

# **Leap of Faith**

A Temporal Detective Agency Novel

**Volume One**

Richard Hardie

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and something nice will happen.

Leap of Faith is dedicated to all my family who, while I've been pounding the keyboard and counting rejection letters, never once told me to give up my hopeless dream.

## **The Author**

Richard lives in the South of England with his wife, son and cocker spaniel. His daughter and her fiancé live nearby.

By necessity, he sells IT software, however by choice he write books for Young Adults. Twice a year, he goes to the Gower with his cocker spaniel and walks for miles along the glorious coastline. Amazingly, many plotlines arise during those trips and lots of plot logjams get freed up. It's a very cathartic time!

Richard was a Scout Leader for 15 years, during which time he wrote and helped produce five successful Gang Shows. That gave him a tremendous understanding of the humour and likes of children of all ages, and some of his characters are actually based on Scouts he knew, both girls and boys. His greatest influence (asides from the kids themselves) has been Terry Pratchett, who back in 2002 actually helped him write a scene for one of his Gang Shows and even acted in it.

## **Acknowledgements**

As always there are too many people to mention, though I would like single out five people.

Firstly I'd like to thank Laurence and Steph at Crooked Cat for taking on Leap of Faith and hopefully the rest of the Temporal Detective Agency series of books.

Caleb Mason, my agent based in America, nurtured, encouraged and convinced me that the Temporal Detective Agency had quality and a future. He took a gamble, for which I'll always be grateful, and through him I became published in the United States as a writer of eBooks.

Tracey Tucker's original artwork inspired the cover for the book you're reading, and her ability to interpret the Leap of Faith story into a single picture is incredible.

Some years ago I started working with a UK literary agent called Sarah (I won't mention her last name, though she'll know who she is). Sarah took the initial manuscript of what became Leap of Faith and, over a long period of time, told me exactly what I was doing wrong (many, many times!) and taught me how to write. Sarah told me to paste a piece of paper above my keyboard with the letters GOWTS on it. It stands for Get On With The Story, which something many writers forget to do.

So before I break my own GOWTS rule, enjoy Leap of Faith, tell your friends about it and now Get On With The Story!

Richard Hardie  
Eastleigh, Hampshire, 2013

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## A Bit at the Front

### *The Temporal Detective Agency*

Camelot started to fizzle out when Arthur and the lovely Merlin went off to the island of Avalon for an extended honeymoon. Bless!

Okay, so Merlin was a woman... *Yawn!* ...and the fantastic disguise I helped her with every day fooled the whole of Camelot for years, including a very confused Arthur. But that's another story and this one's about me and my friends in the Agency.

Let's start at the beginning.

The Knights of the rather worm-eaten Round Table drifted off one by one until there was no one capable of helping Arthur look after the country, and even my friend Galahad was too busy setting up his *Olé Grill* restaurant chain to be a politician. Of the others, Tristan moved to Cornwall and opened up a tea shop with scones to die for; Iolanthe, Bors, and Mordred were busy inventing a machine that could calculate; Gawain vanished one day on one of his adventures chasing the evil Black Knight; while others just got lost and were never seen again. I even heard Guinevere went back to her father's place in North Wales with a besotted Lancelot hanging round her like a faithful puppy. Though to be honest there wasn't much point in staying round Camelot any more.

So we didn't.

The day after Merlin left, my cousin Unita (Neets to me), Marlene and I started the Temporal Detective Agency, opening for business in the wizard's old cave. We reckoned it was only right and proper considering we were Merl's last apprentices and Marlene was her younger sister. I say younger, but she was thirty if she was a day and getting really old and frumpy.

I suppose we could have moved to another part of Britain and opened up shop, but as we'd done a bit of time travelling with Merl and sort of inherited her Time Portal along with the cave, we decided to base ourselves in the twenty-first century where the cases promised to be more interesting than just finding missing pets. We also suspected the toilets would be much better than smelly holes in the ground half full of used leaves. We even persuaded Galahad to join us so we could use the *Olé Grill* restaurant as a cover and besides, he made great coffee.

What we found was that the sanitation and smells certainly improved, but the cases were still mostly dull because good, interesting crimes are few and far between, if not actually nonexistent. Business was pretty slow, but the retrieved felines kept Neets's cats company and the odd goldfish kept them from getting hungry. We even left business cards in carefully selected centuries knowing that *Temporal* would only mean *On Time* to most people. After all, who on earth really believes in time travel, but the only improvement was that we were asked to find a pet sabre-toothed tiger and the odd snake.

