

Chapter One

Donna Noble was flicking through the pages of a magazine while the Doctor bustled around the central control console of his timeship, the TARDIS, peering at readings on the instruments below its green-illuminated glass.

‘Is this a spoof magazine?’ she said, wrinkling her nose. ‘Because apparently at some point in the future the entire UK loses its mind because a shop starts selling meat-free sausage rolls.’

‘What year’s that from?’ the Doctor asked.

Donna consulted the cover. ‘2019.’

‘Yeah, if you think that’s crazy, whatever you do don’t look at anything from 2020 . . .’

The Doctor returned to the console, comparing figures and consulting a database. ‘Carbury,’ he said. ‘Carbury, Carbury, Carbury. Rings a bell . . .’

‘Chocolate buttons,’ said Donna, still half focused on her magazine.

‘No . . .’

‘Easter eggs?’

‘No . . .’

‘Do they still make the rum-and-raisin one?’

‘That’s not –’

Now she was getting enthusiastic. ‘We’ve got a time machine! Back to the seventies, stock up on Pacers and Horror Bags, bung ’em on eBay, make a fortune!’

‘Donna!’ The Doctor spun round and looked at her over the top of his black-rimmed glasses. ‘This has nothing to do with chocolate. Or snacks of any kind!’ he added, seeing that she was about to argue. ‘I’m tracking some sort of energy signal, and it’s coming from a place called Carbury. Village in the West Country. I’m trying to . . .’ He hit the side of his head with his palm. ‘King Arthur! That’s it. Had a bit of a ding-dong with a load of knights a while back. That was at Carbury.’

Donna stared at him. ‘Are you trying to tell me that you’ve met King Arthur?’

‘No! No, no, no, no.’ Donna’s initial look of incredulity started to fade, until the Doctor continued, ‘Met his sister, though. And her son. Had a bit of a play with Excalibur.’

‘And I suppose you fought the dragon, too.’

It was the Doctor’s turn to look confused. ‘I . . . think that’s Saint George. Round table, yes. Lady of the Lake, yes. Dragons – not so much.’

‘Oh, all right . . . Merlin! Pointy hat, big white beard. He’s definitely part of it. Did you meet Merlin, then?’

The Doctor stared downwards, as though extremely interested in every square millimetre of his canvas sneakers.

Donna nearly exploded. ‘You are *kidding* me! You mean *you* are Merlin . . .’ She trailed off, shaking her head. ‘No way. No. Way.’

Best friends, that was the Doctor and Donna Noble. They'd been travelling together for a while now, taking in everything from Ancient Pompeii to alien worlds in the far future. But Donna was no artless child, accepting each new delight with breathless wonder. Oh, she trusted the Doctor with her life – the feeling, she knew, was mutual – and the things she'd experienced alongside him had brought her to tears of both awe and grief. But she'd never quite got the hang of being with someone who'd casually drop into conversation that he'd been at the Gunfight at the O.K. Corral or had hung out with Shakespeare, and her initial reaction tended to be along the same lines as when the new office temp claimed to have been in the SAS or once had a date with Lady Gaga. It wasn't that she didn't believe the Doctor; it was just that the 'yeah, right' reflex was hard to suppress. So the idea that the Doctor – the *actual* Doctor, her *actual friend* the Doctor – was not only a mythical wizard but the most famous mythical wizard in existence was at the same time ridiculous, hilarious and totally plausible.

The Doctor was trying to explain – although whether it made things clearer or just more confusing was up for debate. 'That was, ooh, late nineties, your time. Various knights, as well as the sorceress Morgaine, crossed over into our dimension and nearly started a nuclear war – yes, really,' he added as Donna's eyes opened wide, 'and, er, well, it turned out they'd met me before, and according to them I was . . . Merlin.'

Donna's eyes were so wide now that they began to hurt. 'What else haven't you told me?' she demanded. 'Are you Robin Hood? Or the Wizard of Oz? Are you *Bigfoot*?'

But the TARDIS had landed, and the Doctor seemingly failed to hear her questions. Not listening to each other had turned out to be a remarkably good way of keeping the peace inside the ship. Now the Doctor was flitting around the central console, checking dials and adjusting instruments. ‘I thought it would be clearer once we arrived,’ he said. ‘But I still can’t tell what type of energy this is.’

‘Can’t you wave your magic wand and find out?’ asked Donna. She was watching the scanner screen, which showed what was currently outside the TARDIS doors: a wide, lonely lake.

