warm and bright, sunlight streaming through the bedroom windows and central heating doing its useful job. From her window, Emily saw fields, trees and a few cows. A lone mountain loomed in the distance, greyed by morning haze. She stretched, still a little tired from the journey. Then the memories came flooding back. The crash. The inspector. The missing kid.

‘Well you’ve really landed in it this time. How do you do it?’ she asked herself aloud, only half expecting an answer.

She pulled her clothes on, the same ones she’d worn last night. There were grass stains on the knees and other signs of adventure. She silently wished that they’d be able to get their

bags from the crash site this morning. She feared that some of her precious things might have been damaged. Worse, all her clothes in flames! Now that would be a real disaster. There was a knock on the door.

‘Emily!’ a shrill call. ‘Are you awake yet? It’s nearly eight o’clock, you know?’

‘Yes, Granny.’ It was Granny Smith, her Mam’s mother. Her Dad’s mother, the other granny, was Granny Annie. ‘I’ll be right down.’

‘Good girl. There’s eggs on.’

Emily heard the raps on Malcolm’s door and took his confused groans to mean that he had slept through the first alarm call a few minutes before. Some high-pitched cursing ensued, with all the holy saints being invoked to get Malcolm out of bed. The language was a bit coarse, which alarmed Emily, but she smiled at the thought of Malcolm on the receiving end.

She washed her face and brushed her hair and teeth, luckily with two different brushes, which had been left on her dressing table. Then she skipped down the stairs, a wide smile on her face.

‘Morning Grannies!’

‘Mornin’,’ replied Granny Smith, busy at the range.

‘Sure it’s nearly dinner time already. Teenagers,’ said Granny Annie.

Emily noticed a frostiness in the air, though the kitchen was really hot, its great wood-burning range throbbing with heat. Bread baked inside and, on top, a cast iron frying pan was full of eggs, spitting furiously. An egg spat out a glob of boiling oil. It shot towards Granny Annie and hit her right hand, which lay on the table. She leapt from her chair and screamed that she’d had enough. Definite tension.

Emily sat at the table and stayed quiet. Granny Smith poured out a cup of tea and put a bowl of corn flakes before her. She carefully placed a jug of milk beside the bowl. Meanwhile, Granny Annie sat impassively, staring at Emily, rubbing her sore hand and muttering something about cats and boys under her breath. Edgy. And a bit freaky.

Granny Smith tended the frying eggs

and, after a few minutes, delivered a plate with three fried eggs, sunny side up, and two thick slices of home-baked bread. Spread with butter, it was just about the nicest bread Emily had ever tasted. The eggs were fresh and drippy. A hen called from outside, perhaps pining after her missing young. Emily was almost finished by the time Malcolm came down. He looked a complete heap.

‘You could at least have washed your face, young man. You’ve got half of the field on you.’

‘Sorry, I’ll go and wash...’

‘Sit down. You’ll eat first. Then wash.’

Granny Annie continued muttering, her pitch raised by Malcolm’s presence. Emily wondered. She herself didn’t exactly *like* her brother. That was normal. But her Grannies seemed to be allergic to him. When they’d met last night after the crash, they had both hugged Emily, smothering her with Granny-love, but hadn’t touched Malcolm, just muttered hellos. Now this.

‘I don’t like corn flakes,’ said Malcolm.

‘Well you and your kind can bloody well eat them!’ exploded Granny Annie, standing out of her chair and waving her clenched fists at Malcolm, who cowered in horror.

‘Now, now. It’s not Malcolm’s fault that he was born a boy. Is it Malcolm?’ said Granny Smith.

‘Em, no,’ answered Malcolm. He was clearly in shock.

Granny Annie sat back down while Granny Smith did Malcolm’s eggs and bread.

‘Can’t you just eat the corn flakes?’ Emily asked Malcolm. ‘They’re poured out and everything.’

‘I don’t like them. They stick to my teeth.’

‘Now, now. Let’s not fall out over a bowl of corn flakes,’ said Granny Smith, as she delivered a plate of steaming eggs and buttery bread to a very quiet Malcolm. ‘I want you to get cleaned up now, Malcolm, once you’re finished your breakfast. Then we’ll all go into the station and see if we can’t find your cases.’

‘There’ll be hell to pay if we can’t,’

snarled Granny Annie, 'I'm not forking out for boys' clothes. I'm only on the pension.'

She continued muttering to herself and was placated only by a fresh cup of strong tea, to which she added four spoons of sugar and a tiny drop of milk. Emily and Malcolm finished eating, then Malcolm went back upstairs to wash. Emily waited at the table, still making no comment on the unusual behaviour she had witnessed. Further analysis required.

Malcolm came back down after a few minutes. There was slightly less dirt on his face. Boys.

'All right. Let's go down to the village and see what the story is,' said Granny Smith, wrapping her huge tweed overcoat around her chubby body.

# 4

## LOST LUGGAGE



They drove to the station in Granny Annie's car. It must have been thirty years old, a long station wagon, complete with wood panelling along each side. It purred like a well-behaved cat, which surprised Emily. The purring sound grew louder as they neared the village. Emily looked behind to see two black cats, sleeping peacefully in a jumble of clothes and hay in the rear. She smiled. Malcolm saw this and grinned. But only on the inside, as he maintained a black exterior.

Granny Annie parked her car carelessly, half on the footpath and with the front sticking out onto the road at an angle. You could say she threw the car there. Nobody seemed to care. There was plenty of people about: police,

villagers, railway officials and anonymous men in dark suits with clipboards. There was also a lot of other grannies about, each of whom made a beeline for Grannies Smith and Annie. In hushed tones, they referred to the tragedy, the shock and the sheer annoyingness of the train crash.

‘That poor man has children and all.’

‘They say the signals were working fine.’

‘Would you look at all these useless men around? They’ve no hope of solving this riddle.’

‘Emily saw *him* on the train before the crash,’ said Granny Smith.

At this, all the grannies, and there must have been about ten of them, turned to look at Emily. They had concern in their eyes, which turned to pity when they caught sight of Malcolm. Then they turned away, back to their gossip.

A railway official wearing the heavy, navy suit and high-visibility, yellow vest that passed for a uniform, raised a megaphone to his mouth and started talking. Then he clumsily

switched the megaphone on, just in time for the gathered throng to hear his curses. All the grannies roared their displeasure at his language.

‘I’m so sorry. I... I want to thank you all for coming down this morning. I have two things to ask you. Would all passengers who were on the train last night please form an orderly line to my right? You will be brought to the luggage and then you will be asked a few questions by the police. Then could I ask all those who were out and about in the area between nine and midnight last night to form a line to my left? The police want to see if you saw any unusual activity or persons behaving suspiciously. Thanks. There’ll be tea and sandwiches for everyone afterwards.’

After much muttering and arguing, it was decided that Granny Smith would go into the line with Emily and Malcolm, while Granny Annie and the others joined the other line, with one granny dispatched to sniff out the sandwiches. Emily and Malcolm filed into an old luggage storage room, which was brown with

age, huge spider webs clinging to the bulbs that hung on long wires from the rusty steel roof trusses. The luggage seemed in good condition, just a few items had tears or scorch marks.

Emily quickly spotted her case. Its being bright pink and covered in Tipp-Exed graffiti about her favourite boybands and movie stars certainly helped. No sign of damage. Good. Malcolm's bag was a dirty old rucksack. Emily couldn't tell whether it had been damaged in the crash, as it was torn and filthy to begin with. Malcolm seemed happy, though. They walked through the room and emerged back into the light through a door at the end.

Rickety, old trestle tables were set up outside and railway men asked them to check the bags to ensure that they were theirs and that all was right inside. This they did. Granny Smith was delighted that the kids' stuff was fine as this would save Granny Annie from having a heart attack. She signed disclaimer forms on the children's behalf, to confirm that their belongings had been safely found. Then, at the next table, sat two police officers. They

asked the children a series of questions.

‘Where did you board the train?’

‘Where was your intended destination?’

‘Did you notice anything unusual about the ticket inspector’s behaviour?’

‘Did you notice any unusual behaviour among the other passengers?’

‘What happened when the train stopped?’

Emily answered most of the questions, with Malcolm mumbling the occasional ‘Aha’ to confirm her recollections. When they asked if there was anything else that Emily thought important, she told them about the strange man who had made the inspector nervous, just before the crash. The policemen were very interested in this aspect of the journey and took copious notes. They quizzed Emily at length on the man’s appearance and actions, but there was little she could tell them. They thanked her for her help, took her grannies’ contact details and looked to the next people to emerge from the luggage room.

‘By the way,’ asked Emily, ‘Is it true that

children have disappeared from that train before?’

The police looked embarrassed. They glanced at each other.

‘I’m afraid we can’t comment on that,’ said one, ‘It’s part of an ongoing investigation. Thank you for your assistance. Now move along please.’

This unsettled Emily, but Granny Smith held her hand tightly and winked at her as they went back outside the station.

‘We’ll get to the bottom of this, my dear. Don’t you worry.’

As they went looking for Granny Annie, they found a commotion. There were grannies of all shapes and sizes clustering around one spot. They jostled any men or younger women out of their way and some sharp elbows made contact with male ribs.

‘That’ll be the tea and sangwiches,’ said Granny Smith, ‘are ye hungry?’

They declined the offer, still feeling full from breakfast.

‘It’s probably only cheap ham on stale

bread, anyway,' she suggested.

Granny Annie muscled her way out of the mob and came to them.

'All that for cheap ham and stale bread,' she snarled in disgust, as she downed her sandwich in two bites. She was greatly cheered when she saw that both Emily and Malcolm had retrieved their bags.

'Any news?' asked Granny Smith.

'They haven't a clue what happened last night. Not a notion. I think we're going to have to get to the bottom of this one ourselves. We're having a meeting tonight. Our place. Nine o'clock. When these two are sound asleep.'

She winked at Emily as she said this.

'We'd better get to the shops, then.'

# 5

## GUILTY PLEASURES



They walked the short distance to the village store. It was one of those real old-fashioned shops you sometimes see in the country, with at least one of almost anything you could possibly want on display. There were shovels and sharp knives, bread and butter, cabbage and cauliflower, matches and batteries, strange newspapers and sweets and a thousand other items, some of which were entirely alien to Emily's eye. The kids hung around the counter, eyeing up the assortment of unusual sweets on display.

Malcolm was amazed to see jars of sweets, of all different colours and shapes, on sale by weight, instead of in a plastic packet. The grannies bustled around the shop for

many minutes and returned with armfuls of food, candles and a huge bag of dry cat food. As the shopkeeper, a wizened old lady with thick-lensed glasses and a heavy bainin cardigan, added up the cost of the provisions and packed them into large paper bags, Granny Smith saw that the children were hypnotised by the sweet display.

‘And could you give us two mixed quarters of your finest sweets for these young ones please, Mrs Reilly? They’ve been through a lot.’

Mrs Reilly nodded and even Granny Annie smiled. Obviously her own childhood wasn’t totally forgotten.

After the shop, Granny Smith insisted that she needed a medicinal glass of Guinness for her poor heart. So they all trooped up the hill to Paddy & Mary’s Pub. While Granny sipped her stout, they chatted with the couple behind the bar and Malcolm explored the fishing gear, stuffed fish in glass cases and bizarre bits and pieces that filled the pub all the way to the pungent-smelling peat fire at the back.

Paddy and Mary loved hearing Emily’s

gossip, straight from the horse's mouth. They gave her a free glass of Club Orange with a slice of lemon in it.

Then they drove home, everybody in much better form than they had been on the first leg of the journey. Emily and Malcolm sucked their sweets thoughtfully, discovering exciting new flavours and tongue-fizzing sensations. Their grannies were obviously excited about the forthcoming meeting and chattered excitedly about the preparations that would have to be made. Both Emily and Malcolm volunteered to help and their offers were gratefully received.