Neets and I thought it might be because we sounded a bit old-fashioned coming as we did from fifteen hundred years in the past, so Marlene enrolled us into college until we learned how to fit in and like rap music. No one knew where we came from, of course, but people seemed to sense we were slightly older than them by a few hundred years, and that can be quite off-putting to a young lad who thinks his luck's in. Still we did our best.

Nothing changed much, until one day...



## Chapter One

### *Statues, Tunnels, Cellars and Knights*

One minute I was munching on a bread roll in the twenty-first century *Olé Grill* and the next I was in London standing on top of Nelson's Column, spitting out crumbs like confetti at a baker's wedding.

*That's a bloody awesome view!* I thought, and it was. Then I looked down and thought *Oh piddle!* and I nearly did. I swore some more because Nelson's statue wasn't there and I was a hundred and fifty feet above the ground covered in pigeons. My legs turned to rubber and I lay flat out on the platform gripping its edges with my hands and feet as all sorts of gut-wrenching thoughts came to mind. Like, what if Nelson decided to make a sudden return and I got squashed? Like, what if no one noticed I was way up on the Column for weeks and I starved to death? Like, where was the bloody statue anyway and what was I doing replacing it? Like, there's never a spare pair of knickers around when you want them. And lastly ... *HELP!*

Way below, a man was stammering through some sort of loudspeaker and I reckoned the odds were he was shouting at me. Gritting my teeth and fighting down the remains of the bread roll, I moved my arms and legs one at a time until I was in a sitting position as near to the middle of the plinth as possible. I gave a thumbs-up sign, though I don't know whether he saw it or not because there was no way I was going to look vertically down.

While things got sorted out below I chatted to the pigeons ... anything to take my mind off where I was because four square feet is loads to dance around on when you're on the ground, but sweet nothing when you find yourself a hundred and fifty feet up in the air without a net.

The birdie conversation was getting a bit one-sided when a cage on the end of a long arm appeared with the loudspeaker man crouching inside. With my keen detective insight I could tell he wasn't at all happy with life, mostly because his face was green and he was being very sick.

"Hello." I probably said it too loudly considering he was only a couple of feet away, but his attention was definitely elsewhere. He opened an eye, looked at me sitting cross-legged in front of him and gagged. Okay, so I wasn't at my windswept best, I was wearing a robe covered in weird symbols, was in my low to mid-teens, and sitting exactly where Admiral Lord Horatio Nelson's statue had stood for more than a hundred and fifty years. But I'm not *that* bad looking for a time-travelling girl and yet the stupid man closed his eye again.



“Oi, you! Wake up.” I clapped my hands because nobody goes to sleep when I’m talking, or I soon become their worst nightmare. “It may be a great view from up here, but it’s bloody chilly. So if you’d be so kind as to open the gate on that box thing I’ll join you and we can both return to solid ground.” I carefully stood up, wobbled a bit to give the crowd below something to gasp at, took a short run-up and launched myself across the two foot gap, or to be more exact the one hundred and fifty foot drop into a sickening void, and grabbed the top of the cage. I swung inside and tapped the man on the arm.

“Hi, I’m Tertia from the TDA. What’s your name?”

“Smollett.” It wasn’t all that clear because he was throwing up as he said it. I pitied those below.

“Just *Smollett*?”

“Inspector Smollett.” It didn’t look like he was going to tell me his first name, not that I was really concerned because I knew enough about police ranks to realise that an inspector could make life very difficult. On the other hand, so long as we were suspended in the cage and the copper was losing his breakfast, I had the upper hand.

Inspector Smollett muttered something that sounded like, “Where’s the bleedin’ statue? You nicked it, we know you did. *Retch*. Where’ve you bleedin’ hidden it? It’ll go easier for you if you tell us. *Retch*.” I ignored him because he was obviously delirious. Besides, I don’t think his heart was in it and his stomach was certainly otherwise occupied.

“So, where do you come from, Inspector?” Small talk seemed a good idea. “Somewhere nice? Been on holiday this year yet? Did you fly?” The cage gave a lurch. “Sorry, wrong time to ask that. Still, you can see a lot from up here.” I was standing by the open gate, holding onto the mesh roof with one hand and pointing to various buildings with the other. After the fright of the plinth I was beginning to feel a whole lot better. “What’s that place?”

Inspector Smollett opened one eye. “Buckingham Palace.” *Retch*.

“Nice! What’s that one then?”