‘Lake Vortigern, if I remember correctly,’ the Doctor said, but his concentration was on his instruments, not the outside. ‘The energy’s very powerful, whatever it is,’ he went on.

‘Doctor . . .’

‘Something I’ve come across before, maybe? Not sure . . .’

‘Doctor!’

This time he realised she needed him to actually hear what she was saying. ‘What?’

‘We’re moving.’

‘No, we’re not. Look at the readings . . .’

‘Look at the *scanner!*’

He joined her. The lake on the screen was getting bigger and bigger – or rather they were getting nearer and nearer to it.

Something was pulling them in.

‘I’m going to try to take off again!’ the Doctor told Donna. He dived back to the controls, frantically flipping

switches, but things were clearly getting worse, not better. ‘It’s not working! We’re losing power!’

‘I hope we’re waterproof!’ shouted Donna above the desperate grinding of the TARDIS’s engines as they struggled to resist the mysterious force. The screen showed almost nothing but water now, which meant they were almost on top of it.

The way the TARDIS’s inner and outer dimensions were connected meant its passengers shouldn’t have felt the hard, belly-flopping *splash!* as the TARDIS hit the lake surface at all – but they did. Donna went flying across the control room, and ended up hanging over the fork of one of the coral-like structures that circled the area, her long red hair falling over her face – an abandoned rag doll thrown into a tree. The Doctor had caught hold of the console and was trying to stay on his feet. All the scanner showed now was water, with the occasional confused fish whooshing past.

The TARDIS kept moving. Suddenly the view on the monitor changed. It showed . . . glitter. Sparkling, scintillating glints of light. Donna had pulled herself up now, and was blinking at the brightness on display. ‘What’s this, some sort of underwater disco?’

‘We’re not underwater. In fact, I don’t think we’re even in Carbury any more,’ said the Doctor.

‘So where are we then?’ Donna kept shooting glances at the screen, a few blinding seconds at a time. She tried to force herself to look more closely. There were shapes within the radiance, hints of – what? Figures? Worlds?

‘The energy we were tracking. It’s a billion times stronger here. A trickle must have escaped from this place, made its way through the lake and into Carbury. But whether that was an accident, or a lure thrown out to draw us in . . .’

‘Oh great,’ said Donna. ‘A trap.’

‘Not necessarily. But we are still losing power.’

‘A trap we can’t escape from!’ said Donna. ‘That’s even better!’

The Doctor was still flicking switches on the console; still trying to resist whatever force had pulled them in and was pulling them onwards. His eyes were narrowed, and his teeth clenched as though he was using his own strength to heave them backwards instead of the TARDIS’s remaining power. The lights in the control room dimmed, although the glaring scanner screen meant it was a long way from being dark. ‘I’m rerouting everything,’ he said. ‘All nonessential power. Lights, heat, everything. But it’s draining away as fast as I can find it!’



The lights in the TARDIS began to flicker. First the orange that surrounded the Doctor and Donna, covering walls and ceiling, and then the marine-like blues and greens swimming through the console itself, all fading into darkness.

‘One . . . last . . . chance . . .’

There was a note of desperation in the Doctor’s voice that Donna had never heard before, and it was that tone that made her panic. Nervously she asked, ‘What are you going to do?’

He didn't answer, which worried her even more. Then he abruptly yelled, 'Hold tight!'

Donna obeyed, grabbing hold of one of the branches of the coral-like architecture and hugging it with both arms. The TARDIS flung itself from side to side, trying to escape the force. The coruscating lights on the scanner screen grew to an even more painful brightness.

Suddenly the light shattered. Donna had an impression of diamond fragments, a Roman candle shooting huge, impossible stars; she flinched to avoid flying shards then realised that it was only the light that had broken, not the scanner itself. There was a confusion of brightness, sparkling like sunlight on the sea – and then the incandescence was gone.

The TARDIS was still. Even so, Donna stayed hugging the structure for over a minute, just in case. 'We've landed,' she said eventually. 'Haven't we?' The brilliance had affected her vision and she could see little more than floating red spots in front of her eyes, but the utter silence suggested they'd arrived somewhere.

'Well, technically we weren't exactly in flight . . .' the Doctor said, but it was clearly an automatic answer, not part of their usual pedantic banter. 'Oh, this is not good.'

