

CHAPTER FIVE

ONE LOST CHILD
AND
MERDYN THE WILD

Packed and ready to go, Rose skipped down the stairs past her mother and brother and to the front door.

“Don’t forget extra scraps!” shouted Suzy.

“Get me some for when I get back from work!”

Kris said as he checked that his quiff was still straight. “And I want the low-fat batter!” he added. He knew full well the chip shop had no such thing, but asking made him feel better about himself.

Rose took one last look at her mum sprawled on the couch and Kris staring at himself in the mirror. *Don’t worry, she thought. I’ll save you.*

She imagined for a second that it was a normal household once more. One where Kris wasn’t looking in a mirror twenty-four/seven and her mum could bear to hang up old pictures of the family without bursting into tears. Then she straightened her shoulders, stepped outside and closed the door behind her.

If her mum and brother had paid Rose any attention instead of being wrapped up in themselves, they’d have seen her bulging backpack and Bubbles being pulled along behind her on an extra-long dog lead – though this was less unusual than it sounds. Rose would often

take Bubbles for long walks. They were good for his immune system.

Rose stood on the front doorstep and took a deep breath. She felt like Dick Whittington, except with a guinea pig instead of a cat. Now, which way? She knew that London was *east* of Bashingford and used the compass on her smartphone to orientate herself.

Paris, here we come! she thought.


Now Bashingford is a funny old place. It has the most roundabouts of any town in the world. Plus the whole place is carved out of woodland, so that as soon as you veer off a path, road or roundabout, you are suddenly thrust into woods. And sure enough, it wasn't long before Rose came to the end of a pavement, and the

trees began.

She looked down at her guinea pig.

“We'll just keep going east, Bubbles,” she said with determination.

By way of reply Bubbles laid another tiny poo. He'd been doing this since they left the house; partly because he was frightened to death, and partly in the hope that should they get lost, Rose could follow the poo-trail back to the house, like

Hansel and Gretel. 

Bubbles knew about Hansel and Gretel because he'd spent many a night sitting on Rose's shoulder reading her books with her. Rose liked fairy stories, but Bubbles usually found them too far-fetched, and seriously lacking in guinea-

pig characters.

As they walked on, the wood became more and more dense and the path became more and more *not* a path. The sun was going down and the sky had turned grey. The birds, who had been happily tweeting away, were falling silent. The ground was growing damp and Bubbles was getting wet feet, which were his least favourite kind of feet. It reminded him of when Rose hadn't changed his sawdust for a while, and it had ended up soggy with his own wee. He was very much regretting Rose's decision to run away.

As Rose walked into her fifth invisible spider's web, she began to regret running away too. Maybe her mum was right. Maybe being a singer

was a silly dream. Maybe her dad was wrong. Maybe she wasn't destined for greatness. Maybe she was just going to be normal like everyone else. And what would be so wrong with that?

Well, she answered herself, then everyone will stay unhappy. So keep moving!

The sun was completely gone by now and the wood shrouded in shadows. Rose was getting cold and, to make matters worse, she kept remembering things she'd forgotten, like Bubbles's vitamin C powder. Rose prided herself on always making sure Bubbles was well looked after. He'd never once been to the vet. And now here she was, on the road without his medication. How could she have been so irresponsible? There was no other conclusion;

running away had been a *terrible* idea.

Rose was just about to turn back when she heard a noise behind her.

CRACK.

Her heart stopped beating in her chest, then started beating again moments later in her ears. She had seen enough scary films to know the sound of a twig cracking under someone's foot.

CRICK.

Another sound. Rose bent down to scoop Bubbles into her arms. As she did so, she saw, out of the corner of her eye, a dirty piece of cloth darting behind a bush. Who or what was following her? Was she being hunted by a child-eating dishrag?

Rose turned away from the cloth creature and tried to tiptoe quietly in the other direction. She was chilled to the bone to hear the noise now close behind her.

CRISH, CROSH, CRISH.

Rose figured she had two choices.

1. Run as fast as she could.
2. Turn and face the creature in the hope of scaring it away.

She looked at Bubbles for advice, but he just stared back at her with his wide, vacant eyes and did a poo. Finding Bubbles no help whatsoever, Rose went for option 2.

Quicker than a flash she turned and ...

WHUMP!

She bumped straight into the cloth creature.

A hand shot out and grabbed her wrist. It was a grubby hand with dirty fingernails. It was like something from *Dawn of the Dead* or *Night of the Dead* or one of the many other such films with 'dead' in the title that Kris liked to show her to give her nightmares.

Rose screamed. "Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaargh!"

Given the circumstances, Bubbles would ordinarily have pooped himself again, but it had been a scary day and he had no poos left to poo.