As they entered the house, laden down with the shopping bags, the phone was ringing. Granny Smith put her bags on the kitchen table and went to answer it.

‘Hello... yes... ah, hello. How are you?... No, they’re fine... I know... I know... I’m so sorry. (long pause) We should have called you... (long pause) Okay, that’s fine, see you soon. Bye... Bye.’

She returned the phone’s handpiece to

its cradle - it was one of those really old-fashioned phones, even having a disk with holes in it to dial a number, instead of buttons - and looked at the others with shame all over her face.

‘That was their mother,’ she said to Granny Annie. ‘She heard about the train crash on the news this morning and panicked. She’s been calling for the past hour. She was in a right state. I feel so stupid. I didn’t even think to call her. Did ye?’

All shook their heads. Carried away by the excitement and drama of the night’s events and the many people she’d met, Emily suddenly realised that the city, with all its traffic, pollution and bad-mannered people was already a dim memory. Her parents had simply dropped off her radar, she was disgusted to admit to herself.

The sweet in her mouth - a rhubarb and custard concoction - suddenly lost its flavour.

‘Well that’s that. Now, let’s get organised. Emily, the best way you can help is to get Malcolm out of the way, please,’ said Granny

Annie.

‘What? What am I supposed to do with him?’

‘Why don’t you bring him down the road to Farmer Blue’s? He’s got a young fellah the same age. Would you like that, Malcolm?’

‘That’d be great!’

‘Then what do I do?’ said Emily.

‘You get back here pronto, young lady. We need your help with the food. You can do food, can’t you?’

‘No problem, I do it at school even though we never cook at home.’

‘No matter. See you in a while. Wrap up warm now. Bye Malcolm and, sure, you can have a sleepover there if you want.’

Still carrying his unpacked bag, Malcolm was hustled out of the door by Emily. The Grannies winked at each other, which Emily took to mean that his sleepover was pre-arranged. Emily wondered what her grannies were up to and why boys were incompatible with their plans.

# 6

## THE FARM



Malcolm was in a hurry. He ran ahead, jumping over some of the puddles, jumping into others. He was smiling, his cheeks red in the chilly, fresh air.

‘Come on, Emily. I want to meet some normal males.’

‘You’ll be lucky to find anyone normal around here.’

‘Is that it up the lane?’

‘Looks good.’

They walked briskly up a narrow lane, with grass growing in the middle of the potholed road and brambles crowding in from both sides. A large, red farmhouse stood at the end of the lane, old and saggy, but well-lived in and welcoming. Some chickens and a goat

ambled towards the gate to the lane, curious to see if the visitors brought food. Malcolm dug into his pockets and found a hardening ham sandwich, thrust in there by Granny Annie ‘so as not to waste any food’. Malcolm broke the sandwich into pieces and shared it out between the animals as best he could.

‘Ahoy!’ came a call from the big red barn off to the left of the house.

‘Ahoy!’ answered Emily and Malcolm as one.

A tall, skinny man with a big grin on his face ambled towards them. He was dressed casually in blue jeans and a red check lumberjack shirt. He wore no jacket, even though it was freezing out. His cheeks were red, to match his wiry hair.

‘I’m Farmer Blue, but you can call me Johnny,’ he said, shaking hands with them both. They introduced themselves and Emily explained how Malcolm wanted to visit Farmer Blue’s son.

‘Not a bother, sure don’t I know all about it? You’ll have great sport, son. Don’t

you worry.'

This confirmed Emily's suspicions that Malcolm was being dumped for the night. She smiled to herself as Malcolm looked slightly uneasy.

'Now where's Roger?' Farmer Blue asked himself.

Hearing no answer, he put two fingers in his mouth and whistled. It was the loudest whistle Malcolm had ever heard.

'Can you teach me how to whistle like that? Please?'

Emily rolled her eyes towards the darkening sky as Farmer Blue nodded at Malcolm. Then she rolled them towards the farmhouse, from where a boy about Malcolm's age was approaching. He was dressed just like his father and had another happy grin on his face. The boys were fast friends in seconds and ran into the house to play on Roger's PlayStation, which was ironic, them being in the countryside and all. Boys must be the same everywhere.

'I've a little treat planned for them two and they don't know it yet.'

‘What is it?’

‘Tonight, when the sun is down and the moon is high, we’re going hunting, yes we are. It’s the Hunter’s Moon, start of the season. Boys o boys, they’ll love it.’

‘What are you hunting?’ asked Emily, squeamish at the thought of killing little furry creatures.

‘Deer, of course. But we won’t get one, don’t worry. We’ll be doing well to even see one. But I’ve got a night vision scope and the lads won’t be carrying guns, just me and me mates.’

‘Just be careful.’

‘Don’t worry, little lady. They’ll have an adventure. Roger has plenty of wet gear for Malcolm and I’ll see they don’t come to any harm.’

Emily felt that she could trust this man with her brother’s life, even though she’d only known him five minutes. A strange feeling. Deep inside, she knew that if her grannies trusted him, she could too. This was clear. He asked her in for a cup of tea and to meet Mrs

Blue, but she made her excuses and left, back up the narrow laneway, to the grannies and their mysterious plans.

‘Call back soon and I’ll show you the farm,’ he called after her. ‘You wouldn’t believe the things we do here!’

She waved back and smiled. Yes, she would like to have a look around, she thought, and see if Mrs Blue also wore a lumberjack shirt. Emily was changing.

‘Only here a day, and I’m turning into a farmer already!’ she said aloud, as she skipped through puddles of fresh rain. The moon’s swollen face peered over the horizon as dusk fell silently.

# 7

## MISSING THEM



The house was quiet as a graveyard. The absence of the sounds of quarrelling children was, at first, a relief for Emily's mother. Now, though, all was different. She'd had such a fright when she heard the news about the train crash that she almost died before she spoke to her mother and learned that the kids were okay.

The panic that had gripped her stomach in its squelchy grip had subsided since, but only a little. She had to take a tranquiliser before she could begin to calm down. The doctor had prescribed the tablets to help her sleep at night, but panic attacks at all hours meant that she often went through a whole week in a becalmed, trancelike state. She admitted that this

made her more distanced from her kids and her husband, but she knew of no other way to battle the waves of fear that washed over her. What did she fear? She'd never known the answer to that question, until today. She realised that she feared losing her kids more than anything.

So she sat at the kitchen table. The watery morning sun filtered through the blinds. The radio warbled to itself in the corner. Empty cardboard boxes, sheets of the bubble wrap and rolls of tape sat on the counter top. No packing done today. A mug of tea sat on the table before her. She sat quietly until the tea went cold. Then she stood up, poured it down the sink and made a fresh mug. This was how she filled her day until her husband came home from work. She switched off the radio, but then it was too quiet, so she turned it back on again. She began to panic.

'Malcolm! Emily! Get down here right now! Please?'

No answer.

When her husband made it home from

the office many hours later, he found her in the kids' room, asleep on Emily's bed. She had a smile on her face, hugging Emily's favourite teddy bear, the big white one that Tom had brought back from a business trip to New York.

A smile, he thought. That's a nice change. Then he started packing their old life into boxes.

# 8

## THE HUNTED



He walked carefully, slowly. Every step was onto loose stones, so he shifted his weight constantly, judging instinctively where the surest footing could be found. Hot clouds of his breath filled the air, as deep inhalations delivered oxygen to his tested body. After a time, he came to the summit. On a rocky outcropping, he stood proudly and raised his antlers to the rising moon. His nose, always sampling and analysing the air, sought out an unmistakable smell, that of a female deer. He felt a powerful, trembling pressure fill his chest, which grew until he released it in a roar which echoed through the valley.

# 9

## THE AWFUL TRUTH



When Emily got back to the house, her grannies were at full stretch getting everything ready. Granny Annie was busy at the range, preparing huge lumps of beef and ham for roasting, no doubt for some decent sandwiches. Granny Smith had a duster in her hand and was reaching into all the dim corners of the kitchen.

‘Come on, young lady. Grab a sweeping brush and make yourself useful.’

‘Okay, Granny Smith. Where do you want me to start?’

‘Go into the dining room and do the floor. Then wipe down the table, would you?’

Emily grabbed the sweeping brush, which was one of those old brooms, really,

long, wiry twigs tied around the end of a sturdy length of branch. Strange. The great, oak door to the dining room, which was the location for the evening's meeting, was slightly ajar and surprisingly easy to push fully open. The room was large, much bigger than the kitchen. A long table, made from roughly cut, unvarnished oak took up most of the space. A dozen high-backed chairs were arranged around it and a fluffy, black cat sat right in the middle of the table.

‘Shoo, pussy. I need to clean in here and I don’t want your hairs around.’

‘Tut,’ said the cat. Then it leapt from the table and, in that single bound, was out the door and into the kitchen.

Emily shook her head, dismissing both that the cat had tutted and acted on her command as if it had understood her perfectly.

‘Thanks for that. I’m allergic to that cat, but nobody will listen to me.’

Emily heard the words and froze. Who else was in the room? Obviously one of her grannies was hiding behind the door and put-

ting on a deep voice to scare her. She walked uneasily to the door and pulled it from the wall. Nobody there. She looked out into the kitchen and saw her grannies arguing about the best way to roast ham, whether with or without a honey glaze, while the black cat sat quietly on the kitchen table.

Emily turned back to the dining room, just in time to see the table sneeze.

‘Achoo! Excuse me,’ it said wearily, a tired face forming from the tree rings in the middle of its top surface.

‘God bless you,’ said Emily without thinking.

‘Thanks. You’re new. Who are you?’

‘I’m Emily. I’m staying with my grannies for a few days. With my brother, Malcolm.’

‘A man child? Oh, they won’t be too happy about that, will they? Oh no they won’t.’

‘Why not?’

‘Because they’re witches, of course. Didn’t you know that?’

Emily stormed from the room and went to Granny Smith.

‘Granny. The table is talking to me, which is bad enough. But he told me you’re witches! What’s going on? Please?’

Granny Annie turned to Granny Smith, smiled and winked.

‘Sit down dearie,’ said Granny Smith. ‘Here, have this drink, it’ll calm you down.’

She handed Emily a slender mug, which was filled to the brim with a frothy, sweet-smelling, milky drink.

‘What’s this? Cappuccino?’ asked Emily.

‘Something like that, now drink.’

Emily drank. It was delicious - warm and comforting, with an unusual, nutty flavour she hadn’t tasted before. It definitely calmed her down and she felt her pulse returning to normal. Both grannies pulled up chairs and sat before her, each gazing into her eyes. Looking over the top of her cup, Emily shifted her gaze from one granny to the other. These were nice people. Very nice. So don’t panic.

‘Emily, we’ve to tell you something very important,’ began Granny Smith. ‘Do you promise to keep it a secret?’

‘My mum and dad say I’m not allowed to have secrets, especially with grown-ups.’

‘Sound advice that is, too,’ said Granny Annie. ‘But we’re your grannies. Now you know that we’d never ever do anything to harm you, don’t you? Grannies are the only ones who can promise that.’

Emily nodded. Granny Annie was right, of course.

‘So do you promise?’

‘Yes. Now why did the table talk to me?’

‘It’s a magic table,’ sighed Granny Smith, ‘and we’re witches.’

‘Good witches, mind,’ said Granny Annie.

‘Witches?’

‘Witches.’

‘But witches aren’t real. They’re only in movies and books and on TV.’

‘We try to keep a low profile. Sure people would panic! You know what they’re like.’

‘So can you fly on broomsticks? The brush! The cat!’

‘Well, most of what you might think

about witches simply isn't true. We can't fly on broomsticks, for example.'

'Look at me,' chimed Granny Annie, 'would any broomstick take me without breaking in two, magic or no magic?' Granny Annie was smiling happily for the first time since Emily and Malcolm had turned up.

