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. "Aaaaaaaaaaaaargh!"

Given the circumstances, Bubbles would ordinarily have pooed 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 shrew*."

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

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

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 tufty*."

"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.

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*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!

"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!"

CHAPTER SIX

HORSELESS CARRIAGE IN MY GARAGE!

It was slow going on the main road, because every time a car went past, Merdyn jumped into the hedgerow or behind a bin.

"What be these foul beasts?" he wailed as he picked himself up from the floor for the tenth time.

"Beasts?"

"Aye." Another car roared past, making Merdyn leap behind a lamp post. "There be another. They have wheels instead of legs and emitteth a rancid stench from their back pipes."

Rose looked at him. Now what was he on about? "Don't you have cars where you come from?" she asked.

"Caaars?" said Merdyn, stressing the word weirdly again.

"Yes. People use them to travel around."

"Ah. 'Tis a carriage!" Merdyn deduced. "But has no horses?"

"Horses?" Rose laughed. "Well, no. It has an engine though, you know . . . you start it. With a key?"

"Huh," said Merdyn quietly to himself. "Purgatory gets stranger and stranger . . ."

A moment later, Rose's smartphone went off in her bag, playing Beyoncé's "Crazy in Love" as usual.

"Ye gods!" cried Merdyn, slamming his hands over his ears. "What be that caterwauling?"

Rose stopped walking and pulled out her phone. Her mum's face appeared on the screen.

"Where's the fish and chips, love?" Suzy complained immediately.

Merdyn could not believe his eyes. He stared at the tiny woman, trapped in the little black square before him. "What black magic be this?" he whispered in horror.

"Yeah. Sorry, Mum, I got a bit . . . er . . . delayed," said Rose, blissfully unaware of Merdyn's mounting terror.

"Well, hurry up, will you? I'm starving here!"

"OK, I'll—"

Rose had barely begun her sentence when Merdyn GRABBED the phone from her hand and THREW it on to the pavement with great force. The screen smashed instantly. CRACK!

"Wha—? Stop!" Rose screamed.

But the wizard-warlock wasn't finished yet. He JUMPED and STAMPED on the phone for all he was worth, breaking it into tiny pieces. Then he threw himself to the ground and sifted frantically through the shattered glass and plastic with his fingers.

He looked up at Rose, bemused. "Where did she go?"

"Where did WHO GO?" yelled Rose. She couldn't remember a time she had been angrier. That phone was expensive! She NEVER took it to school in case something happened to it, and now this IDIOT had smashed it to smithereens.

"Why, the wicked witch in the box?"

"That was my mum! She was just at home!"

"Thy mother *liveth* in that tiny box?" said Merdyn, aghast. "What happened? A hex? A curse? Did she fall foul of another wicked witch?"

"What? No! Stop talking about witches!" said Rose. "She wasn't IN the box, you idiot. It's a smartphone."

"Even I knew that," Bubbles chimed in squeakishly. "And I'm a guinea pig."

Merdyn looked at Rose, dumbfounded. "A . . . startfoam?"

"Smartphone," Rose repeated.

"Startfoam," he said again, stubbornly.

"Smartphone," Rose tried again. "And it cost a LOT of money."

"I told you. I have monies."

Merdyn threw some more dirty pebbles at the livid Rose, which did NOT help. Rose threw the stones right back at him. Merdyn couldn't help pondering how odd it was that he had fought marauding murderers and crusading conjurors, but that was nothing compared to the wrath of this twelve-year-old girl. She must have really liked that startfoam.

"This singing spell had better make me REALLY famous!" Rose yelled, before picking up the broken phone pieces and putting them in her bag.

They walked in silence the rest of the way to the fish and chip shop. Rose got some for herself, her mum and Kris and, her anger finally subsiding, for Merdyn too.

She wondered how she was going to explain her new companion. It would be OK, she figured. As long as Merdyn didn't smash Mum's phone, or hog the TV, or eat her chocolates, she imagined she'd be fine with a warlock staying in the shed for a while. *Though I won't say* warlock, thought Rose. *I'd best say* wizard. *Sounds less*, *erm . . . kill-y.*

When they arrived back at Daffodil Close, Rose tiptoed down the little path between her house and Dion's garage, with Merdyn behind her.