“Westminster Abbey.”

I pointed at another.

“Houses of Parliament.”

“Really? Looks different from up here. What’re those two big holes over there?”

“Marble Arch,” he muttered. “Oh Gawd!” Any remaining colour disappeared from his cheeks almost as completely as Marble Arch had from Hyde Park. We both stared at Speakers’ Corner where there were two perfectly good rectangular holes but definitely no arch.

I tapped him on the shoulder. “You can get up now, Inspector.”

“I can’t. You don’t understand, I hate bleedin’ heights.” He wiped his mouth on his sleeve.

“I know and I do sympathise, but we’re back on the ground and there are lots of people looking at you. People with notebooks and pencils mostly and some with cameras.” I’d picked up a thing or two about journalists on my travels and already knew what the headlines would be on Monday morning.

**Marble Arch disappears!**

**Leaves big hole in the ground!**

**Inspector Smollett says:**

**“Police are looking into it”!**

I patted his hand, smiled and prepared to give my first ever interview. I turned to the reporters, gave a genteel cough, and began.

“Well, it all started like this...”

I decided not to tell the whole story. To be honest no newspaper in the world would have printed

it and anyway my friends wouldn't have been impressed. That meant I had to leave out about ninety percent, but the rest was pretty good stuff and stubby pencils scratched away busily. All the time I was talking, Smollett kept pulling at my sleeve trying to interrupt and using the words loved by all coppers, "*You're nicked!*" I smiled at him sweetly.

As the last scribble ended, I took out an old metal cup and spoke into it, ignoring the thermos of tea and handcuffs offered by my inspector, as well as the astonished looks from the crowd of journalists. A muffled reply came from the cup and seconds later an ultraviolet archway materialised in the middle of the Column's fountain. It wasn't the most convenient of places, but with a wave and a smile I splashed into the arch followed by the inspector's increasingly distant voice: "*Stop in the name of the Law. Oh, bugger ... where's she gone?*" and disappeared.

*Zzzzzp.*

Going through the Time Portal is a bit like flying through a tunnel ... bloody narrow and best done in films. Looking back I could still make out the shrinking inspector sloshing around in the Trafalgar Square fountain trying to arrest a ghost and, at the other end, my friends were coming towards me like a train. I'd used the Portal loads of times, but when I ended up on Nelson's Column it was the first time I'd literally been sucked through it to somewhere not of my choosing. Come to think of it, I wanted to know where Nelson's statue had gone and whether Marble Arch's disappearance was a fluky coincidence. The copper obviously didn't think so and had me down as a statue and monument thief. I was well out of it and dead pleased to be on my way back home to the pleasures of a hot cup of tea and dry clothes.

It was then that things went all fuzzy as I shot off on a sort of temporal branch line and ended up sprawling on a cold stone floor. I lay very still in case I was on yet another column and slowly opened my eyes half expecting to see more pigeons, but it was less than twilight dark and there were no birds, just stuffy darkness.

I was in a room staring at a boy, which was a promising start. He was crouching down behind a mouldering packing case and mumbling what sounded like: "*Stop, stop! Oh, please stop! Lords above, what have I done? Oh, crap!*" He didn't seem in control of things and by the look of it I wasn't the only unexpected thing to have come out of the Portal. Damaged wooden boxes and smashed pottery littered the place while dust rose into the air as though there'd been a mini-explosion. After a minute of silence, the boy peeked out from behind his crate, inched forward on all fours towards a candle and swore as he burned his fingers on the still-smoking wick. He fiddled with flint and tinder and eventually managed to relight the candle stub.

The room was small with a solid-looking oak door, had no windows and hardly any light to speak of other than the dim shimmer from the boy's candle and an unholy ultraviolet glow coming from the Portal archway. I never really liked that glow. The brick walls were bare and dripped with what looked like green slime, or really cheap hospital paint, but aside from the odd packing case and bits of broken crockery the room was empty and held nothing of interest except me lying on the floor covered in white dust.

The boy walked nervously towards the archway, ignoring me for some reason, and put out a hand to touch the switch that still glimmered to one side of the ultraviolet Portal. He pushed it up and dived full length across the cellar floor sliding to a halt by the door with his eyes shut and his hands over his ears. He probably thought the Portal was going to explode, suck him into some hellish netherworld, or slit his body down the middle and turn him inside out so his guts would slither over the floor like half-set red jelly. Which I suppose considering what had just happened to me and Nelson wasn't so crazy. All the boy got was silence as the Portal's whine wound down to a stand-by hum and the ultraviolet light blinked out.