'No love, we use a car, just like anyone else. Only difference is, we can put a drop of potion into the petrol tank and it'll run for years.'

'We haven't been near a petrol station since 1972, you know.'

'Oh, and the table and the cat really can talk.'

'Why are you telling me all this?'

'Three reasons really,' said Granny Smith. 'You're the only witness to what really happened on the train. And you're the daughter of a witch's daughter.' She paused.

'And the third reason?'

'Finish your drink, love.'

'Is there some kind of magic potion in this? I'm starting to feel a bit giddy inside.'

‘Just a little something natural to help you relax, that’s all. The third reason is that we’re part of a coven of twelve witches. There must always be twelve witches in a coven, that’s one of the rules. It’s to do with the moon.’

‘And?’

‘And one of our sister-witches, Edna, disappeared the day before you came. Just "poof", vanished.’

‘We’re worried that something might have happened to her and it might be connected to the train crash and all the other awful stuff that’s been going on,’ said Granny Annie.

‘That’s sad,’ said Emily, ‘but what’s that got to do with me?’

‘Like I said, we need to have a sisterhood of twelve. So we want you to join us until we get Edna back.’

Emily’s head reeled. The drink certainly helped her to remain calm in the face of the most amazing things she’d ever been told. This was real, not a movie. Real.

‘Yes. I want to become a witch!’

‘Good girl! Good girl!’ the grannies ex-

claimed.

They all stood up and Emily was nearly smothered by two huge hugs.

‘So how do I become a witch?’ enquired Emily.

‘All in good time, my dear,’ said Granny Smith. ‘Now, haven’t you got some cleaning to do?’

# 10

## CONVERSATION WITH A TABLE



Emily, now feeling quite happy and giddy, went back into the dining room. She quickly swept the floor, occasionally glancing at the broom in her hands, convinced it could fly. Then she took a dust cloth and began to wipe a thick layer of old dust from the table.

‘It’ll be good to have the old coven meeting on me again,’ it said.

‘Why? Has it been a while?’ asked Emily, by now comfortable with having a conversation with a table.

‘That feels good, just a little bit of dirt stuck there, no, left a bit, that’s it. Thanks. Yes, they’ve been having most of their meetings at Edna’s lately. She’s the leader of the coven. Or

was.'

'What happened?'

'Your grannies called around to see her early last night, a few hours before your train was due to arrive. Apparently, she'd vanished into thin air. Cat and all gone.'

'Don't witches do that sort of thing all the time?'

'I suppose they do, what with their invisibility spells and all. But not without letting their sister-witches know first.'

'What do you think happened?'

'They've all been uneasy these past few months. I sensed an evil presence in the area last summer. Strange things began to happen and my brothers were full of chatter about it.'

'Brothers?'

'Trees, of course. We're chatting all the time.'

'I noticed.'

'When the wind blows, our conversations can travel the length of the country. Trees see so many things, so many. Mostly of no interest to humans. You know, the weather and

stuff. We love talking about the weather. Especially the sun and the rain. Ah, the sun and the rain.'

'You're no different from most people, then.'

'Well I've been around a lot longer.'

'How old are you?'

'Three hundred and twelve. At least that was my age until someone took an axe to me. I've been a table for twenty-two years now. It's not so bad, I suppose.'

The table sounded really sad and Emily felt that it must be awful to be a felled tree, swaying happily in the breeze one second, attacked by a sharp axe the next.

'I'm so sorry that you were cut down. I really am.'

'Thank you, child. You're a good apple, I can see that.'

'So what evil things happened?'

'Down by the lake. A stranger came and cut down all the trees around. Like he wanted to silence us and didn't want to be spied upon. Then there were accidents, disappearances ...'

‘Missing children?’

‘Certainly. It’s an awful business.’

‘Do you think this evil presence is behind Edna’s disappearance?’ Emily asked.

‘I’m sure of it. I heard chatter that there were strange lights and smells around her house last night.’

‘Do my grannies know about this?’

‘But of course. They both chat to me every day. I keep them informed about what’s happening out in nature. Witches are so close to nature. They respect it far more than the city types, with their machines and concrete. I sometimes think that what this planet needs is a few more witches. That’s if there’s to be any chance of saving it.’

‘Well, I’m going to be a witch,’ said Emily proudly, as she finished dusting off the table, which now looked quite grand.

‘I feel better already,’ said the table.  
‘Maybe there is hope.’

# 11

## AN EVIL WIZARD AT PLAY



The children sat quietly at their desks. Eyes down, faces dirty, they waited fearfully for their next lesson.

‘Well, my lovely pupils. Time for some biology. Everyone to the lab. Now!’

The children stayed at their desks.

‘I said NOW!’ screamed the wild-haired, bearded man, who stood by the dusty blackboard, as he faced the four desks, three of which were occupied.

A hand was raised, hesitantly.

‘Yes, Duggan. What is it now, you little sniveling oaf?’

‘Please sir, the shackles. We can’t go to the lab without you opening them.’

‘I knew that.’

The crazy teacher pulled his ragged robes apart at his chest, to reveal a heavy chain around his neck, from which there dangled an assortment of ancient-looking keys. He fumbled through the keys, muttering loudly to himself, until he found the key to the children's shackles. Then he bent down at the first desk and unlocked a large padlock, pulling the rusty chain free from the desk's cast iron frame.

'Don't move, you cur,' he bellowed, as he strode to the rear of the small, dirty room, into which only a single shaft of golden sunlight penetrated. It came through a crack in the boarded-up window.

He carried four large balls, again made of iron, and dropped them with a loud crash beside the desks. The wooden floorboards groaned and cracked. He used the padlock to attach a ball to the first child's ankle chain.

'Now try and escape,' he laughed.

He unlocked the other two children from their desks and fitted the balls to their chains, too. He threw his last ball to the back of the room in disgust.

‘I need another one to fill my class,’ he muttered slyly. Then he went to the ball, picked it up and placed it carefully back in its box.

‘Now move it!’ he screamed. He liked to scream and shout, especially at poor, defenceless kids.

The children, all boys, all around Malcolm’s age, shuffled wearily after their master. Carrying the heavy balls in their weak hands, there was no chance of escape, the chains between their ankles meant that taking a normal step was impossible. They went into another small room, this time more brightly-lit. The walls were whitewashed and a weak bulb hung from the rotting beams overhead. A single, long desk with a rusty metal top surface, sat in the middle of the room. On the desk was some sort of a box, which was covered with a dirty old rag so the children couldn’t see what was inside. But they knew that something was alive in there, for the rag was moving.

Pulling a sharp knife from his pocket, their teacher smiled an evil smile, gleefully anticipating what would come.

# 12

## MAGIC SANDWICHES



It wouldn't be long now. Emily could feel it, another of the odd feelings she'd been having.

'All done in there?' asked Granny Smith.

'Yes, gran. That table is very interesting. Do you have a name for it?'

'It's a him. Trees and wooden objects are all male. They're the only males we can stand being around. And his name is Table. Now will you butter some bread for me?'

'All these?' asked Emily, noticing the twenty or so loaves of bread on the kitchen table. The smells of the cooking roasts gave her strong hunger pangs and her stomach groaned, seeming to say 'Feed me!'

'We can't let you use magic until you've

been officially made a witch, young lady,' said Granny Annie.

'But we can help,' said Granny Smith, offering Emily a tiny porcelain cup, in which there was a small amount of bright orange liquid. 'Now drink this.'

Emily drank the contents of the little cup, expecting it to taste of oranges. But it tasted of mint and had the effect of making her tummy feel as if she'd just eaten a roast lamb dinner, complete with potatoes, carrots and gravy.

'Wow! I feel really full.'

'Well, you've just drank a Fill-me-up potion. What do you expect?'

Emily said 'That really works! Why do you bother with normal food?'

'Wouldn't life be very boring if we couldn't eat properly? We witches love our sangwiches. We really do.'

'And fry-ups,' chimed Granny Annie.

'And fry-ups. Now watch,' said Granny Smith, as she pulled a twig from her apron pocket and waved it at the loaves of bread. She

muttered in some unknown language.

There weren't any stars or tinkling sounds, as Emily expected, but the results were more amazing than she could have anticipated. The loaves of fresh-baked bread lined themselves up along the length of the table and, as if being cut by an invisible knife, began to slice themselves. Each slice was perfect.

'Now take the butter knife,' said Granny Smith, handing Emily an ordinary-looking knife with a white enamel handle.

'Where's the butter?'

'Just try it.'

Emily took the first slice of bread and spread the knife along its length. To her amazement, butter appeared from the knife and coated the slice of bread evenly with lush dairy goodness. In no time at all, Emily had buttered every slice. She was elated and completely delighted with herself for having being allowed into this magical world that she never knew existed until today.

'All done.'

'Good girl, now can you set the table in-

side for us?’

‘Yes, but can you make me a witch first?’

‘Sorry darling. We can’t do that until the coven agrees. It’s only a formality, but we must stick to the rules. There’s too much at stake.’

‘I understand,’ said Emily, sounding a little glum.

‘Chin up, dear. They’ll be here soon.’

# 13

## WITCH NUMBER TWELVE



There was a funny knock at the door. Three taps, followed by a pause, then one more tap.

‘Why that’ll be one of us now.’

Granny Annie opened the door and two ladies came into the kitchen. Darkness had fallen like a ton of bricks outside and a cold wind whipped through the door, which was hurriedly shut. Emily had seen the two ladies at the train station earlier that day. She was introduced to them by Granny Smith.

‘Emily, this is Sarah.’

‘Pleased to meet you,’ said Emily, unconsciously curtsying.

‘Likewise, m’dear. Any grandchild of these two must be something special.’

‘And this is Irene.’

‘Hello.’

‘Hello to you too, dearie.’

‘Drat,’ said Granny Annie. ‘We never set the table. Oh well.’

She waved her wand at the table. This time there was a bright flash and, when Emily glanced into the dining room, she was astounded to see that the table was set perfectly, with twelve placings and assorted centrepieces. There was another special knock on the door. The seven remaining witches came in together. Emily’s head began to spin and the level of chatter rose dramatically.

‘This is Eileen.’

‘Hello.’

‘And Patricia.’

‘Nice to meet you.’

‘Gemma’

‘Hi.’

‘Jackie.’

‘Hello.’

‘Tara.’

‘Hello.’

‘And Lola.’

‘Hi.’

‘And finally, Emily, meet Rachel.’

‘Hello.’

Emily’s head was spinning and her shoulders aching from all the tight hugs. The smell of old ladies’ perfume filled the air. All the witches passed positive comment on the look of the piles of beef and ham sandwiches, which had been magically put together, and whirled into the dining room to take their regular seats at the talking table. They each greeted the table, which seemed capable of carrying on many conversations at once, faces forming from its knots and lines as required. Three seats remained empty. Granny Smith and Granny Annie each put a hand on Emily’s shoulder and led her gently to a seat at the head of the table. Then they took their own seats.

‘Sisters,’ began Granny Annie, ‘we are gathered here tonight for two very important reasons. Firstly, we must empower this young lady,’ she nodded at Emily, ‘to become a witch and complete our coven in Edna’s mysterious

absence. Secondly, we must discover what happened to Edna, what caused the train crash and what is behind the strange events of recent weeks. It is my belief that a single force is behind all these goings on.'

The witches nodded unanimously in agreement.

'Who will vouch for Emily?' asked Lola, a beautiful-looking witch, with long, blonde hair and ruby red lips.

'I will vouch for her, as she is of my own flesh and blood,' said Granny Smith, with pride in her voice.

'I too will vouch for her,' said Granny Annie. 'She is a good girl with great potential. Are there any here who would disagree with Emily joining our coven?'

All the witches shook their heads and smiled at Emily. She felt good, welcomed.

'Then welcome to the coven, Emily. You are now officially a witch!'