"Now listen. I need to persuade my mum to let you stay for a while," she whispered. "Are you happy to sleep in there?"

She pointed at the little shed in the Falveys' garden.

It was a basic affair with a peeling green roof, small door and window.

"It is a paltry abode but, being in Hell, I suppose I cannot expect a castle," said Merdyn.

"Er . . . exactly," said Rose. "So, just wait here."

Inside the house Rose found her mum exactly where she had left her. The talent show had finished and now she was watching a documentary about Marilyn Monroe.

"You took your time," Suzy said, barely looking up.

"I bumped into someone," said Rose.

NOW Suzy looked up. "I thought I heard another voice when I called you! Who was it? Not a stranger? What did I tell you about talking to strangers?"

"He's not a stranger," said Rose. "Well, he is quite strange. And kind of full of himself. But he's nice at heart, I think. Well, I'm not sure about that but . . . the thing is, he's . . . he's a . . ."

"Spit it out, Rose," said her mum, impatiently.

"He's a . . . he's a wizard," Rose managed, finally.

Suzy was so shocked she even paused the documentary about Marilyn Monroe.

Outside, Merdyn saw Rose's next-door neighbour, Dion, emerging from the side door of his garage, having finished tinkering with his beloved car for the night. Dion jumped out of his skin when he saw Merdyn, but he didn't want to get into a conversation with an extra from *The Lord of the Rings*, so he just nodded and dashed into his house.

As he did so, Merdyn saw something drop from his pocket and lie among the paving stones, shining in the moonlight. Merdyn liked shiny things, so he bent down to pick it up.

It was a small black box. As Merdyn studied it, pressing and prodding, he heard a muffled noise from inside the garage. BOOP BOOP!

The clever reader, which I think we have already established you are, will recognise this sound as the noise made when unlocking a car remotely. But to Merdyn it sounded like a bird call.

Being a curious type, the warlock opened the little side door of the garage and went in. Once inside, he could see that it wasn't a bird at all, but a *caaar*. Since Rose had explained that they were just horseless carriages, Merdyn wasn't scared of them any more. In fact, he found this carriage rather beautiful. It had a picture of a huge eagle on its front, and the moonlight streaming through a window made it gleam like a giant gemstone.

Merdyn ran his hand down its side. *So shiny*, *so smooth*, *so cold*. He noticed a handle and instinctively pulled it. A door popped open. The leather seat inside looked very inviting, so he sat in it.

There was a round thing in front of him. Weirdeth. Why have a wheel *inside* the carriage? Then he remembered Rose saying something about a key. Could the silver shard chained to the little black box be a key? Merdyn held it up in front of his face.

'Tis a small and dainty key, *but a key nonetheless*, he thought. *Now where does it go . . .?*

In the lounge, Rose was still fending off questions from her irate mum.

"You met a vagrant in the woods? And you want him to live in the shed? Have you gone completely potty?"

"But Mum, he can do magic! He made Bubbles talk! Listen . . ."

Rose pressed the pinecone against her guinea pig's head. There was a long silence.

"Come on, Bubbles. I couldn't shut you up five minutes ago!" Rose begged. Bubbles just stared at her with vacant eyes. "He was talking earlier," Rose told her mum, smiling desperately. This was going even worse than she had expected. Suddenly the possibility that she would soon have a magic singing spell and transform everyone's lives for the better seemed very remote.

Rose's mum had seen Rose do some eccentric things in her time, but this behaviour was on another level. "I knew this would happen," she said, shaking her head. "You've gone mad. I've read about it. This can happen to children who've suffered sudden changes . . ."

Rose was about to interject when they were interrupted

by the sound of a revving car engine.

VROOM-VROOOOOOOM.

It was an odd noise. Dion never revved the engine of the Pontiac Firebird so loudly. He knew that such high revs per minute would damage the pistons. Was this . . . something to do with Merdyn?

No sooner had this worrying thought entered Rose's head than it was confirmed. She heard a crank of gears, followed by a loud explosion that sounded not unlike a car crashing through a garage door. SMASH!

Rose and her mum rushed to the front window just in time to see Dion's beloved $100,000 Pontiac Firebird hurtling backwards across the road, swerving and snaking and screeching as it went.

