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# DOCTOR WHO

## 73 YARDS

SCOTT HANDCOCK



DOCTOR WHO

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Based on the BBC television adventure
by Russell T Davies

SCOTT HANDCOCK

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*For Alfred and Bella …*
*One day, your mum might let you read this.*

*Also, for Mum …*
*Who might read this, one day.*

*And for Nan …*
*Who would have been chuffed.*

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# Chapter 1
# The Land and the Sea

*9 November 2024*

It was another brisk, autumnal morning on the west coast of Wales. Imposing limestone cliffs stood defiant against the waves, as they had done for thousands upon thousands of years; they stood tall above the sea, the victim of its eternal push and pull, while their vertical pocks and grooves made it look like they were reaching for the stars.

An orange sun crept out above a vast and endless horizon, peering up to join them. As the freezing waters slammed against the rocks, and a harsh wind buffeted the hiking trails beyond, it offered a misguided promise of warmth.

On the edge of the highest clifftop, the sounds of the sea were drowned out by an even more ancient sound:

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the curious mechanical wheezing that accompanied the rhythmic materialisation of an old police box.

This was the TARDIS – a sophisticated space-time machine from a long-forgotten world – and, while it seemingly managed not to attract attention wherever it might appear, anywhere in the universe, it never looked quite as out of place as it did in that moment, on the top of a remote Welsh clifftop.

A moment later, the doors to the tall blue box snapped open, and out stepped the Doctor. He wore a warm yellow duffel coat over a tight white-and-blue-striped top, and a pair of reliable jeans; the look was then capped off with a simple red beanie on his head. If there was any doubt that he'd been anticipating their current location, his opening exclamation confirmed it.

'Yes!' the Doctor grinned. 'Spectacular! We are in Wales!'

'How can you tell?' His best friend Ruby Sunday followed him outside, closing the TARDIS door behind her. She braced herself against the icy coastal air. Unlike the Doctor, she was a little less certain about where they might have materialised. She'd had enough time to grab a jacket, pulling it on over a cosy orange jumper, but her checked skirt and leggings immediately felt like a very bad decision.

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The Doctor breathed in deeply, enjoying every hit of the salty air.

'That smell,' he sighed contentedly. He gestured to their surroundings. 'That green. That coastline, Ruby!'

Ruby followed his gaze, savouring the serenity. It was a far cry from a world like Kastarion 3. There, they'd emerged from the TARDIS straight onto a battlefield where the sky was thick with fog and stank of smoke. Here, however, everything seemed so fresh: a tiny little corner of Earth, her own small planet, billions of years old, and yet it still felt completely new, as if mankind had yet to discover it.

Ahead of them, she could see miles of bleak countryside, extending into farmland further out. A single, barren tree appeared to have survived the elements, standing stark against the skyline. Its branches had been blasted by the fiercest of coastal winds over a great many decades, giving it the appearance of an umbrella that had been turned inside-out.

Then there was the sea – that majestic, infinite sea – stretching out far into the distance behind them. The only things that suggested its scale were a couple of distant islands. It made Ruby feel so small. People had always said there was so much of Earth we still don't know about, entire worlds and ecosystems hidden

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beneath the waves. Was this how the universe felt to the Doctor? On the surface, it all seemed so simple. But then, when you stopped to consider it – all the currents and tides and depths, constantly changing – there was always something new to explore.

'The rocks and the water, it never ends!' the Doctor cheered. 'The war between the land and the sea.'

Ruby followed as he marched away towards the farmland, negotiating the soft and spongy ground. She thought about where they were. She was so close to home.

'I've been to Wales twice,' she said, trying her best to maintain her footing. 'I went to see Shygirl in Cardiff. Then I went to the Mumbles, when I was 16, because of a boy. I think I broke his heart, but there you go.'

'Oh, bless him,' replied the Doctor. 'Mind you, Roger ap Gwilliam. That's a bad example of the Welsh. Terrifying!' He clapped his hands to reinforce the point. 'The most dangerous Prime Minister in history. He led the world to the brink of nuclear …' He paused. 'What year are you from?'

'2024.'

'Ooh, ha ha. Yikes. He's 2046. Spoilers! Forget I said anything!' He picked up his pace, knowing that Ruby wouldn't let him end it there.

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'No, no, tell me what happened!' she insisted. But they were interrupted by a sudden crump and the faintest metallic chime. Both of them looked to the ground.

'Oh, no no no, what's this?' The Doctor lifted his boot. It had snagged on a strand of cotton, part of a far more intricate design almost seven feet in diameter, not unlike an oversized cobweb.

The Doctor crouched down to inspect it more closely. 'Oh, it's a circle,' he realised.

He followed the pattern round. Strings of thread looped and intersected, supported by twigs and wire, all beautifully intertwined. Some of the threads had trinkets hanging from them – tiny keepsakes and mementoes – ranging from a doll's head to silver toy shoes, love hearts to clothes pegs; others hugged to tiny, rolled-up scrolls containing messages; one even had a chain of bird skulls dangling from it.

'Someone made this,' said the Doctor reverentially, picking up a sprig of dried flowers. 'Sorry, man, sorry. I'm sorry.'

'It's like something made by children,' Ruby added, kneeling beside him. 'Lucky charms and bird skulls. There are messages, look!'