Emily didn't know what to say. She had expected an elaborate ceremony, possibly involving potions, animal sacrifices and strange

dances. Her head spun, which was becoming a familiar feeling in Castleconnell.

‘Am, thanks. Thanks,’ she said. ‘I hope I’ll be a good witch and I won’t let you down.’

‘You’ll be great and you’ll learn as you go, Emily. Good girl. Now to business.’ said Granny Smith, her voice adopting a very businesslike tone. She pulled a piece of folded-up paper from inside her flower-patterned house coat.

# 14

## CLUE



**G**ranny Smith brought the paper close to her face and sniffed it. An odd expression crossed her face.

‘This piece of paper was found in Edna’s house today by Lola. Thank you Lola.’

She carefully unfolded the paper until it was about the size of a letter.

‘It’s in Edna’s writing and it reads as follows: "The evil is getting stronger. The trees, the lake, the children. The key is the All-Seeing Eye." And that’s all there is. Any ideas?’

The witches caressed the paper with their long fingers, using their weird senses to pick up more information than the mere text on its surface. It was decided that the Eye should be consulted immediately.

‘Sorry, but who or what is the All-Seeing Eye?’ asked Emily.

‘She used to be one of us once, a witch,’ answered Granny Smith. ‘Then she went beyond witchery, by taking her magic to the next level, to a place where most of us don’t want to go.’

‘Where is that?’

‘All in good time, m’dear. So she left the coven. Now she lives alone at the top of the mountain,’ she indicated the general direction of the mountain Emily had seen that morning with a cock of her head, ‘and she watches everything. All that goes on in this world, in the magic world and in the strange worlds beyond magic.’

‘Will she help us?’

‘Of course she will. Once a sister, always a sister. Right girls?’

All the witches around the table nodded and murmured approvingly. Emily could see that she was now part of something special and she need never feel alone again. She desperately wanted to meet the All-Seeing Eye, who

sounded so mysterious, exotic and exciting. She also wondered just what kind of worlds could lie beyond the world of magic.

‘So are you coming with me?’ asked Granny Annie.

‘Yes please,’ said Emily, her eagerness for adventure bursting from every pore.

‘Very good. Have we time for a quick sangwich?’ she asked Granny Smith.

‘There’s always time for a sangwich,’ she replied, as she got up from her seat and walked towards the kitchen. ‘Emily, can you help me with the tea, love?’

Emily followed Granny Smith into the kitchen, then carried the mountainous platters of yummy sandwiches into the witches, who were by now chatting excitedly about the All-Seeing Eye and Emily and other things, like embroidery and the price of ham these days. Emily brought all the sandwiches in, then went back to the kitchen to help with the teapots.

‘Granny, will I be okay?’

‘Of course, dearie. Granny Annie will look after you and you’ll come to no harm. I

think you'll enjoy yourself, actually.'

Butterflies flapped about inside her, but Emily still felt reassured. She brought four large teapots into the dining room and the jugs of milk and bowls of sugar cubes flew in behind her, but she paid them no heed, already well-accustomed to the bizarre events that happened in the magical house.

The sandwiches disappeared almost as magically as they had been made, but there were no spells involved this time. Emily wasn't sure that she could even eat, what with the excitement of her impending trip. She picked a ham sandwich and nibbled it. But then the taste got her. It was just about the nicest sandwich she'd ever tasted, definitely some magic involved in the baking of the bread and the roasting of the ham. Wow! She wolfed it down and three more sandwiches followed. She wasn't allowed to drink tea back home, but this was a different place, so she washed her sandwiches down with lovely, hot, strong mugfuls of the stuff.

'All set Emily?' It was Granny Annie,

pulling a heavy cloak around her shoulders.  
'Let's go and see the All-Seeing Eye. Maybe  
we'll find some answers.'

# 15

## NIGHT DRIVE



They drove down winding country roads, where the branches of the trees rattled off the roof of the car and pot-holes that would swallow a small horse lurked around every bend. Granny Annie was concentrating hard on controlling the car, her shoulders hunched forward and her eyes sweeping the road in every direction. It was raining now and the windscreen wipers screeched back and forth across their field of vision, not helping matters.

‘We’re nearly there, Emily,’ said Granny Annie as she did a handbrake turn and careered through a barely noticeable gap in the hedgerow.

Emily thought her granny had gone

mad, but was relieved to find that they were not in a field, but on a very narrow dirt track that led up, up to the All-Seeing Eye's mountain lair. Emily could see very little ahead, as the hedges and trees were closing in on them, the car's headlights making little progress in lighting the way.

‘Watch out for trickery now, Emily. It’s her way of scaring off any unwanted visitors.’

‘Like what?’ said Emily apprehensively.

‘Like that!’

A huge oak tree just ahead of them suddenly became animated and lunged for the car with its mighty branches. An evil face appeared on the tree's trunk and it wailed like a banshee. Emily was scared, but Granny Annie reassured her with the explanation that it was simply an automatic spell. Whenever the tree detected a moving object on the track, it would do its routine. They passed it by safely, the tree rubbing its head with a branch in confusion at its inability to scare the newcomers.

‘Must be witches. Oh well,’ it said to itself as it turned back to face down the trail

again.

There were other spells at work. A huge, gaping hole opened up right in front of the car, but they drove straight over it. Swarms of evil-looking bats, each one carrying a ball of cow dung, flew at the car. The dungballs rained down on the windscreen, causing the wipers to groan in their work and complain about the stink. After what seemed to Emily like a five mile journey through a real-life chamber of horrors, they finally came to a clearing.

‘That’s the worst of it. You all right, dearie?’

‘Fine. That was actually a bit exciting. My heart’s beating so fast!’

‘Look!’

Emily looked ahead, through the dung-covered windscreen and saw that the All-Seeing Eye’s lair was within reach. They were near the top of the mountain now and Emily could see that its peak was shrouded in cloud.

‘Where’s her house? She doesn’t live in a smelly old cave or anything, does she?’

‘No. You’ll see that she has a fine place.

The cloud is a spell to keep her hidden from all below. It's impressive, isn't it?

‘Wow!’

They continued upward and entered the cloud. Granny Annie slowed right down, following the trail with her inner senses. Emily noticed that her hands were off the steering wheel and the car seemed to be controlling itself. It was truly spooky being surrounded by cloud, in zero visibility, yet still driving forward at the top of a mountain. Oh, and with nobody's hands on the steering wheel.

Then the cloud faded and the night became utterly clear and calm. Immediately before them was a splendid, wooden house. It shot up into the sky, at least four storeys tall, and had a flat platform perched on top of the roof. The house was painted black, with dim light peeking from unusually-shaped windows, some square, some round, some triangular and even a few ovals. They left the car, Granny Annie tut-tutting at the amount of dung on its roof and Emily amazed at the house. The front door was very narrow and, as it began to creak

open, she imagined that the All-Seeing Eye must be a horrid old hag with one cloudy eye, wrinkly skin and a baldy head.

# 16

## SEEING THE ALL-SEEING EYE



To Emily's amazement, the All-Seeing Eye was beautiful, possibly the most beautiful woman she'd ever seen. Her hair was long, black and shiny. Her skin was as pale as the full moon, with not a wrinkle in sight and she wore a gorgeous, flowing robe, made from velvet of deepest, midnight blue. Tiny stars seemed to shine from it, twinkling as she moved. And she had two eyes, each as deep as a precious well.

'You finally made it,' said the All-Seeing Eye. 'Hello Annie. And hello Emily, I'm pleased to meet you.'

She extended her delicate hand, its long, red nails not at all like the talons Emily had expected.

‘I’m very pleased to meet you too.’

‘Well, the rest of our chit-chat will have to wait, I’m afraid. To the viewing platform now, girls. Emily, I’m afraid your brother is in serious danger.’

As she followed the All-Seeing Eye into the house, through a wide hallway and up the stairs, Emily feared that her pounding heart would burst from her chest. The house was dark, with just the occasional candle throwing its flickering light on unusual textures and colours. The ground floor had been sparsely decorated and, with each thudding step upwards, Emily figured that the All-Seeing Eye spent all her time on the roof, watching all that went on the valley below. The stairway was a circular one, wooden, enclosed. Every dozen steps or so, a small door, about Emily’s height, led off the stairs. Each door was closed. They passed a green one, a yellow one and a red one. Finally, they came to a large, heavy, steel door. It looked too heavy to be supported by the flimsy, wooden house. The All-Seeing Eye turned to them both as she pulled a slender, sil-

ver key from a little velvet bag that hung around her neck.

‘Don’t be scared of anything you might see or feel in here. You’ll come to no harm,’ she said. Her voice was believable.

Emily nodded, as did Annie, who smiled reassuringly at her granddaughter. The silver key was twisted and the All-Seeing Eye said something in a foreign language that Emily couldn’t understand. It was like "Sverigana notsu". The door sighed and quietly slid into the wall on the left. Beyond was a dark, narrow passageway. The All-Seeing Eye led them in. Emily’s heart beat faster. It was very dark. Her eyes hadn’t adjusted yet, so she felt blind. She stumbled. The floor was rising. Up ahead, she saw a small rectangle of stars. Her pupils expanded to let in more of the scarce light and she began to notice details. The walls were not black and featureless, but dully glinting, polished granite. Emily touched the stone and drew her hand back when she felt heat. She touched it again. It was hard, yes, but its warmth was gentle and happy. They reached

the end of the ramp and emerged onto a round platform, about ten metres in diameter, with no walls or roof, just the sky. Beneath the platform floor, on all sides, was cloud. Beyond the cloud was a breathtaking view of the entire valley, with the sea glimmering distantly in the moonlight.

‘Wow!’ exclaimed Emily. ‘That’s all I can say. Wow!’

‘I’ll explain the workings of my viewing platform later, Emily. For now, come here. Malcolm.’

She led Annie and Emily to a huge telescope at the edge of the platform. It was like an antique, with ornate brass fittings, a leather body and the smell of time. But it also had gadgets, little blinking lights and sleek ornamentation. It looked like a witch’s telescope. The All-Seeing Eye squinted as she focused the telescope on a point in the forest, which stretched for miles between the two mountains that dominated the townland.

‘Got them. Look,’ she took Emily’s shoulder.

Emily stood on a little wooden stool and closed her left eye as she put her right against the telescope's eyepiece. The eyepiece fitted around her eye snugly and, like the entrance walls, it was comfortably warm. Emily felt the telescope's body. It was warm too.

# 17

## THE SMELL OF RAIN



The image became clear. She was seeing Malcolm and his hunting companions. There's the boy. There's a few men. Six altogether. They're walking across a field, the telescope automatically tracking their progress. The men carry guns, the boys don't. Then sounds, a distant howl. She was hearing as well as seeing.

'Having fun yet, Malcolm?' It was Farmer Blue, his voice as clear as if he was standing there on the viewing platform.

'This is the best night of my life!' answered an enthusiastic Malcolm.

'Good, good. We'll have a break in a cave up ahead, do some tea. You warm enough? Good. Then we'll close in on this stag.

I can smell him. Can you?’

‘No. I can only smell grass and rain.’

‘Do this for a few years. Grow up in it. Then you’ll be able to smell the deer. I promise. I’ll catch up with Jim, see if there’s any fresh tracks.’

Roger caught up with Malcolm and told him about the cave.

‘It’s great. Really scary. It’s tight getting in and then it opens up into a big room. We always have a fire there when we’re out hunting.’

‘It’s not too freaky, is it?’

‘Well, you’ll probably be afraid that the walls will come together and crush you to a pulp when you’re going in. I always am. But it’s never happened yet.’

‘Oh. Good.’

Emily looked at the All-Seeing Eye.

‘It’s the cave, isn’t it? It’s going to crush them?’

‘No. Worse. Well, not worse. Nastier. You know what I mean.’

She let her fingers dance across a tiny computer keyboard along the telescope’s body

and it hummed gently as it rotated and adjusted its elevation until it was pointing at a rocky area where the forest met the distant mountain.