As soon as her vision had cleared, Donna gingerly peeled her arms off the support and joined the Doctor at the console. The scanner was showing an idyllic scene of sun-kissed meadows and distant hills. 'Doesn't look too bad,' she said, trying to lighten the mood. 'Looks like where we used to go on camping holidays when I was a kid. There'll be a shop selling souvenir spoons and strawberry Mivvis round that corner.'

A few of the controls on the central console were illuminated, and Donna looked over the Doctor's shoulder to see what he was looking at: a little meter, its needle leaning far to the left. 'Are we out of petrol? Time-petrol. Whatever.' She glanced back at the scanner. 'I don't believe it. This *is* just like being on holiday in Wales. Out of petrol and now it's coming up foggy.' Wisps of mist were floating across the screen. Then the scanner started to flicker. 'And now the TV's gone wrong! It's Porthmadog 1978 all over again.'

The screen went dead.

All at once, the remaining lights on the console went off. There was now no light at all. The Doctor whipped out his sonic screwdriver, and its glow revealed the expression on his face. It wasn't worried as such; it was different. Deeper. He went to the far side of the console and stood there for a moment. Then, as though about to cross the Rubicon – an act that would seal his fate forever – he reached out and touched a panel.

'This shouldn't open,' he said quietly. 'This *won't* open.' It sounded like he was trying to convince himself.

He was wrong. The panel eased itself open, coming to a stop when nearly vertical.

Donna joined him. But even with the light from the sonic she couldn't see what was inside the compartment. 'What is it?' she whispered.

'The heart of the TARDIS,' the Doctor said. 'A link to the power of the time vortex. I drew on it directly to pull us out of . . . wherever we were.'

'It worked, though,' said Donna. 'Didn't it?'

‘It did. It got us out of there. And now it’s all gone.’

The Doctor slammed down the console panel. Then, taking a deep breath, he pulled the door control.

The main doors should have gently opened, revealing the world beyond. They didn’t.

‘Are we trapped?’ Donna was still whispering, gripped by an irrational feeling that speaking too loudly would damage the TARDIS further.

‘Do you want the good news or the bad news?’

‘Oh, hit me with the bad news, why not.’

He shrugged. ‘We can’t get out. We can’t take off. And the food machine won’t work without power. No food or water.’

She raised her eyebrows. ‘The good news better be bloomin’ good.’

‘Er, yeah, about that. The good news is – we’ll have frozen to death long before we starve. If we’re really lucky, the oxygen will cut out and spare us from even that.’

‘Ever thought of getting a job putting the little notes in fortune cookies?’ Donna replied, aghast. ‘That’d be a right laugh. “Today is the day to step on a rake.” “There is nothing to fear but fear itself, so enjoy being frozen to death.”’ She stopped, realising he was being deliberately flippant to make her feel angry rather than scared, and that made her even more scared. Fear crashed over her in an ice-cold wave. ‘My chest feels tight. Like my lungs are trying to suck in an elephant.’

‘Don’t talk.’

Donna exploded. She was too afraid now to control her emotions. ‘I’m about to suffocate and you want me to keep *quiet?*’

He held the sonic screwdriver up to his face so she could see the promise in his eyes. ‘Conserve your oxygen. I’m going to get us out of this,’ he said firmly, keeping his gaze locked with hers. Then he turned and hurried off out of the control room and deeper into the impenetrable darkness of the ship.

Donna remained where she was, taking shallow, shuddering breaths. She was trying to stay calm. Trying really hard. Breathe in, breathe out. Breathe in, breathe out. But panic was fighting its way back into her brain. The TARDIS no longer felt like a safe place. The darkness made everything eerie: those coral structures were now looming monsters; the console and the huge column that sprang from it were ghostly shadows. She wanted to run after the Doctor but knew she’d get lost in the TARDIS’s maze of corridors, maybe forever. Along with passages leading to probably a million bedrooms, the TARDIS also had wardrobes, a swimming pool, a library (which is where she’d picked up the magazine that now lay discarded somewhere on the pitch-black floor) and who knew what else. Exploring it had been fun – it was like trying out all the facilities at a luxury hotel. But now the ship felt both terrifyingly vast and bizarrely claustrophobic at the same time. The darkness seemed to have weight, crushing her, pressing her down.

This wasn’t like running away from monsters. This was a different kind of fear.

Donna wasn’t used to second-guessing herself. She was confident, self-assured, a person who blithely sailed through life without doubting herself.