He got up and by the remaining light of his candle stared at me as though he was trying to see if I were a statue, or just dead. I thought he was going to wet himself when I sat up, rubbed my eyes

and said, “Where am I?” Understandable, I suppose. I coughed, beat at my robes causing billowing dust clouds, then held out both arms at full stretch as though magic were going to ripple from my fingers. He hesitantly approached again.

“Stay where you are, boy.” I stood up and gave him a threatening prod with my forefinger. “One more step and I’ll turn you into a rabbit. I can do that you know, because I’m a wizard. Or pretty well nearly a wizard.” Amazingly the boy seemed to believe me, or at least he decided to stand back. “Tell me where I am and be quick about it. It doesn’t do to keep Tertia, the nearly-wizard, waiting,” I glanced at my clothes, “even when I look like a used duster. If you’re going to open and close your mouth like a fish, then for pity’s sake get some words out and answer my question.” I looked around. “Okay, this is *not* Merlin’s cave, or the *Olé Grill*, so where am I and what do you know about disappearing statues?”

I made the last words a stinging command and the boy sprang to attention although he managed to stop short of saluting me. “Y-you’re *here*.” He spread his hands wide. “You’re in my father’s cellars and we’ve no right to be here. He’ll skin us both alive if he finds us down here, especially after what I’ve done.” He looked as though he expected to hear his father’s footsteps at any moment. “Honest, I don’t know anything about statues. I only pulled a couple of switches and this devil’s machine went mad. Things went flying round and all sorts of garbage got spewed out. Present company excepted,” he added quickly and very wisely.

So far I hadn’t actually made any attempt to turn him into a rabbit and he was probably feeling slightly braver, so I decided to seize the initiative back. “Enough of your tomfoolery, boy. How dare you talk like that to a nearly-wizard member of the Temporal Detective Agency? I’ve a mind to teach you a lesson you’ll never forget.” Giving him the choice between an angry father and a vengeful me seemed to have the desired effect as a bead of sweat trickled down his forehead. “However, as you seem to know where I am and presumably how I got here I shall let you off and trust that your manners will improve. In consideration of my leniency, boy...”

“Bryn,” the young man said quietly. “My name is Bryn, not *boy*.”

I ignored his mumbled resentment. “...you’ll tell me where we are and what you’ve got to do with Nelson’s missing statue and Marble Arch.”

Bryn looked at me suspiciously. “You’re not from round here are you? I can tell. If you’re from the Revenue and Excise the best thing you could do would be to jump back through that archway thing.”

“I told you, boy,” (there was a muttered “*I’m Bryn*”), “my name is Tertia. Actually I’m not sure if I did mention it, but it is,” I waved dismissively as though names were unimportant, “and I have no interest in taxes of any kind. I try to avoid them like any sensible female.”

“Oh, so you’re a girl, then,” said the boy called Bryn with remarkable insight, “which round here would make you quite acceptable if you weren’t English and appeared out of my father’s Time device. Personally, I’ve got nothing against girls, even if you do think you’re a wizard and wear strange clothes. I’m quite open-minded and after all, this is the eighteenth century.”

“Twenty-first,” I said without thinking. “This is the twenty-first century. You’ve got to add a century onto the actual year, not take a couple away. A lot of ignorant people make that mistake.” I was busy brushing dust off my robes when I noticed the look on Bryn’s face, which roughly said: *I’m getting out of here. This girl’s mad or I’m an Englishman!* I watched him edge back against the wall and realised almost too late that he was feeling his way towards the door.

“Where do you think you’re going, young man?” I was watching Bryn like a one-eyed lizard. “Either you help me get out of here, or I take you with me through that infernal archway to whatever fate awaits us.” I flicked the switch on the side of the Portal and spun a small wheel with numbers on it that made the thing hum. I smiled when the archway started to shimmer as the familiar whine reached a point just above human hearing and the ultraviolet pulsing glow throbbled

into life. “Amazing! I’m not normally very technical. I usually leave things like this to my cousin. Now, boy, the decision is yours.”

Before Bryn could answer we both heard footsteps approaching the cellar. They sounded strange. They weren’t the confident steps of a man who knew he had every right to be there, but they sounded aggressively loud enough not to be friendly. “My dad!” Bryn sprang away from the door and grabbed me by the sleeve. “Are you really a wizard?”

I gave half a nod. “Apprenticed to the world’s best. Merlin herself.”