‘Now look again.’

Emily looked and saw a man at a crack in the rock face that she knew was the cave entrance and the hunting party’s destination. He was big and heavy, which was all she could tell from his back. He turned slowly and looked around him with a sly smile on his twisted face. He knew he was being watched!

‘He knows I’m looking at him!’ exclaimed Emily, without taking her eye from the telescope.

‘Has he seen you?’ asked the All-Seeing Eye, concerned.

‘No.’

‘Tell me if he stares you in the eye.’

‘Okay.’

He stopped seeking out Emily’s eye and began to work. He sat on a large rock and put a cloth sack beside him. He opened it and took out some large jars and string. His eyes, the beard. Yes, the string around his waist.

‘It’s the weird man from the train!’

‘As I suspected,’ answered Annie.

The All-Seeing Eye was concerned.

Emily watched him closely, describing the scene to the witches. He opened the lids of the jars, which were filled with heavy, yellow liquid, pierced them with a knife and put a length of fuse string through. Then he put a lump of putty around the holes to keep the string in place. When he had four jars armed, he used heavy tape to stick them together. Then he twisted the fuses together and joined them to a long strand.

‘Is it a bomb?’ asked Emily.

‘In a way. It’s a sleep bomb. I think he plans to put it in the cave.’

True to form, the man packed his tools back into the sack, stuffed it in his coat pocket and carried his device carefully into the crack in the rock. After a minute, he emerged without the device. Then he sat back on the rock and stared into the forest, turning his head whenever he heard the slightest sound.

‘He’s waiting for them. When they get

near, he'll light the fuse then hide in the forest. When the sleep bomb goes off, they'll all be knocked out...'

'And he grabs the boys,' said Granny Annie, completing the All-Seeing Eye's analysis.

'My God. What will we do?' sobbed Emily, tears welling up.

'First we'll think. Good girl. We'll save him. How long until they reach the cave?'

'About twenty minutes, what with the full moon. They're travelling fast,' replied the All-Seeing Eye.

'I can't drive, they're on the wrong side of the mountain.'

'Maybe the spell amplifier?'

'Did you ever get it to work?'

'Not really. What about a weather spell? Make it rain so they'll just go home?'

'They'd probably only run to the cave.'

'Yes. Is there anyone near them?'

'No. That's the side of the valley witches can't bear. The spirit there is wrong for us. Been like that for a few years now. The lake and all.'

‘I have great difficulty seeing there. Great difficulty. What about smells?’

‘Smells?’

‘My spell amplifier isn’t great for sending spells long distance, but I found out it works really well for sending smells.’

‘Smells. What do we do with a smell?’

‘We find that deer they’re after. Then we direct the smell of a female deer so that we draw the stag across the hunters. They’ll follow him for miles and won’t bother with the cave. They might even get him, which would be sad for the stag, but good for the kids. I think everything’s starting to come together now. A plan or what?’

‘A plan, definitely a plan,’ replied Granny Annie.

‘It’ll work. I know it will,’ said Annie.

‘I’ve some deer scent downstairs in my chemistry parlor. Keep an eye.’

And she was gone. Emily and Annie waited by the telescope, taking the occasional look at the hunting party, as it made its progress towards the trap in the rock.

‘I think she’s right,’ said Granny Annie.

‘About how everything’s starting to come together?’

‘Aren’t you the clever girl? Go on, tell me what you think.’

‘Okay. The strange man on the train is the same man who’s trying to ambush the hunting party, which includes two boys. The man was on the train that crashed last night, the train that one or more children have disappeared from recently. There’s also an evil presence around here, I can definitely sense that, an unease.’

‘So?’

‘So the man is kidnapping children. Why? I don’t know. Who is he? I don’t know. Are the children alive or dead? I don’t know.’

A single tear meandered down Emily’s face. Inside, she was panicking. Her granny sensed this and put a warm arm around her shoulders.

‘We’ll get a message to the rest of our sisters, keep them up to speed.’

‘Will you send an owl or a bat or some-

thing?’

‘No dear. Too unreliable. I’ll use my mobile.’

She fished around in her pockets for a few moments, pulling out a small snake that hissed sleepily, and then a corkscrew, before she found her phone. She called home and alerted Granny Smith to the drama that was unfolding in the fields below.

‘Fine. The girls will come up with a Plan B. Don’t worry now.’

The All-Seeing Eye returned, carrying a tiny bottle with both hands. She entrusted the bottle to Emily, who held it tightly, then went to the far side of the platform. She pressed a switch on a huge contraption that was fixed to the platform just like the telescope. A wide, brass rail ran around the edge of the platform. It seemed to just hover there, no fixings being visible. The All-Seeing Eye’s beautiful fingers danced across a keyboard on the device and it began to slowly move. It glided quietly around the platform and Emily saw that it was fitted to the brass rail with a ring. Emily now saw that

there were more devices around the platform, any of which could be easily moved to any viewing position. The new device, which Emily assumed was the spell amplifier, eased in beside the telescope, which moved a little to the left and readjusted itself to keep the hunting party in view.

The spell amplifier was all pipes and keys, like a huge church organ that had been remodeled into a bazooka. The All-Seeing Eye began to play it, her ten fingers dancing on the piano keys that encircled the widest part of its body. The music that was formed was not like a piano or an organ; it was more like the twittering of birds, melodic and piercing.

‘The bottle, please, Emily.’

Emily handed the bottle to the All-Seeing Eye, who opened a tiny door at the tip of the spell amplifier. She poured in a few drops of deer scent, through a tiny, purple, glass funnel, then closed the door.

‘It’s ready. Now where do we send it?’

She checked the view through the telescope, as it automatically rotated into three dif-

ferent positions. She was seeing the positions of the hunters, the stag and, just to keep an eye, the ambusher, whose terrible profile and potential for evil was growing by the second. She turned to a small drawer unit which sat alone in the centre of the viewing platform. It was black as night and lacked even the dull gleam of the other surfaces. She rummaged through the drawers until she eventually found a magnifying glass.

‘Aha! Let’s check the wind.’

‘It’s a wind glass,’ explained Granny Annie to Emily, ‘it lets you see the wind when you look through it. It’s great really. Tonight, it’ll tell us which way the wind will blow our deer scent, so it’ll go straight to the big stag.’

The All-Seeing Eye looked through the wind glass, then checked through the telescope again. Then she went to the spell amplifier and keyed in coordinates she’d taken from the telescope.

‘There,’ she said, pointing to an area off to the right of the trap. ‘They’re heading straight towards the cave from our position.’

The stag is on the mountain up to the left. The wind is blowing right to left, or east to west, if you want to be technical. So, if we put the deer scent to the right of the cave, the stag should smell it and come straight down in front of the cave and the hunters, on his way across.'

She was pointing out the locations as she spoke and Emily knew it made perfect sense. She and Annie nodded their approval. The All-Seeing Eye slowly twisted a dial on the spell amplifier. The bird song began to play and a low rumble came from the device. Tiny lights blinked around the top and a dark green vapour formed around the very tip.

'That's the smell coming out, Emily. You might be able to see it better with this,' said the All-Seeing Eye as she handed Emily the wind glass.

Emily held the glass up close to her eye and the world changed utterly. It was like looking into a swirling fog. Nothing solid or heavy existed, there was only the infinite dance of tiny molecules, flying free of all bonds to liquid or solid. The air was alive, great rivers flowing

across the sleeping landscape, with tributaries and tiny eddies forming where the earth dared to interrupt its flow. Emily could clearly see a great river of air flowing in from the sea and up the Shannon, across the fields near the cave and hitting the mountain, where it shot up high into the sky. She turned to look at the tip of the spell amplifier. The green haze was much more clearly defined through the wind glass, forming a needle, like a laser, which shot down into the valley. Emily followed its path and could see its impact in a dazzling flash of sparks in a small grove of trees. The energetic sparks of pheromone were whipped up by the breeze and carried quickly across the hunters' path. It amazed Emily to see a smell being carried on the wind. Within a minute, it had reached the mountain.

'They're getting very close to the cave now,' said Granny Annie, who had been using the telescope to keep an eye on Malcolm and the others.

'I'm on full power now,' said the All-Seeing Eye, who continued to make tiny adjust-

ments to the spell amplifier.

‘This would be a good time for a prayer,’ said Granny Annie. ‘Pity I don’t believe in that carry-on.’

Emily closed her eyes and prayed.

# 18

## EVOLUTION



It had taken about one hundred million years for him to get to that point. Through the endless cycles of evolution, a small, rat-like mammal had survived the decline of the dinosaurs. The mammal thrived and quickly evolved. Branches left the original path, leading to the creation of creatures as amazing and diverse as dolphins and elephants. The branch of the stag was a strong one and his kind, though threatened, continued to survive and thrive in many parts of wild Europe, even Ireland.

As he stood calmly in a clearing on the lower slopes of the mountain, his brain pulsed rapidly. His body was a powerful mass of muscle and bone, with a strong heart pumping

blood, ripe with oxygen, from his hoofs to his proud antlers. He was a chemical beast, driven, compelled to find a mate, relying on his keen sense of smell to pick up the chemical signals that would lead him to her. There. Again. The molecules of her smell reached his brain and lit it up like a Christmas tree.

The survival of the species depended entirely on the smell. The smell was everything. He raised his head to the moon and roared as if to say "I'm on my way, dear!" Then, with a mighty leap, he was off, down the mountain at a gallop, homing in on the smell of his mate.

# 19

## A TWIST IN TIME



**I**t was hard going, alright. Rivers of sweat rolled down their backs and the chill of the night was but a memory now.

‘When are we going to reach this cave, Roger?’

‘Not too long now, Mal. It’s just through those trees up ahead.’

‘I’m starving and tired and we haven’t even seen a deer yet.’

‘Not giving up, are you?’

‘No. I suppose I just moan a lot.’

‘Not to worry. I’ve been doing this since I was four. I shot my first rabbit when I was six. I’ll get a deer one of these days, you wait and see. Watch yourself here, it’s a bit tricky.’

Too late. Malcolm’s ankle slid into a fur-

row on the ploughed field they were crossing. When it reached the bottom, there was a stone waiting, which forced Malcolm's foot to twist at an angle that wasn't within its normal range.

‘Oww! I think I’ve twisted my ankle!’

‘Dad! Dad!’

‘Sssshhh, Roger. I think I hear something up ahead. What is it, son?’

‘Malcolm. He’s twisted his ankle.’

Farmer Blue handed his rifle to one of the men and rushed back to Malcolm, who sat on the ground rubbing his sore foot.

‘Can I see? Where’s it sorest?’

Farmer Blue gently massaged Malcolm's ankle, then twisted it very slowly. Whenever Malcolm said "Ow" was registered in his mind. After he checked Malcolm's pulse, he declared that it was a bad twist, but not broken.

‘That’s the end of your hunt, Malcolm. Sorry.’

‘Tut,’ tutted Malcolm, ‘I don’t want to ruin it for the rest of you.’

‘Not to worry. I don’t think that stag is coming out tonight. Unless...’

He stood suddenly and turned to face the mountain. He cupped a hand to his right ear and listened intently. He pointed towards the mountain.

‘He’s coming. This way. Firing positions, lads, we might get a clear shot. Roger and Malcolm, stay down and stay quiet, okay?’

‘Okay.’

Malcolm felt a giddy excitement overcome the throbbing pain in his ankle. He and Roger squatted low, keeping a good view of the proceedings. In front of them, a few metres nearer the trees in front of the cave, the men lay low, guns held in propped arms. They looked just like snipers in a war movie, thought Malcolm. One by one, they pulled back the bolts on the rifles, then pushed them forward, sending bullets into the barrels, ready for firing with just a flick of the safety catch and a squeeze of the trigger.