"Child!" shouted the cloth creature, in a low, gruff, man's voice. "I meaneth thou no harm!" He released Rose's wrist and held both hands up in the universal 'I meaneth thou no harm' gesture.

Rose backed away. "Who ... who are you?" she

said. "What do you want?"

At this point, Rose noticed the man's shoes. They were very peculiar moccasin-type things with layers and layers of strapping that went all the way to his knees. His trousers were ... cowhide? Or leather? And he wore a cloak of multicoloured rags.

He raised his arms slowly and stepped into a ray of moonlight that was now poking through the trees. He had a long scraggly beard and matted dark hair with silver bits in it. His hat was pointy on top, and floppy at the sides. And ... black? Purple? It was hard to tell. It looked like it had NEVER been washed.

The same could be said for his face. Rose could make out high cheekbones and a long thin nose.

His features had a quiet dignity. And then there were his piercing blue eyes. You could hardly look at them, they were so dazzlingly blue, like police lights. They were made even more striking by the dirt caked around them, so it looked to Rose like he was wearing dark make-up or eyeliner.

“My name is Merdyn,” said the strange man. “This land be Purgatory?”

“What does ‘purgatory’ mean?” asked Rose.

“‘Tis another word for Hell.”

Rose blurted out a nervous laugh. “Yeah, you’re in the right place. But we call it Bashingford.”

Merdyn tilted his head in a perplexed fashion, much like a dog does when trying to understand a basic command. “Ba-shing-ford,” he said

slowly, stressing each sound like it was a foreign word.

Rose thought him a very peculiar man indeed, but reckoned he meant her no harm. He looked lost. Confused. Perhaps he was homeless or something.

“Where are you from?” she asked.

“I did cometh through the Rivers,” he said, a hint of sadness in his voice. “Sent here against my will. But then, who goeth willingly to Hell?”

“Well, yes. Most people come here against their will,” mused Rose. “Relocating from London mainly. A lot of businesses find it cheaper to ...”

Merdyn’s eyes started to glaze over as she talked. He was looking at something. What was it? Rose stopped talking and tried to follow his

blue-eyed gaze.

He was staring at Bubbles.

Merdyn licked his lips. "Thou have bellytimber!" he said.

"Belly ... what?" said Rose.

"Bellytimber," Merdyn repeated impatiently.

"Food. I am very hungry." He snatched the guinea pig out of her arms. "Build a fire while I killeth it, we can have it with parsley and sage."

He was about to dash Bubbles's head against a tree when Rose grabbed the traumatised animal back and pulled him to her chest.

"This is my pet!" she shrieked. "His name's Bubbles. You can't *eat* him!"

"All right then, what be this?" Merdyn reached over her shoulder and snatched a plastic bag

sticking out of Rose's backpack. It was Bubbles's food pellets. He opened it and started shoving the contents in his mouth. "Hm. 'Tis a little dry but ..."

"That belongs to Bubbles!" Rose said, seizing it back.

"Fine," said Merdyn, irritated. "Then take me to thy lodgings. We will feasteth there. I shall taketh refuge with thee while I endeavoureth to escape this dread place and get back home."

"Erm, excuse me. You're not staying at my house," said Rose, alarmed. "I don't even know you!"

"Worry not, little one, I have monies. Much monies." He dived into a pouch around his belt and flung some dirty old lumps at Rose. They

looked like ... pebbles?

“Right,” said Rose. “For a start, that isn’t money. And for a finish ...” She wasn’t sure where to finish. “Look, I wish I could help you, but I’ve got problems of my own, OK? So. Goodbye.”

She lowered Bubbles to the ground and set off in what she hoped was the direction of home. But Merdyn blocked her path.

“Youngling, please. I have other things to trade with,” he said. “I could help thee with thy ‘problems’.”

“How can *you* possibly help me?” asked Rose. “You look like you can barely help yourself.”

Merdyn pulled a highly offended face. “How DARE thee? I am Merdyn the Wild, destroyer of

enemies. The greatest warlock who ever liveth!

ALL THOSE WHO KNOWETH ME, KNEEL BEFORE ME!” he finished with gusto.

“What’s a warlock?” asked Rose.

“A warlock, I ought not to have to tell thee, is capable of great and powerful magic.”

“Oh,” said Rose. “Like a wizard?”

“Pah!” spat Merdyn. “Wizards be woolly-hearted fools. A warlock serveth only the powers of darkness.”

“Like a bad witch?” offered Rose sensibly.

“Nay!” cursed Merdyn, even more annoyed at this suggestion than the wizard one. “Bad witches be ugly, smelly, uncouth hags!”

“You don’t smell so great yourself,” said Rose, wafting her hand under her nose to illustrate. “And why do you speak in that weird way?”

“What meaneth thou?”