Or that's what most people thought. It was even what Donna thought. But being with the Doctor – it was changing her. In a lot of ways, both good and bad. There'd always been a vast amount of compassion buried beneath her brashness; now it was clearly on display. But other elements of her psyche were being exposed too. She knew about some of the women who'd travelled with the Doctor before her, and she couldn't help feeling she wasn't as good as them. Never afraid, always knowing the right thing to do – that was Rose Tyler and Martha Jones, while she, Donna, just blundered about. Would Rose or Martha be frozen with fear in this situation? Of course not! They'd be working on a solution. The Doctor wouldn't have left *them* behind while he went off to do whatever; he'd have told them to mobivate the flimflammers or something, and they'd have understood instantly, then solved the problem, saved the world and be having celebratory chips by now.

And here she was. Donna Noble, in the dark both literally and figuratively, helpless and hopeless and useless.

But a voice inside her head said, 'Are you a woman or a weevil? Only babies snivel. Find something you can do, and if you can do nothing, at least face your end with dignity.'

And she replied to the voice in her head, saying, 'Yeah, like it's that easy.' But, all the same, she held her head high. She might not be Rose or Martha, but she would handle it.

Then the Doctor hurried back into the control room, and she was so relieved she could have cried, but instead she barked out, 'Well, you took your time,' realising as the words passed her lips that she sounded *exactly* like her mother.

The Doctor had brought back a large metal crank handle, which he now inserted into a hole by the main doors and began to turn. Donna joined him, but he told her again to conserve her oxygen so she stepped back, frustrated at not being able to help, but also relieved – she was feeling lightheaded, her breath was becoming ragged, and she knew she didn't have the strength required.

Slowly, slowly, the doors began to inch open. The contrast between the dark, cold TARDIS and the warm sunlit fields outside was hard to take in. For Donna, finally squeezing herself through the narrow gap, it felt like stumbling into a summer day.

The brightness was painful after the gloom of the TARDIS, and she kept her eyes closed as she threw herself on to the grass and took in deep, grateful breaths of sweet-smelling air. As far as she was concerned it didn't matter if the TARDIS was no longer working, because she was just going to stay lying there forever in the warmth, breathing.

But finally the initial feelings of relief started to retreat, and the worries crept back in. Moving still felt like an effort, so Donna sat on the grass and waited for the Doctor to join her. The view was similar to that they'd seen on the scanner in Carbury: their journey had started at one lake and ended at another. Calm, smooth blue waters dappled with sun reminded Donna of the sparkling lights of the passageway between the two.

The Doctor's face was very serious when he finally sat down beside her; it didn't look like good news was imminent.

When he spoke he didn't seem to be speaking to Donna, but rather talking aloud to himself. 'It's all gone.'

'What has?'

He didn't answer directly. 'It was like bailing out a boat with a hole in it. I managed to keep us afloat long enough to get here – but it took everything we had.'

'The time-petrol – the power, I mean?'

'Yes.'

'Yeah, it'll recharge, though, won't it?'

He shook his head slowly.

'But it's a time machine! It's like this big super-doooper future thing!' She gestured towards the ship, which admittedly did not look either super-doooper or futuristic in its guise of a twentieth-century British police box. 'And you're telling me you don't carry a can of fuel? Or a spare battery? Or have solar panels or something?'

'That's not what I'm telling you,' said the Doctor.

'Well, that's all ri—'

'There are ways for the TARDIS to regain power. If all else fails, it can draw energy from the time vortex itself.'

'I'm sitting here waiting for the "but",' said Donna.

'But it's not working.'

'Why not?'

The Doctor shrugged. 'Something to do with the Druse, I imagine.' Then he frowned. 'I don't know where that came from. The Druse?' He screwed up his face, trying to force the information out of his brain. 'It's on the tip of my mind. Something I used to know, or will know in the future – but it's not there for me now.'

‘How d’you mean, something you will know in the future?’ Donna asked.

“‘I contain multitudes”,’ the Doctor quoted. ‘I have a complex relationship with time – and with myself – and there are so many worlds.’ He was silent for a few long minutes, then visibly pulled himself together – back straightened, head held high. In one swift movement, he hopped to his feet. ‘Books don’t need power!’ he said, and dashed into the TARDIS.

He reappeared shortly afterwards, carrying a huge book bound in red and gold.