She unfurled one of the scrolls from its thread and

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opened it up. The ink had started to bleed into the paper but she could still make it out.

'*I miss you,*' she read. 'That's all it says.' She opened another. '*Rest in peace, Mad Jack.*' She paused, realising what they must have stumbled into. 'Oh, poor old Mad Jack, bless him. It must be some sort of memorial.'

The Doctor didn't reply. If he had chosen that moment to say something, an unearthly gust of wind had swallowed his words. Ruby turned to face him …

But the Doctor was suddenly nowhere to be seen.

'I said it's like a memorial!' Ruby yelled, trying to get his attention.

But again, the Doctor didn't reply. He must have gone back to the TARDIS, she supposed.

'All right,' sighed Ruby, getting to her feet, 'don't be doing that to me!' She strode over to the TARDIS and tried the door. It wouldn't budge. Even her key refused to open it.

'It's locked,' shouted Ruby, calling up at the TARDIS windows. Was it just her imagination, or did they seem darker than usual? 'You've locked it from the inside. Can you hear me?' Then a new thought struck her: a reason why the Doctor might have snuck away without saying. 'I hope you're not having a pee round the back …'

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With just the right level of warning, she ventured round to the back of the TARDIS. But her relief at being wrong was swapped out for a growing sense of dread. If the Doctor wasn't here or inside the TARDIS, where was he?

She stumbled back to the front of the TARDIS instead. In his distinctive yellow duffel coat, she was bound to spot him somewhere, even if he had wandered off without her. But no, there was still no sign. Just miles of sea and rolling countryside and …

Wait, was that someone else out there with them?

Ruby squinted. Some distance away was a figure. Not the Doctor – he'd have stood out like a beacon – but someone new. Someone who hadn't been there when they'd first landed.

It looked like a woman with long white hair – an old woman, perhaps? – dressed in black, standing merrily where she was. She seemed to be staring at Ruby. But then, Ruby was also staring at her.

Had they been trespassing, Ruby wondered?

But the stranger didn't seem to be angry. She wasn't advancing or raising her voice. Instead, she just stood there, watching. Her head tilted conversationally from side to side. Was this stranger talking to someone? If she was, there was no one else out there.

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No one but Ruby.

Ruby took her chance. 'Hello!' she cried out loudly, yelling above the wind. 'Have you seen my friend? He was here! He's um …'

But the woman didn't seem to be listening. She just stood there, watching Ruby, wringing her hands in a pattern, over and over. Now and then, she would shrug, almost like an apology – no, not quite an apology, more like: *sorry, it can't be helped* – and the longer Ruby met her gaze, the more she noticed the pattern … and the more unnerved she became.

She called out, one more time. 'Doctor? Where are you? Doctor!'

But still no reply. Just the wind, the sea and the woman's silent words.

Desperate, Ruby hurried back to the TARDIS, giving the doors her hardest shove.

'Doctor!' she shouted, banging at them both with her fist. When she got no answer, she rested her head next to the keyhole and whispered, 'Doctor? Are you there?'

Then she realised that the TARDIS was different.

Previously, it had possessed some kind of aura, inviting people like Ruby towards it – a mysterious, timeless warmth, accompanied by a soft, reassuring

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hum. But now, the blue box was silent, still and cold. Even the lamplight on the top of its roof had faded to nothing.

'You're dead,' she told the TARDIS. 'Are you dead?'

The TARDIS, like the absent Doctor, didn't reply. Ruby gave it the benefit of the doubt and held her ear against the wood, hoping to hear the faintest hum or clunk or groan … but nothing happened.

Ruby was all alone – well, almost alone. She turned back to the woman. 'Sorry! I want to ask,' she started, then it occurred to her that the woman still couldn't hear her. 'Hold on!' she yelled, hurrying forward a couple of steps, before having to stop to correct her footing on the uneven ground.

When she looked back up, however, she didn't seem to have made any progress. She wasn't any closer to the woman. In fact, somehow, the woman appeared to have changed location and yet remained in the exact same pose: framed against the dull grey sky, rubbing her palms and shrugging.

*Right,* Ruby thought. *That's weird.* 'Could you just wait there?'

Ruby ran a few more feet, picking up her pace to catch up with the motionless bystander. Then, when Ruby stopped … could it be?

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The woman seemed even further away.

No, not further away – *the same distance away*; at least, relative to Ruby. But now the woman stood behind a rock when she hadn't before.

Surely Ruby would have seen her move, though? No one could hop about like this so quickly, never mind an old woman out in the cold. And yet the woman never actually appeared to move while Ruby was looking at her. Instead, she simply stood, fixed in that same position, repeating her already familiar gestures.

'Okay.' Ruby accepted the challenge and ran forward another ten feet. She was determined to catch the stranger out this time. But when she looked up …

The woman remained the same distance from her, and yet further back still, this time framed beneath the canopy of the leafless old tree.

Ruby paused. Who was this woman watching her? The white hair made her seem old and yet she moved with such speed. And who had time for games like this anyway? Ruby had made it clear she was looking for help.

She noticed that the woman was dressed in a long black smock. Perhaps some kind of mourning dress? Maybe that's why the woman was up here, to visit the memorial (if that's what it was)? There was something

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