“Herself?”

“Long story.”

“And you’re really from the future?”

“If I’m from the twenty-first century and you’re from the past then I must be in a way, I suppose. But originally I’m from long ago.”

“You’re mad! And you reckon you can change people into rabbits?”

“Well I exaggerated slightly there. That comes in year four with Merl I think.”

“Then I’ll come with you if I may. I like a bit of an adventure and if you’re really a wizard where you come from it’ll be more interesting than staying here and meeting my dad. You haven’t seen him when he gets really mad. Actually neither have I, but after what I just did I don’t want to, either.” He shuddered and glanced at the door.

The footsteps had stopped and though I couldn’t see it I sensed the handle was turning. Bryn grabbed my arm and hurried me towards the welcoming archway. “So tell me then, if you’re not from around here, how come you’re a female wizard dressed in those funny clothes and covered in dust?”

The handle was definitely turning now.

“Okay, if you want to waste time.” I stood still and faced him with hands on hips. “Firstly these are my wizard robes, and secondly I was on top of a column somewhere in London and the next thing I knew I was here, for which it looks as though I can blame you. There was lots of dust up there, there’s lots of smashed pottery down here and if you hadn’t noticed I’m soaked up to my knees.”

The door was inching open now.

“That’s fascinating, Tertia,” Bryn hadn’t been paying attention to a word I’d been saying, focused as he was on his father. “I’d like to leave *now*, please.”

I hung back. “You haven’t told me where we are yet.”

“Haven’t I? You’re in Port Eynon in South Wales in the year 1734...”

I uttered words like “*Blimey!*” and “*How the bloody Hell!*” which is most unlike me, because I know how to *really* swear.

“...and I strongly suggest we leave now.” He pushed me into the archway and grabbed my hand. “I know my dad uses this thing so I know roughly what it does, but where are we going to end up? In the village square?”

As if I knew.

All he got in reply was, “Home I hope, but really I’ve absolutely no...” As we walked through the archway I glanced at the opening door and caught a fleeting look at the man entering the cellar. I recognised him instantly as a murderer, a fraud, a thief, and the man who ruined my parents and nearly killed them and half of Camelot. I thought he’d died centuries earlier when Sir Gawain defeated him, and I still hated him. I ran into the archway.

*Zzzzzp.*



## Chapter Two

### *Case of Knights*

I ran out of the Portal archway into the Temporal Detective Agency office and nearly fell over my own feet. Bryn tumbled after me, pointing at the archway and mouthing off about tunnels, infernal machines, and statues of wizards. Sweet boy.

“Get your cases packed, girls. We’ve got a bag!” I spat out the words. “I mean we’ve got a case. A real one, with real mystery and a real villain.” Neets and Marlene stared at me open-mouthed because sometimes when I get excited I tend to forget people may not know what on earth I’m talking about.

“Come on in, dear,” Marlene, the Agency’s senior partner, was sitting on the edge of her desk looking powerfully dumpy. “Don’t hang around dripping all over the floor just because your feet are wet. Take your shoes and socks off, grab a towel and dry yourself properly.” The sister of the more famous Merlin watched as I got myself ready, then took the towel from me and threw it in a corner where I’d have to pick it up later. After all it was my turn for clean-up duty.

“Cup of calming Merl Grey?” Marlene poured me a mug of Merlin’s favourite own-blend tea and sat down behind her desk. She arranged non-existent papers into a non-existent pile, then leaned back, pushing her fingers through her startlingly orange fright-wig of real hair. “Finished? Now, Tertia, tell me what happened and who this fine looking young man is. Then I’ll decide if the Agency has a case or not.” Marlene smiled at Bryn, who took a step backwards as though she’d sworn at him. “You know the rules about bringing home waifs and strays. Cats are one thing, but boys are definitely a *no, no*. By the way, I saw some of what you did through PortalVision, but the picture faded after you left the column. I have to admit I was worried for a moment and Unita was all for going to give you a hand, weren’t you, dear?”

My cousin drew herself up to her full five-foot-eight inches, beating me by four. “I considered it for a second or two, but there’s no way both of us would have fitted on that high pillar thing so I decided to stay here.” Neets was a lot less impetuous than me, as well as being older by two whole years, and unlike me suffered from vertigo, whereas I only hated heights.

Bryn stared with his mouth wide open until our conversation ceased and we all looked at him, mostly with our arms folded. He shuffled his feet and gave a nervous smile, because after all he wasn’t used to time travel let alone being in a room full of women who assumed they were in control and thought they could turn him into a rabbit.