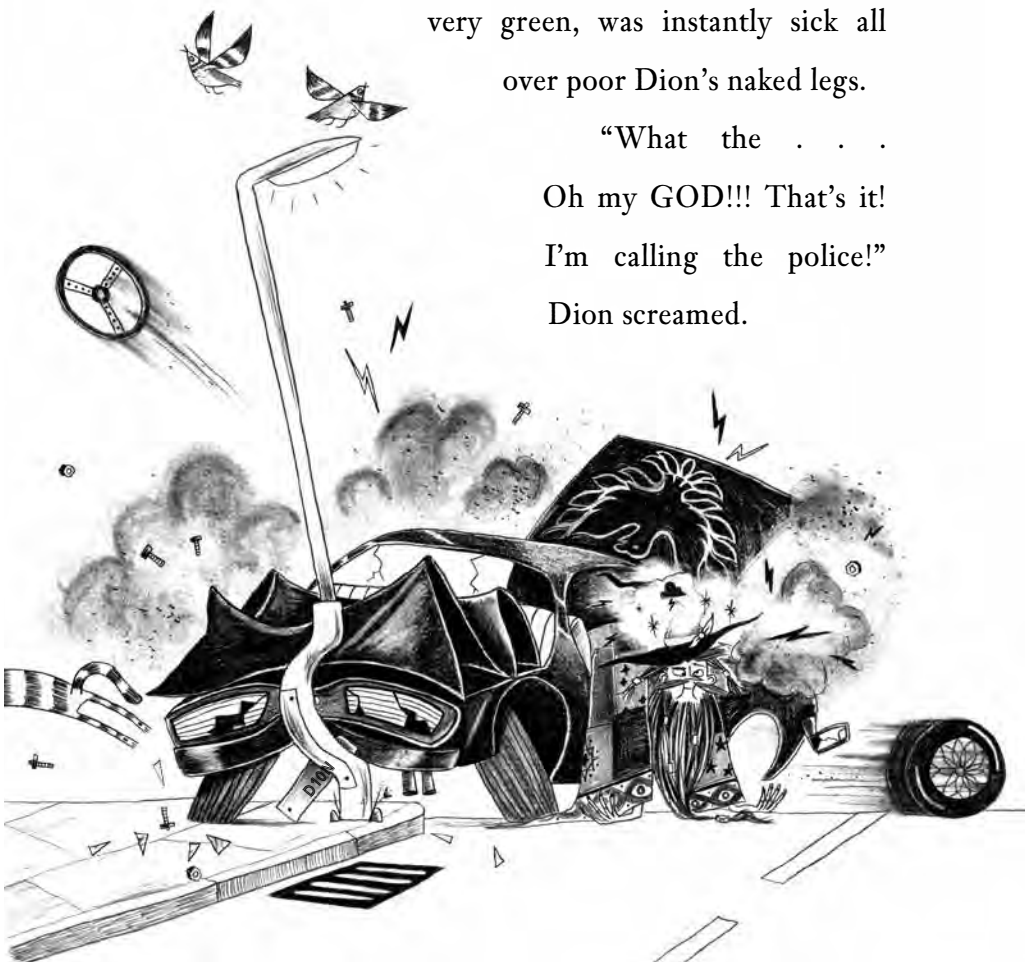
As it whizzed past, Rose glimpsed Merdyn at the wheel looking sick and screaming at the top of his lungs. The car swerved one last time, then thumped into a lamp post. CRUNCH!

The boot (or 'trunk' as they call it in America) crumpled up like an accordion.

Two seconds later, Dion's front door flew open. The postie had bare feet, and he was wearing nothing but a dressing gown. He'd been in the bath watching *Titanic* on his iPad when he'd heard his car fire up. Now he was pelting across the road leaving foamy bubbles in his wake, screaming, "My car! My beautiful car!"

He reached the car-wrapped lamp post and yanked open the driver's door. Merdyn, who looked very green, was instantly sick all over poor Dion's naked legs.

"What the . . . Oh my GOD!!! That's it! I'm calling the police!" Dion screamed.



Rose and her mum watched the whole thing unfold like a – well, like a car crash, from behind the window of their front room. Eventually, Suzy turned to Rose.

"Is that your wizard, by any chance?" she said.

"Actually, he's more of a warlock," replied Rose, meekly.

A phone and now a car,
crushed like a toy.
How many more things
could Merdyn destroy?