“That for example. What’s with the thous and thys? Are you an actor?”

“An actor?” Merdyn was stunned at the insolence of this child. (Actors were considered the lowest of the low in the Dark Ages, quite rightly in my opinion. But I digress ...) Did the child not know the dangers that could befall a person who insulted a warlock? Then Merdyn realised something terrible.

“Thou believeth me not,” he said quietly. In his land, EVERYBODY knew Merdyn the Wild. Everybody feared him. But now, here, he was ...

a nobody.

Rose shrugged. “Of course I don’t believe you.” Then she had an idea. “Tell you what. If you’re some kind of magician or whatever, then show me something.”

Merdyn looked downcast. Without his lovingly crafted magical staff, Thundarian, he could not perform his most spectacular spells.

“Thought so,” said Rose, reading his body language. “Come on, Bubbles.” She tugged on Bubbles’s lead and they set off.

“Wait!” cried Merdyn, suddenly remembering that he didn’t need his staff for basic magic. All he had to do was recall his first year at the School of Alchemy. “There is something I can show thee. A morsel. A crumb. A shrew¹.”

And with that, he grabbed what looked to Rose like some leaves or herbs from pockets around his belt. Then he began scurrying around the wood collecting bits of shrub, mushrooms and spiders' webs and crushing them in his hand. To Rose, he looked like a complete lunatic, crawling around on his hands and knees, getting excited about grass and rubbish.

Finally, he stood upright, held a pinecone in the air and whispered a bizarre incantation.

**“PRIMULA VERIS,
SPEAKINSIDEOUTSIDE
VIBERNUM OPULUS!”**

Bubbles looked at Rose as if to say, “Who is this nut job?”

“SAMBUCA NIGRA FRUCTUS!”

Merdyn continued much louder. Then with great fanfare he threw the crushed mixture over the pinecone and held it proudly aloft.

“Well, thanks for that,” said Rose, thinking that was the end of the trick. “Very, er, impressive.”

But Merdyn wasn't finished. He snatched Bubbles from her once again.

Rose lashed out with her fists. “What are you going to do? Try and eat him again?”

But Merdyn simply held her back by her forehead while she flailed wildly. “Cease thy protestations, girl. And listen ...”

Merdyn pressed the pinecone gently against

the guinea pig's head.

A strange sound began to emerge. At first, it sounded like someone talking on a distant radio. Then it became louder. Intrigued, Rose leaned into the pinecone. And when she did, she could hardly believe her ears.

“What’s happening?” said a tiny voice. “Hang on. Why is my voice sounding outside my head? Ooh, I’m freaking out. I knew this was a mistake! I wanna be home in my cage! I wanna be home in my cage!”

Rose’s mouth fell open like a goldfish. “Whose voice is that?” she asked.

“Why, thy rat’s. ’Tis his inner voice,” said Merdyn.

“Rat’? Who are you calling a rat?” complained

Bubbles’s inner voice. “Oh, I’m so confused. I feel a poo coming on. I’m-gonna-poo-I’m-gonna-poo-I’m-gonna - poo-I’m-gonna ...” Then, of course, Bubbles did a poo.

Rose was astonished! It was Bubbles’s voice all right. This was *exactly* what she imagined he’d sound like. She looked at the strange, smelly, scruffy man with the bright blue eyes standing in front of her. “OK. So ... you’re a wizard,” she said slowly.

“Warlock!” snapped Merdyn. “Now, listen to me. I must get back to my world. Thou art from this hellish place, thou can help me navigate it. What I have just shown thee is but the pips of an apple. If thou helpeth me, I have the power to give thee thy heart’s desire. Believe me, I can do

it. I am no hufty tufty².”

“Hm. Could you make me a great singer?” Rose asked, excited suddenly.

“Of course,” replied Merdyn. “If that really is what thou wanteth.”

“Being a singer *is* what I wanteth! I mean, want.”

“So be it. If thou helpeth me, I shall make thee a singing spell. Thou shall sing like an angel. No one will ever have heard the like!”

“Then we have a deal,” said Rose. She grasped Merdyn’s outstretched, dirty hand – albeit reluctantly – and shook.

“Just to be clear,” Bubbles jabbered as they set off home, “nobody’s going to eat me?”

“No, rat,” Merdyn replied. “Not yet anyway.”

And at that, Rose suddenly remembered why her mum had sent her out in the first place.

“Oh blimey!” spoke poor Rose’s lips:

“I forgot the fish and chips!”

Notes

¹ Not literally, reader, he just means a small thing.

² A person who likes to talk up his or her abilities: a show-off. Next time you feel like someone is bragging, try calling them a *hufty tufty* and see what happens. Although don’t be surprised if he or she calls YOU a *hufty tufty* back, for being so clever as to have read this book!