“I would still like to know who this young man is, Tertia,” said Marlene, pressing her question,

“and why on earth you decided to bring him with you. I would also like to know more about this wonderful case and especially about your incredible villain.”

“I couldn’t leave the boy there, could I?” I said. “I mean, I saw the man and from what Bryn said I reckon he must be his dad.” I tried the ultimate objection. “I bet you and Neets would have brought ‘im ... being sensible adults. Anyway, it was definitely ‘im!” I was still excited, in spite of the Merl Grey tea.

“She didn’t bring me,” Bryn said without much conviction, “I brought myself. I’m quite capable of making my own decisions, you know. Besides, I like my dad. It’s just that this time I did something really stupid and he’ll skin me for it.”

“You may be right, Tertia,” said Marlene, totally ignoring Bryn. “If we’re to find out what happened to Nelson’s Column, Marble Arch, and you, it looks like the lad could be very much involved, if not the unwitting cause.” She emerged from behind her desk and started pacing like Sherlock Holmes, but without the pipe and violin.

“Hang on,” I said indignantly. “I’m the one who was sucked through space and time. It’s me that got landed on top of a column. It was me that got shoved into a cellar with this lad. It was me that ruined a perfectly good pair of shoes in that water fountain and it was me that saw the man.” I felt people were ignoring my last point. “*The Man!*” I repeated just to reinforce it.

“A case worthy of the Agency, I admit. No missing pets to find for a start.” Marlene stopped pacing up and down her office and perched on the edge of her desk. “Actually, which man are you talking about?” I stared at her and continued to drip on the carpet, while Bryn stared at all three of us with his mouth agape and probably wished he were back home. If I had my way he soon would be and if Marlene had hers he wouldn’t have left in the first place.

“The Black Knight, that’s who!” I was nearly shouting. “The bastard that tried to murder my parents and nearly killed Merl and Arthur. He was in Bryn’s place.”

Marlene gave an adult’s superior smile. “It can’t have been him, Tertia. Arthur had the Black Knight executed after Sir Gawain defeated him, so how could he have been in South Wales, let alone in the year 1734?”

I mouthed a few expletives of frustration and Neets came to my rescue.

“We didn’t *actually* see him die,” she reminded us. “We were just *told* he’d been executed. If Tersh saw him at Bryn’s place maybe he didn’t die.”

“She’s right,” I said. “What if the bastard escaped from Camelot? He had enough supporters inside the castle and I bet Arthur wouldn’t have boasted about it. Let’s say he did get away and got to South Wales through a Time Portal.”

“Impossible,” said Marlene. “There are only two Portals, ours and the spare back in Merlin’s old cave in Camelot. And that one doesn’t work anymore,” she looked thoughtful, “unless of course Merlin kept others for spare parts in her old castle workshops. It’s quite possible, knowing my sister.”

“But we know there’s another Portal, Marlene.” I pointed at Bryn. “I saw it in the boy’s cellar and we used it to get back here. That means someone from Camelot must have taken it to South Wales and as I saw him plain as day it must have been the Black Knight.” I looked at the boy who had hardly moved since we’d arrived. “Is that evil man your father, Bryn?”

Bryn stiffened. “My dad’s my dad! He’s not evil.” I don’t know why I’d expected him to do anything but defend his father. After all I’d have done the same, except of course that my dad had been a farmer and was nearly killed by the Black Knight. “He does the odd bit of smuggling like everyone,” Bryn continued. “The odd barrel of brandy, some bales of silk, and a few crates of tea, but he’d never hurt anyone and he’s not even a bit bad really. Who is this Black Night anyway?”

I reckoned Bryn deserved an explanation, but Marlene beat me to it. “Back in Camelot... *I take it he knows about Camelot?*” I nodded, “...the Knights of the Round Table looked after King Arthur

and protected his kingdom. One of them, called the Black Knight – they all had silly names – wanted Guinevere and the kingdom for himself and tried to kill Arthur and take over Camelot. He nearly did it too, because lots of the best Knights had either retired, or were off on stupid quests. Only Sir Gawain, the White Knight, had enough sense to get together a band of soldiers and attack the Black Knight's small army before it reached the walls of Camelot, but unfortunately not before it laid waste to most of the farms and villages and killed many of the peasants. Unita's and Tertia's parents got away with their lives, but everything they owned was destroyed. The Black Knight was captured by Gawain and taken to Camelot castle and was only seen once after that, when we all thought we saw him executed. Now it seems he may have escaped and somehow may be your father."