Malcolm heard the noise now, like a crashing object hurtling through trees. It sounded more like a grizzly bear and Malcolm felt a little pang of fear, for the first time that

night, but not the last. He looked at Roger who gave a huge grin in return. Then they both fixed their attention on the trees, watching for the slightest movement, the tiniest glimpse of antler.

# 20

## ACTION STATIONS!



After Granny Annie's update call, the coven swung into action. Sandwiches were made and strong tea was brewed, then they all sat down at the great table to decide what to do. After a brief, worried discussion, it was agreed that half of the witches would fly to the scene of the ambush and keep an eye on everything. For these witches really could fly on broomsticks, Grannies Smith and Annie had lied to Emily about this because they didn't want her to be totally overwhelmed. This surprise would come later.

The other witches set up an incident room on the table. A computer, with connection to the witch internet, was set up and a witch began trawling through the files of "Sus-

picious People", holding a sketch that Granny Smith had drawn from Emily and Malcolm's descriptions of the strange man on the train. She held the sketch beside the screen and clicked through the facial pictures on the computer with astonishing speed. A large board was placed against the wall and on it were stuck maps, pictures and snippets of information, all of which must somehow be tied together if Malcolm was to be saved.

'This isn't just about Malcolm,' said Granny Annie to those who had chosen to analyse the information, just as the loud whooshes from outside confirmed that the flying squad were on their way to the scene of the potential crime, speeding low over the sleeping countryside. 'This is also about little Roger Blue, who's in danger too. And it's about those other missing kids. And I wouldn't be at all surprised if this was about our poor, dear Edna as well. Like, where is she?'

There was no answer. The remaining witches diligently analysed their information, made phone calls, listened to the wind and the

trees, spoke to the sleepy birds outside and, of course, began to chant a variety of spells. The table also got involved, describing in more detail the area near the lake that held such fear for the trees. It was pinpointed on a map.

‘That’s where the old mine was,’ said Annie. ‘Sure, wouldn’t that be a perfect hiding place?’

‘Got him!’ exclaimed Lola, turning from the computer screen with a big smile on her fair face.

The other witches gathered round the screen. It definitely was him. The screen image was of a heavy face with a beard like a tangled gorse bush. His eyebrows flared up to frame small, beady eyes that had a powerful focus, like he could see you from the computer screen. His nose was rough and flat, like it had been broken more than once. His mouth was pure evil, thin and clever, it seemed to be repressing a smirk.

‘What does it say about him?’ called the table, by now feeling just a little bit left out.

‘His name is Seamus Mór, also known

as Big Seamus, also known as...'

'As what?'

'As Mad Seamus with the Evil Eye. Not good. He's been reported in a few different parts of Europe, but his last sighting was in Ireland, down in Waterford. It says here that he was chased out of the county for stealing lambs. His track record is worse, though. He's been accused of doing evil magic resulting in the death of a family of four in Belgium. Also accused of causing a flood in France that wiped out half the wine crop.'

'That is a crime,' said a witch with a glass of red in her hand.

'It gets even worse,' continued Lola, 'he's been accused of trying to kidnap a child in London. The International Witch Police want a word with him on that one.'

'Where's he from? Is there any reason for his awful behaviour?'

'It says that he was a schoolmaster up until ten years ago. His school closed down because there weren't enough children to be taught. That must have driven him mad, be-

cause he has no history before that.'

'Where was his school?'

'Blackwater, just the other side of the mountain.'

'It's him alright. He must be kidnapping children as some sort of revenge.'

'Most likely. Now what information about this character will help our sisters and the children? God, I wish I believed in prayers.'

With renewed vigour, they returned to their task. This identification was a breakthrough and Mad Seamus's profile was emailed to all and sundry, witches, police, witch police and newspapers. If the witches couldn't sort out this guy, and he was an evil handful, maybe the mortals could help out. They were generally a nuisance, but witch pride couldn't get in the way of this case.

# 21

## THE AMBUSH



They lay in wait, quiet, still. Malcolm's ankle was throbbing again, the adrenaline having worn off. The sound from the trees to their left grew louder and a mighty stag appeared. On the edge of his cover, he stopped. He sniffed the air and detected the hunters, whose smells traveled on the same breeze as the smell of his prize. But her smell was stronger. So he ran. Across the open field he thundered. Ahead, he saw a clearing in the trees. This was where he knew she must be.

'Here he comes lads. Safety off,' whispered Farmer Blue.

The hunters gently eased the safety catches off and each was ready to send an ounce of red hot lead powering through the air

to destroy the vital organs of the massive stag. Roger elbowed Malcolm in the ribs. Malcolm turned, startled. Roger had his forefingers in his ears and nodded to Malcolm to do the same. Malcolm did so, just in time, for then the firing started.

The stag's bravery was matched only by his luck. As he single-mindedly raced to his goal, bullets whizzed past him. Most hit only leaves and twigs as they sped uselessly into the trees behind. Others hit the ground well away from the stag, lifting plumes of dirt and stones. One or two hit rocks and ricocheted noisily into the sky.

Malcolm almost wet his trousers when the shooting started. He had no idea that rifles were so loud; definitely much louder than on TV. And he was so close! He watched as the hunters calmly aimed, fired, reloaded, aimed and fired again. Over and over. A quick glance at the stag. He's fine. Really big, but really fast, too. After another second, he was gone, into the trees and out of sight.

Farmer Blue jumped up, excited, adre-

nal gland pumping and breath catching. The other hunters got up and prepared to follow the stag, each exclaiming in colourful language how big and fast he was. It seemed the unanimous opinion that this was the biggest stag any of them had ever seen, or even heard of being seen in those parts.

‘What about Malcolm, dad?’ asked Roger. In the excitement, Malcolm’s twisted ankle had been forgotten.

‘Right. This isn’t good. Would it be okay for you boys to wait in the cave for us? Do a brew and we’ll keep after the stag for a few minutes. Would that be okay? We’ve never come this close to one so big.’

His face was pleading with Malcolm. Farmer Blue was like a big child, who wanted to stay up late on Christmas Eve so he could catch a glimpse of Santa Claus. Some would say that he should have put the child’s welfare first, but how was Farmer Blue to know that an evil kidnapper lay in wait?

‘It’s okay,’ said Malcolm. You go ahead. We’ll wait. I want to see the cave anyway.’

‘There’s a good lad. Can you manage him, Roger? Have you got all the bits and pieces in your backpack?’

Roger nodded and the men were off, running towards the trees where the stag was last seen. Malcolm put his arm over Roger’s shoulder and they slowly made their way towards the cave.

‘Did you see the size of him?’ said Malcolm.

‘He was big all right. Like your man on the Munster Rugby logo.’

‘I hadn’t thought of that,’ laughed Malcolm. ‘Did you see the All Blacks match last week?’

‘Oh stop,’ said Roger. ‘I want to keep my memories of ‘78.’

‘I remember it well.’

‘Them were the days.’

# 22

## GOOD LUCK, BAD LUCK



Emily couldn't believe her ears. The plan to lure the hunters away from the cave had worked a treat, but thanks to Malcolm and his stupid, twisted ankle, the boys were walking straight into the trap.

'What do we do? What do we do?' she asked anxiously.

Granny Annie had gone pale. She and the All-Seeing Eye became downcast when Malcolm twisted his ankle. It was almost as if they knew this would cause the plan to backfire. This was worse than before. The boys were on their own and the evil presence still lurked nearby.

The All-Seeing Eye looked through the telescope and focused on the bearded man. He

stood behind a tree a few metres from the cave entrance. He had seen the commotion with the stag and a hunter's bullet had, unluckily, missed him by a whisker. He saw that the boys were on their own and smiled to himself. It was a thin, nasty smile, like a crocodile's expression before it grabs a baby gazelle. Or two.

'I'll call the girls, see what they're up to,' offered Granny Annie. She just wanted to be doing something.

'Emily, can you please keep an eye on this man?' asked the All-Seeing Eye. 'I've an idea that just might work.'

Emily took the telescope and eyed him closely. Again, he seemed to sense that someone was watching and glanced furtively into the bushes around his position. Then he disappeared as she saw the boys, who were almost at the cave entrance.

'They're nearly there!' she called.

The All-Seeing Eye, who had gone downstairs, raced back up with another little bottle in her hand. She poured a few drops into the spell amplifier and focussed it on the cave

entrance.

‘Where is he? I need a clear shot.’

‘I don’t know. He disappeared once the boys came into view. What are you doing?’

‘I’m going to try some sleeping potion on him. It might knock him out for a few seconds. I don’t know from this distance, it’s not as powerful as the deer scent. We’ll try, but I need a clean view of him.’

‘There he is! Coming out of the cave!’

‘Ready...’

‘No, wait! Here are the boys. They’re going into the cave.’

‘I’ve got to try.’

In the next instant, everything happened at once. The sleep bomb detonated, in a slow, lazy poof of gas. The All-Seeing Eye fired her sleep potion at the cave entrance. As Roger and Malcolm fell to the dirty cave floor, without even having had a chance to put on a pot of tea, the All-Seeing Eye’s spell amplifier picked up the sleep gas and sent it to her. She stepped back from the machine and looked at Emily with a smile on her face.

‘I forgot! It works... both... ways...’

Then she fell to the floor, unconscious. Granny Annie and Emily rushed to her side and lifted her limp body to a sitting position. Annie gently slapped her face, but she was gone to another place.

‘That spell amplifier. I knew it would get her into trouble some day.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘It’s hard to explain, but as well as sending spells, thoughts and potions out, it also picks them up out there and brings them back. She must’ve taken a hit from that big sleep bomb just as it got Malcolm and Roger.’

‘So what do we do now?’

‘We have to stay with her. Look, you stay on the telescope. If we can’t do anything, let’s at least keep up to speed on what’s happening. Clues, Emily. Get me some clues.’

Emily returned to the telescope and peered at the cave entrance. All she could see was a cloud of yellow smoke. The only sound was of slow, heavy footsteps. Her anxiety was increasing by the second. She asked if there

was any good news from the coven.

‘Yes, news. Good news. There, there, darling. You’re all right now,’ she fanned a cool breeze across the All-Seeing Eye’s expressionless face. ‘They know who he is. Called Mad Seamus. Wanted all over Europe, apparently. He’s our man, likes to snatch children.’

‘Oh my God!’

‘Not to worry, dearie. The word is now officially out on this fellah. His days are numbered and his card is marked. We’ve a rough idea where he is and some of the sisters are flying toward the cave right now. They’ll stop him.’

‘I thought you said...’

‘That witches can’t fly? I know dear. We were just afraid that if we told you too much in one go... well, your little mortal’s brain mightn’t be able to cope, that’s all.’

‘I understand, I suppose.’

‘That’s the girl. Now, we can fly, and on broomsticks, but only when conditions are right.’

‘What kind of conditions?’

‘Well, for one, there has to be a full moon.’

‘Like tonight?’

‘Yes, we’re lucky this awful thing happened tonight. And the moon will be full for another couple of nights yet. Then there’s the wind. If it’s too windy, we can’t fly, simple as that. We’d be blown into a mountain or electricity wires or something. Very dangerous. You should hear the stories!’

‘And what’s the third thing?’

‘For a witch to fly, she must use her magic to make herself as light as the clouds. But if a witch has a heavy heart, whether through evil or sadness, she will not be able to fly. I’ll wager that your Granny Smith isn’t flying out with the girls now, her heart would be just too heavy from worrying about Malcolm.’

‘Wow. This is so interesting. And where do you get your broomsticks?’

‘You mean, where’s the broomstick showroom, with all its fancy broomsticks in different colours and styles? There isn’t one, I’m afraid. All witches make their own broom-

sticks, normally from hazel branches. Doesn't matter, really. The broom isn't magic in itself, y'see, it's just a vehicle for the rider's magic. In most of what we do, witches are self-sufficient. Children today wouldn't appreciate it, they're so used to throwing perfectly good things away and buying something new whenever they feel like it. So much stuff around these days, most of it pure junk.'