‘Love a book,’ he said. ‘Good old books. Don’t need recharging, can’t stop working, even if you drop them in the bath they’ll dry out again. Might get a bit wrinkly, but that happens to the best of us.’

‘Speak for yourself!’ said Donna.

The book’s cover was embossed with the circular characters that made up Gallifreyan writing, and after staring at them for a moment Donna found that her brain knew they read ‘Time Lord Legends for Time Tots’. ‘Time tots?’ she said. ‘Seriously?’

The Doctor waved a hand dismissively and began to riffle through the pages. ‘Here we go!’ he said after a few moments. “‘The Tale of Two Bad Guardians.’”

And he began to read . . .

Chapter Two

“**O**nce upon some times, in a universe before and after our own, two powers existed: the Guardian of Might and the Guardian of Magic. In an endless battle, the Guardian of Might would try to defeat the Guardian of Magic through strength, and she would try to defeat him through cunning. Yet so closely aligned were they that neither could ever triumph.”’

‘Bit sexist,’ said Donna.

‘What?’

‘The big butch fighter’s a bloke, the sneaky one’s a woman! Typical.’

‘Or a template upon which all humanity was based?’ said the Doctor, adding hastily, ‘Joking, joking,’ as Donna’s eyes grew wide and outraged. He quickly turned back to the book. “*The Guardian of Might, known as Arthur, wished for the universe to be ruled by order. The Guardian of –*” Why are you laughing?’

‘Oh come on,’ said Donna. ‘I get “King Arthur”, but outside of that . . . Arthur’s a name for your uncle, not an all-powerful space being. It’s like – what did your lot have?’

‘My lot?’

‘The Time Lords. Before they all disappeared. Was there some sort of Guardian of Time?’

‘We had a president.’

‘Right. And what was their name? The president?’

‘Well . . .’

Donna stared. ‘You are joking. That is exactly how you looked when I asked you about Merlin. *You* are the president of the Time Lords.’

He shrugged. ‘Not any more. I may have been one of them. For a bit.’

‘You were *Mr President The Doctor?*’

‘Lord President. And only briefly.’ The Doctor shrugged. ‘Probably the closest we got to any “Guardian of Time” was someone called Rassilon. He was the founder of the Time Lords.’

‘Rassilon. Right. That works. That’s all spacey sounding. Look. I’ve got an uncle, Bob. Love Uncle Bob. I bet he’d be a brilliant guardian of something or other. Guardian of Bad Jokes. Guardian of Barbecuing. But try saying “Bob, Founder of the Time Lords” or “Lord President Bob”.’

‘The Ring of Bob,’ the Doctor muttered. ‘The Harp of Bob. The Rod of Bob.’ A smile was spreading across his face. ‘The Black Scrolls of Bob!’ He burst out laughing. ‘Yeah, all right, point made.’

It took them both a while to compose themselves enough for the Doctor to return to the story, but finally he continued. ‘“*The Guardian of Might, known as –*” yes – “*Arthur, wished for the universe to be ruled by order. The Guardian of Magic, known as Morgwen, championed the forces of chaos.*”’ He frowned.

‘What?’ said Donna.

‘Morgwen. That’s wrong. It’s usually Morgaine – or Morgan le Fay, Morgana, Morgause . . . It’s interesting, actually.’

‘To you, maybe,’ muttered Donna, but she kept listening.

The Doctor was getting into teacher mode. ‘The Arthurian legends, those on your Earth, anyway, use those interchangeably – or collectively.’

‘You what?’

‘I mean, sometimes there’s one character but she might be called any one of those names. Other times they’re all in the same story as different people – Arthur’s sister, or half-sister, or aunt, the mother of Mordred, the mother of Gawain, a sorceress or priestess, an innocent or a traitor. They take any or all of those parts. Maybe it’s because this Morgwen likes chaos. Harder to pin down if no one’s quite sure what role you play.’

‘You’re talking like this is all real, though,’ said Donna. ‘But that’s a children’s storybook you’ve got there.’

‘I expect it’s based on fact. Us Time Lords like our fiction nonfictional. Or our nonfiction fictional. One or the other. Now, do you want me to go on or not?’

Donna grinned. ‘Yes, please, Mr President The Doctor, sir.’

He narrowed his eyes and gave a mock scowl, but continued reading. “*. . . forces of chaos. The fight continued until their very universe grew close to collapse, but neither would concede. The final hope was Merlin –*”’ The Doctor stopped, confusion flitting across his face. Donna started to say something, but