"That's crazy!" said Bryn with a splutter and I had to admit I wanted to agree with him, except I'd seen the proof with my own eyes. The man coming into the cellar had definitely been the most hated man in Camelot.

"That murdering bastard's behind all this, I know he is, and we certainly can't send Bryn back alone to a father who's a murdering bastard." I paused. "Marlene, we have to go back there with him. The Agency has to go and sort this out, statues and all."

Marlene ran her fingers through her shock of flaming ginger hair. We looked at her expectantly, because quite honestly there was nothing else for us to do. "If you're right then I agree it's almost certain the evil thug's behind it all and we have to do something about it. But there are things you don't know yet. Like what exactly is that statue doing in the middle of the *Olé Grill*?"

Marlene slid off the desk and led us out of her office into the restaurant's dining area which, because it was Sunday morning, was empty. In the middle of the room and surrounded by tables was an over-sized conversation piece that was beyond words. Well, mine anyway. It was definitely made of stone, looked extremely well-weathered and as a statue was vaguely familiar.

Neets walked up to it and examined the figure like an expert. "If I didn't know better I'd say this was from Trafalgar Square. Not that I've seen it up close of course, just from photos. It's about the right height and a very good copy." She walked round the statue. "So good in fact, it's covered in pigeon droppings."

"What, you mean real ones?" I asked, getting interested.

"Want to taste some?"

I wasn't sure if Neets was serious, but I shook my head anyway.

Marlene coughed. "I don't believe in coincidences," she said. "Nelson's statue being swapped for Tertia, Tertia ending up in South Wales in 1734 then coming back here with the boy through an illegal Portal, Marble Arch completely disappearing, and behind it all it looks as though we've got the Black Knight in the wrong country let alone the wrong century, way after he should have died. Interesting, don't you think?" Marlene had a massive grin across her face. "Like Tertia said, we've got a case to solve and there isn't a missing pet in sight. The Temporal Detective Agency is in business and we've got a real villain to bring to justice." She looked thoughtful. "The fact is though, girls, we're still amateurs and need a professional to get us on the right track." She marched back into her office and fiddled with the sleeping Time Portal's mass of knobs and dials, while Neets and I looked on in puzzlement. Bryn still sat in Marlene's chair looking understandably dazed and trying not to be noticed.

Marlene thrust her arm into the archway and we watched it disappear until only her shoulder was left. She was obviously blindly searching for something and from the intense look of distaste on her face it could well have been down the S-bend of a toilet. She gave a grunt of satisfaction and pulled as hard as she could as a terrified inspector Smollett sailed through the Portal, landing face down on Marlene's desk, water pouring from his shoes onto the carpet and adding to the pool I'd created earlier. Of course his feet were several times larger than mine so he dripped longer and more

thoroughly.

Marlene pursed her lips and examined the inspector with detached interest. "Girls, this is our professional," she walked up to her desk and prodded the trembling figure, "though he looks more like a wet fish and I'm inclined to throw him back."

Smollett was lying on his stomach, but managed to shake his head vigorously.

Marlene patted him on the shoulder. "Don't take on so. Do you really think I'd have gone to all the trouble of bringing you here, not to mention getting another soaking for my carpet, just to send you away with a flea in your ear?" She laughed and gave him a none-too-gentle shove. "Come on, get off my desk and take off your shoes and socks. Tertia, pass him your towel, dear. It's in the corner over there."

Inspector Smollett did as he was told and pushed himself into a sitting position on the edge of the desk. I handed him my towel and grinned. "So we meet again, Mr Inspector Smollett, and while I've got the chance I suppose I ought to say thank you for getting me off that pillar thing, even though you were trying to arrest me for the theft of a statue. I was getting a bit bored up there. Great view and all that, but when you've seen one vertical drop you've seen them all." Smollett winced and I suspected anything over six feet made him feel sick and that included his own body wearing four-inch stacked heels. Smollett dried his feet on my towel and tried to squeeze as much water as possible out of the bottom part of his trousers.

Neets turned to Marlene. "Nice person I'm sure, but I don't see how he's going to help us. He's just a copper."

"But that's the point," explained Marlene as though that said it all. "Mysteries like this are bread and butter to guys like him." Smollett was shaking his head now and trying to mouth the word *No!* but none of us took any notice. "You'll see, he'll take to this little lot like a duck to water." She looked at the pool spoiling her treasured carpet. "Besides, he was close to hand when we wanted him."