'I think I see them now!' exclaimed Emily. The telescope swiftly panned to the left, then began to slowly track six shifting shapes that flew silently above the trees, cloaks flowing like smoke, absorbing the light of the cold moon.

# 23

## WITCHES TO THE RESCUE



They swooped low over the trees. It was exhilarating, flying like this, among the night birds who also navigated by the stars. Your heels would clip the topmost branches as the broomstick rose and fell to hug the contour of the surface below. Witches couldn't normally just fly up into the empty sky. Their magic was more like a power to travel a set distance above objects. When a witch flew, she followed the lie of the land, up, down, up, down.

The lead witch, Rachel, called that the cave was in sight. She was over a mighty oak and had an excellent view of the route ahead. Then down she plummeted, crossing the ploughed field where Malcolm had twisted his

ankle. Sarah, who was just behind Rachel, used her seconds of height over the oak to glance through her wind glass. She could see the green residues of the deer smell in the distance and, much closer, the lingering yellow cloud from the sleep bomb.

‘Sleep gas, girls. Best hold your breaths!’ she called out.

Each witch inhaled deeply, then switched off her internal breathing reflex, the one that makes the body breath automatically. Witches have great control over their bodies and can survive for many, many minutes without air. So, breaths held, they shot across the field to the cave.

The six witches stopped in a circle outside the cave entrance and made a pile on the ground with their broomsticks. They scanned the location for signs of movement, but could hear or see nothing. The two bravest witches ventured into the cave while the others searched the immediate area. Inside the cave, there was a sad sight; in the light of a lantern, little Roger’s backpack sat on a rock, its con-

tents spilled out on the ground. A little further into the cave, the broken jars from the sleep bomb were strewn about, shards of sharp glass littering the darkness. No sign of the boys, none at all.

‘They’re gone. Gone,’ said Sarah, emerging from the cave. ‘I found this,’ she said, holding up Roger’s backpack, ‘and Rachel’s getting a sample of the sleep bomb.’

‘There’s no sign of tracks out here. Just back and forth from the trees there to the cave. But nothing like an escape route.’

‘If he was carrying the two boys, his footprints would be deeper.’

‘True. He must have gone over the mountain. Brooms, girls. Let’s head up and find his trail.’

They mounted their broomsticks and whooshed up the mountain, finally able to inhale again. As they ascended, hugging the rough mountain surface, with its many outcrops and depressions, they split up. Two went over the top, two went left and two went right. Rachel and Sarah reached the top of mountain

without seeing anything unusual. At the peak, they paused for a second to admire the view and wave across at the All-Seeing Eye's mountain, correctly assuming that they were being watched. Then down, down, down, at an incredible pace. Though their eyes were bleary, with tears streaming out from the fast-moving air, they could spot the other pairs of witches approaching the bottom of the mountain from either side. They met at the bottom.

'Anything?' asked Rachel, breathless from her exciting ride down the mountain.

'I think I saw something over there,' said Tara, pointing towards the nearest patch of dense undergrowth.

'What?'

'Movement, that's all. Could've been a deer.'

'Or a man. Let's take a look.'

They flew slowly across the rocky ground. Rachel pulled up her broom and pointed to the ground. They could see a series of depressions in the fine gravel. Footsteps! Heavy footsteps from the mountain to the un-

dergrowth. Rachel's phone beeped twice. Incoming message.

'It's from Annie. She says we're on the right track. They spotted him coming this way, carrying a big sack.'

'The boys!'

'Let's go, girls!'

They sped into the shadows. A trail opened up in the undergrowth, like a hunters' trail or one made by deer. Tree branches whipped the witches as they followed the path, down through denser forest and, suddenly, into an open, rocky area. They stopped, but not by choice, as their broomsticks fell to the ground.

'What?' said Rachel as she sat on the stony ground, rubbing her head gingerly.

'Bad magic,' said Tara. 'Look.'

She pointed to a tree stump before them. Like the many stumps around the clearing, it had once been a mighty tree. But now its roughly chopped remains held a dark secret. The centre of the stump had been hollowed out and a round glass ball sat in it. The ball contained a swirling cloud of black and red.

Tara took a step closer and the ball glowed. She hesitated, then took a step backwards. She turned to the others, who saw that she was sweating and pale.

‘It’s a witch repellent,’ she said weakly.

The witches gave a collective sigh. This was a very troubling development. Not only could they not rescue the boys, or even find out where they had been taken. Now they would have to face down the terrifying prospect of an evil presence on their patch, one that had the power and the cunning to defeat them. They took some samples of the stony ground and nearby bushes, as well as the air.

‘Before we give up, let’s see if there are any more of these horrid devices,’ suggested Rachel.

All together, for none would travel alone with such malevolence in their midst, they flew slowly to the left. There were more of the balls, each placed in tree stump just like the first. An oak, a beech, a horse chestnut. They reached the shores of the lake, then returned the way they’d come. They passed the first ball then

continued on. Again, witch repellent balls at regular intervals until they came again to the black, lifeless lake.

Armed with this useful information and a quickly sketched map, they turned and headed for home, sending messages to both Granny Annie and Granny Smith.

# 24

## COMFORTABLY NUMB



**G**ranny Annie wasn't able to revive the All-Seeing Eye and there wasn't much else to be seen. Emily was in shock at Malcolm and Roger's abduction, so Annie gave her a pinch of relaxant which helped a little.

'Come on, dear. I need your help. Even though there isn't a pick of her there, those are tricky, winding stairs.'

'Where are we going to put her?'

'We can't leave her here. Not in this state and not with so much badness about. She's coming with us.'

They carefully carried the sleeping body downstairs. There were a few bruised elbows all round before they reached the car. The

heavy door to the viewing platform had closed automatically after them, sensing that the All-Seeing Eye had left. The front door to the house closed by itself too, but Granny Annie put a quick protection spell on it to keep any nosey parkers away.

They drove back to the house at break-neck speed. Granny Annie muttered her way down the hidden driveway, cursing at the trees that jumped out in front of them, while Emily sat in the back, holding tight to the All-Seeing Eye.

They reached home with a screech of brakes. The flying witches touched down in the back yard at the same time. The All-Seeing Eye was brought into the house and put into a big, soft armchair, while Granny Smith fussed in the kitchen, making tea and ham sandwiches. After a few hours, dawn broke and the sleeping gas wore off.

Nobody else'd had a wink.

# 25

## THE PITS



Malcolm rubbed his eyes, but it made no difference. There was nothing to see, just pitch blackness. He was confused, light headed, scared. Was he still in the cave?

‘Roger! Roger! Hello! Farmer Blue!’

No reply.

‘Help! Help!’

He tried to stand up, but his ankle gave way with a sharp dart of pain that ran straight to his brain. He sat slumped against a wall, which he felt with his back was damp and cold.

‘I am still in the cave,’ he said to himself.

Then the memory of the explosion came to him. A loud bang, yellow smoke, a horrible stink. Did that happen? His eyes grew

accustomed to the dark, their pupils widening to the size of pennies to let as much precious light in as possible. Slowly, a picture of his surroundings began to form. He was in some sort of cave all right. A small square of pale light was visible far above. Morning had arrived. Was this really the cave? A bundle of rags lay beside him. He poked it with his good foot, in case it harboured rats or other unmentionables. He was startled when the bundle said "Ow!"

‘Roger! Is that you?’

‘Yeah, yeah. What’s going on? Did you kick me?’

‘Yeah, sorry. I genuinely don’t have a clue what’s going on, I’m afraid. I think we’re still in the cave. We must have fallen asleep or something.’

Roger sat up and looked around.

‘No, this isn’t the cave. This looks like one of the mineshafts over by the Dead Lake.’

‘The what?’

‘The Dead Lake. It’s behind the mountain where we were hunting. It used to be a gold mine. There was a tiny bit of gold found

there in the 1890s, so a load of miners came in and dug the whole place up, deep shafts everywhere. Then, because they use poison cyanide to extract the gold from the rocks, the whole lake was killed off. And all for a handful of metal.'

'That's awful.'

'Too right. My dad says the lake used to be one of the best trout lakes in the country.'

'So why are we here?'

'That, Malcolm, is the million Euro question. I don't like this.'

At that, there came a sound from above, a horrible squeaking. They looked up and saw a dark shape framed by the brightening patch of sky. The shape came closer and closer until it hit the ground between them, almost crushing Malcolm's bad foot. It was a huge bucket and it was attached to a heavy, rusty chain.

'Get in the bucket. Now!' boomed a deep, cruel voice.

A shape could be seen at the top of the hole, their kidnapper!

'Who the hell are you?' called Malcolm.

‘What are you doing to us?’

‘Get in the bucket. Now!’

‘No we won’t,’ said Malcolm, feeling braver because of Roger’s strong voice.

‘Very well,’ said the voice, ‘I’ll just fill the hole with water and ye’ll float up to me. Hang on until I get the big hose.’

Malcolm and Roger looked at each other. They were scared. They had no idea who this man was, but they wordlessly agreed that drowning would be no answer to their problems.

‘Wait! We’re coming up!’ shouted Roger.

The man reappeared at the top of the hole and watched as the boys clambered into the bucket. When they were both squeezed into its wood and iron embrace, the chain went taut and they began to rise. Slowly they ascended, the chain making horrific screeching sounds, which echoed all around them. As the shaft brightened, Malcolm could see the marks left by ancient shovels and picks. He even saw some graffiti scratched into the wall, which read "Tom Clancy, 1892, No Gold Here -

Gone home to Clare".

They neared the top of the pit and the light flooded in. This made Malcolm feel a little brighter inside, though he trembled at the thoughts of what lay in store for them. They reached the top and the chain stopped pulling. The bucket swung slowly as it dangled over the deep hole. Malcolm's eyes followed the chain to a winch a little bit away. The man stood at the winch, secured the chain, then walked over to them as they sat petrified in the bucket, a rusty chain all there was between an uncertain future and certain death.

'Well, my boys. Did ye sleep well?' asked the man. He was big, heavy, ugly. Malcolm immediately recognised him as the weird man from the train. There, he had twine tied around his waist. Him, for sure. But he didn't let on anything.

'What happened? Why did you put us down there?' ventured Roger.

'You'll have to learn, boys, that I ask the questions around here. Now, I'll let you off today, young man, as this is your first day. But

take this as your final warning.’

‘First day of what?’

‘This is your first day in Big Seamus’s School For Brats Who Don’t Even Deserve A Decent Education. I’m sure ye’ll get on grand here. And if ye don’t, there’s always the pit. Or the lake. Oh, by the way, don’t bother bringing me apples, ‘cos I don’t like ‘em.’ He laughed a heartless laugh. ‘I hates ‘em!’

# 26

## THE RESCUE



As Malcolm and Roger endured their first day in Big Seamus's School For Brats Who Don't Even Deserve A Decent Education, Emily and the witches schemed a way to bring them home. All the witches stayed in the grannies' house all through the night and into the next day. It was agreed unanimously that farmer Blue would also be invited to help in the rescue mission. He appeared at the house just after dawn had broken. He was apologetic and upset and tried to explain to the witches what had happened. Of course, they knew much more than he. Granny Smith took him aside and explained that the boys had been abducted by an evil man who used magic and other unspeakable tricks

to control children. Farmer Blue said that he must be stopped for good. Granny Smith agreed. Farmer Blue said that he could get twenty men with guns ready for a rescue and Granny Smith said grand, do it.

After Farmer Blue left to round up his posse, the witches gathered, knowing that they had to find a means of defeating Big Seamus's black magic. Emily suggested the Witches' World Wide Web, WWWW, and she was asked to do a search. She used 'witch repellent cures' as her keywords and got 3,454 results. The first turned out to be the best. It told of how the spherical witch repellents used by the evil schoolmaster were made from anthracite, a type of coal, mixed with tiny bits of diamonds. Why they worked was unknown, something to do with the carbon balance of life. The way to combat them was to neutralise the carbon. Quite simple, really. Heat it and it burns. Problem solved.