"A bird in the hand ... usually makes a mess all over your palm," I said, but no one laughed.

Marlene took Smollett by both hands and pulled him upright, partly because he didn't look as though he could do it by himself, but mostly because I knew that sitting on the edge of her desk was her privilege and anyone else doing it was taking a liberty. She patted him on the shoulder, smoothed his hair, and adjusted his tie like the concerned mother of any schoolboy.

"There you are," she said with a final flourish and pecked him on the cheek, "as good as new." She clapped her hands. "Now, I'd like to get this detective agency doing what it's supposed to do. Let's go and solve Tertia's mystery!"

Neets saw the only flaw in the whole thing; who exactly was going to pay us? But as we hardly ever got paid, even as a flaw it was flawed. Besides, anything we made would now have to be split between Marlene, us two girls from Camelot, a very confused young lad from some Welsh seaside village we'd never heard of, and a London detective with a terrible head for heights. I could have included Neets's cats as a back-up, but Galahad would have made a better reserve on the basis he didn't leave unpleasant surprises in the corner unless they were chargeable plus tax.

Inspector Smollett was the first to comment by leaping to his feet and making a run for the restaurant's cave entrance. Dodging round the tables he slipped, bounced off Nelson's statue, tripped over my outstretched leg and landed in a heap in front of the smiling Galahad. The knight gently picked him up and led him back to Marlene's table like any good restaurant owner with a client who hasn't paid yet.

Smollett turned to me, looking like a startled rabbit. "I arrest you for the theft of this statue and me as well," he squeaked and I almost felt sorry for him.

"Don't be silly," said Marlene in a suddenly very businesslike voice.

The detective looked around nervously as Galahad smiled, watching the inspector who without



thinking was nibbling on a small bread roll. The knight told me once that he found people tend to get a weird thrill from experiencing any outrageous charge, especially when they're not actually going to have to pay it. I reckoned my inspector was munching on a theoretical fiver at least.

"Can I go, please?" Smollett muttered through a mouthful of crumbs.

Marlene gave him a guilty smile. "Sorry, Inspector, I'm afraid I need your help. The facts are one thing, but I need your deductive powers as a copper and who knows, I might even need to borrow your handcuffs depending on how we get on."

Smollett sat down and finished off his vastly expensive roll. I reckoned it could now be a tenner from the look in Galahad's eye.

Marlene looked at me and tapped her chin again. "Tertia, when you left the cellar was Bryn's father in the room? I mean, I know you saw him, but could he see you? Think now, this is important."

I thought long and hard. "Yes ... he'd just come through the door when we disappeared."

"And the Portal was still switched on when you left?"

"Yes." I wasn't sure where this was going.

"So Bryn's father could follow you here just by looking at the Portal dials and seeing where they were set to."

"Oh yes!" I saw where this was going, got up and padded in my bare feet into Marlene's office, avoiding the stubborn pools of water. The familiar whine started up as the dull ultraviolet glow lit the small room when I switched on the Portal and with great care studied the dials, checked some numbers, made fine adjustments, then crossing the fingers on one hand, slid the other into the shimmering archway. I felt around and with a smile of satisfaction, found what I was looking for and spun the dials three seconds after Bryn and I left so that no one on the Welsh side would know where we'd gone and be able to follow us to the agency's cave, especially the Black Knight.

When I returned, Marlene picked up a small travelling case and handed it to me, together with a small remote-control box. "Right, get packed, girls. You're going to the seaside. I'm sure Galahad will lend you some clothes, Inspector. Bryn, you look fine as you are. Personally I'm staying here to coordinate things."

I glanced at Marlene wondering if I'd heard right, but she was whispering urgently to Bryn. It wasn't like her to take a back seat, but I presumed she had her reasons and I didn't ask what they were.

Galahad reset the tables and patted Nelson's statue for good luck, then disappeared through the Portal to open up the *Olé Grill* restaurant in all the other centuries where he had a franchise. Before he went, I saw him look under Marlene's saucer by force of habit for a non-existent tip.

Half-an-hour later, four figures disappeared through the Time Portal. Bryn wasn't looking forward to going home, Neets asked why I was taking suntan lotion to work, and Smollett knew his Sunday lunch was ruined.

Destination ... Port Eynon in 1734.

Purpose ... to solve the statue mystery and beat the evil Black Knight.

Big bonus ... no dull cases like missing cats and dogs.

*Zzzzzp.*