'I've got it!' exclaimed Emily.

'Good girl,' said Granny Annie. 'Now what have you got, exactly?'

‘I know how we can deal with the witch repellents around the mine!’

‘How?’

‘We just have to heat them up and release the carbon.’

‘You what?’

‘They’re made out of coal. We just have to burn them.’

‘Is it to do with carbon?’ asked Granny Annie.

‘Exactly!’ exclaimed Emily. ‘Coal is made from carbon, so are diamonds, so are all human beings, well, carbon mixed with other things like hydrogen and oxygen. Even the so-called lead in pencils is actually carbon, mixed with clay.’

‘They say that carbon is the most important chemical in the world.’

‘You’re right! It says here that carbon really is the most important chemical. Without it we couldn’t exist. Even our food is made out of it. You know carbohydrates? They’re made out of carbon, oxygen and hydrogen. We live on carbon’

‘Those old Star Trek films,’ said Granny Annie, ‘always refer to humans as "carbon-based life forms". So they were right. And witches have found a way to loosen the bonds of the earth. That could be how them things work. Earth is carbon, isn’t it?’

‘Yes, mostly. Now we just need to find a way to heat the witch repellents from a safe distance. I wonder...’

‘Do you have an idea, Emily?’

‘It wouldn’t work.’

‘What is it?’

‘I was thinking about hairdryers. They blow out heat, but it wouldn’t be strong enough. And they need electricity.’

‘Not to worry. We can put a multiplication spell on a hairdryer to make it stronger. And electricity isn’t a problem. Remember our car? We can put a little bit of magic in them to make them work anywhere.’

‘Fantastic!’ cried Emily. ‘Now, where are your hairdryers?’

Granny Annie and the other witches stared at her blankly.

‘Witches don’t have hairdryers, Emily,’ said Granny Annie. ‘We wash our hair only with rain water and we let it dry naturally. Now that I think about it, the All-Seeing Eye has a hairdryer. She takes her appearance far too seriously, we think.’

‘So can we get a loan of hers?’ asked Emily.

‘I don’t see why not. You keep working on your research and I’ll ask her. She’s still flaked out in the front room. Granny Smith will make some hang sangwiches to keep us going.’

The All-Seeing Eye, still faint and swooning, gave Granny Annie the passwords, access spells and keys to her house and Annie went off like the clappers to fetch her hairdryer. Meanwhile, Emily kept searching the Witches’ World Wide Web for information. She discovered that they would need only to neutralise two of the witch repellents to get through the cordon, because they had a limited range of just a few metres.

Farmer Blue turned up with his friends,

each with a rifle and dog, mainly cocker spaniels, all eager to help. They ate ham sandwiches and gulped mugs of hot, thick tea while they waited for action. It was ten to nine in the morning.

‘I have it!’ cried Granny Annie, bursting through the door with the hairdryer in her hand.

‘Let’s magic it,’ said Granny Smith.

They placed the hairdryer on the talking table and all the witches gathered round. Concentrating hard, they combined their powers to put the best multiplication spell and the strongest self-powering spell possible on the little device.

‘So what’s the plan?’ asked Emily.

Everybody looked at her blankly. Then she knew it was up to her to come up with the plan.

‘Okay,’ she began, ‘we approach from beside the lake, that’s where he’ll least expect us. We neutralise the witch repellents and the men with the guns surround the huts. Then I’ll go in and confront him and order him to free

the boys.'

'Oh, Emily. Are you sure?' asked Granny Smith.

'It's the only way, granny. Besides, I won't be on my own, will I?'

'No, you won't,' came the chorus of voices.

So they set off for the mine and the lake. Some of the witches flew on their broomsticks, some drove. The men travelled in Landrovers, their dogs yelping all the way. Emily went in the station wagon with her two grannies, both as pleased as punch with their granddaughter's bravery.

Everybody gathered beside the lake, just as the evil schoolmaster's first lesson of the day began. He always started with double maths. It was a pleasant morning with a clear, blue sky and barely a breeze. Emily held the magicked hairdryer tightly and, at a nod from Granny Annie, aimed it at the nearest witch repellent. She switched it on and, after a few seconds, black smoke rose from the tree stub. Then she went to the next device and incinerated that

too.

The men and their dogs moved forward and took up positions around the cluster of wooden huts beside the black lake. Emily and the witches calmly walked up to the hut which had grey smoke coming from its chimney, assuming that was where the boys were being held. Emily walked up the wooden stairs and knocked on the door, rat-atat-tat. After a few seconds, the evil schoolmaster himself opened the door and stepped out. He sniffed the air, looked around cautiously, then jumped back inside, slamming the door shut behind him. Emily looked back at the witches, hiding in the shadows, and shrugged her shoulders. Granny Smith made a Go on motion, so Emily knocked again.

Again, he opened the door, but this time he made to grab Emily, thinking he had another prisoner for his evil classroom. But Farmer Blue aimed his rifle and shot the evil schoolmaster in his shoulder. He fell backwards onto the floor, roaring in pain. Emily pushed past him into the smelly, dark hut as the rest of

the witches and hunters rushed forward.

‘Malcolm! Are you alright?’ He looked pathetic, chained to his desk and pale with hunger.

‘I’m okay,’ he replied feebly.

Emily looked around and saw Roger and the other boys, each chained, each looking pale and sick, but with their eyes lighting up with joy. Farmer Blue came in behind her and put his foot on the evil schoolmaster’s chest, his rifle aimed at Seamus’s Mór’s shocked face.

The children were released and brought into the village for a slap-up feed of roast beef, roast potatoes, peas and gravy, with strawberry mousse and ice cream for dessert, plus as many sweets from Mrs Reilly’s shop as they could carry. In the end, they were all fine. The evil schoolmaster ended up in a mental hospital, where he could do no more harm. Anyway, the witches are keeping a good eye on him.

And as for Emily and Roger, they went home, back to the big city. And even though their new home was huge, with a massive garden, a treehouse and a jacuzzi, they constantly

pestered their mum and dad for another holiday with their grannies. And let's just say that Emily, with her magic spells, never had to do her homework again. Never ever.

Emily found that she had more time for Malcolm. They argued less. And their mum and dad seemed happier, kissing each other all the time. Yuk! And so they all lived happily.

# 27

## WHAT HAPPENED TO EDNA



The day before Emily and Malcolm arrived in Castleconnell, Edna was busy in her kitchen. She was working on a surprise for the rest of the witches, a new spell and potion.

‘My word,’ she said to her black and white cat, Speckles. ‘The girls are going to love this. If I can get the mixture right, just one teaspoon and a magic word and I’ll be no bigger than a mouse.’

Speckles watched with curiosity as Edna gathered the potion ingredients. There was frogspawn in a jam jar, lemonade, some bark from a yew tree, bat whiskers, spearmint mouthwash, some leaves and, finally, salt and pepper for seasoning. She put everything into

her little cauldron, a special pot over a gas flame, just perfect for potions. She stirred the mixture for hours, taking a sip here and a sip there, until she was happy with it. As night fell, and Emily and Malcolm's train neared the village, Edna uttered the magic word and took a spoon of potion.

‘Microscopia,’ said Edna.

‘Meow,’ said Speckles, alarmed at the sparks that began to fly from Edna's head and body.

The sparks flashed across the kitchen and Edna began to change. Her cat hid behind a huge African mask as Edna started to shrink. Smaller and smaller she became. When she was no bigger than your hand, the shrinking stopped. Speckles began to eye her with new interest. His little cat brain was confused. His owner had disappeared and what was this? A new kind of mouse?

Edna noticed that her cat was in a crouch, his stalking position. With a tiny gulp, Edna realised the danger. She tried to shout at her cat, but her voice was so tiny. She looked

for somewhere to hide and decided to run to a mouse hole in the skirting board. Just then, the sparks began to fly from her again and she faded in seconds to the size of a pinhead.

‘Must have been because I was tasting the potion so much,’ she said to herself, in a squeaky voice that couldn’t even be heard by an owl.

Speckles searched all over the kitchen for her but, luckily, Edna was too small to be seen. Her fear now was that she would be crushed under Speckles’s huge, clawed feet. She decided to stay away from the mouse hole and searched for a way to let the other witches know what had happened to her. She tut-tutted to herself when she realised that she hadn’t told the others that she was trying a new spell. That was a witch rule, in case something went wrong, like when ordinary people go swimming or climbing mountains.

Then Granny Smith called by to see how she was getting on. She looked all around the house for Edna, calling her name. Edna jumped and waved and screamed, but Granny

Smith couldn't see or hear her. So she left the house, very worried, and reported Edna's mysterious disappearance to the others.

As the whole adventure with the Evil Schoolmaster unfolded, Edna spent her days making a message out of tiny specks of dirt and dust she found on the floor. After much work, she spelt out the word TINY, in letters three centimetres high.

She worried that her message might be too small to be seen or that a draught might blow it away. Suddenly, tiny sparks began to jump from her hands. In an instant, a cloud of sparks filled the kitchen and Edna was back to her normal size. With a grateful sigh, she put the remaining potion away on a high shelf and fed Speckles. Then she went to tell the witches what had happened, vowing to be more thoughtful towards mice and bugs and bats and all the other tiny creatures.

# E

## EPILOGUE



Six months after all the excitement, Emily lay in her bed, wide awake and restless at two in the morning.

She'd gone through the whole running down the beach and finding Johnny Depp washed up, just lying there, fantasy. More than once. He'd look up at her with those dreamy eyes and say 'Shouldn't you be asleep?'

She'd tried the singing inside her head thing, couldn't come up with any reasonable explanation as to why she couldn't fly over the rainbow.

So that didn't work either. Then she rose and stood at the window, watched the clouds skipping across the moon, the night birds floating on the warm air.

'Night birds?' she said. 'Haven't seen those since...'

Something else crossed the moon's silvery face. Something totally weird but utterly familiar.

In seconds, two friendly faces were at the window, their hands gesturing at her to let them in.

'Grannies,' cried Emily, hugging them in turn. 'I've missed you both. More than I would have thought possible. Thanks for coming to visit.'

'Afraid this isn't a social call, dearie,' said Granny Smith, her smile quickly fading.

'Not at all,' said Granny Annie as she pulled a small doll from her cloak pocket. The doll was dressed like a witch, a serious-looking face, black shawl, broomstick in hand. Odd.

'There's a soulcatcher about,' said Granny Smith.

Emily said 'What's a soulcatcher?'

This didn't sound good.

'It's not good,' said Granny Smith. 'She's a restless spirit, goes around the place collecting the souls of witches.'

'That's awful,' said Emily. 'Why would she want to do that?'

'That's something we have to find out.'

And find out fast.'

Emily looked out at the moon again. She felt a flight coming on.

'Do you need my help?' she asked hopefully.

'Yes,' said Granny Annie.

'More than that,' said Granny Smith.

Emily looked at them both, held her palms upright, to say And?

'We're so sorry, darling,' said her grannies together. They looked at each other and continued. 'She's looking for you now.'

'Me?' gulped Emily, the colour draining from her, the fun suddenly gone from the whole bizarre situation.

'This doll,' said Granny Annie. 'It's supposed to represent you. We found it in her lair. She has a kind of shrine to you there.'

'Crikey.'

'It gets worse. Edna's gone missing. We checked her house in case she went and shrunk herself again. Nothing. We think her soul's been captured.'

Emily straightened her back, clenched her fists.

'I don't like the sound of this

soulcatcher at all, at all,' she said. 'Let's go.'  
Granny Annie said 'That's the girl.'  
Granny Smith said 'You're a legend.'  
And off they flew.

**THE END**

(For now!)