

## PROLOGUE

She was struggling for breath, her heart pounding. The darkness was suffocating her; it was as if it had a life of its own. Her heart felt as if it was going to explode out of her chest. Then she saw him, a tall dark figure in the doorway.

He clicked on the light. “Struggling to sleep again? Come on, I’ll tell you a wee story.”

Relieved to see her dad, she sat up slightly in her bed, moving her anime duvet to make room for him to sit beside her. She knew that at age 12 she shouldn’t be afraid of the dark, but she could swear there had been something there, something in the shadows.

“Right, petal, let’s see, what shall story will we go with tonight?”

“You know which one.”

“Of course – the reality behind the curtain. So where were we? We’d covered fairies and elves, what about gods?”

“No, not gods tonight – they’re boring, and only ever fight with themselves. What about witches?”

“Good choice.” Without a book to reference, her dad began his story, in the only way he knew how: scientifically. “In folklore, witches were humans who had powers to manipulate the world around them, like being able to change what people actually saw. In medieval times, those that were called witches scared the local people and, as we know, when ordinary people band together in a collective, they can do extraordinary things, sometimes good, but in

regard to the witches sometimes very bad things. The baying mob would inflict terrible torture on these women. We have evidence of the witch trials and archaeological artefacts from their torture.”

“Dad, this bit is boring, get to the good bit.”

“Sheesh, a guy tries to build up a picture and all you want is the ending. Okay, here it comes. Folklore is often full of absolute nonsense, but...” He left a dramatic pause; she was hooked. “...But there are small kernels of truth that we can prove scientifically. For example...” He was really milking this dramatic pause thing now. “...For example, each and every human does have the ability to change reality. There have been studies that show if the collective minds of 100 or more people concentrate on one thing – let’s say changing a random number generator to show the number they are all thinking of – then it manifests. The individual person also has the power of prophecy – well okay, our subconscious can only detect danger 0.2 seconds before it happens, but still, it’s detecting a future event before it happens. Like when the hairs on the back of your neck stand up, or you just feel something is wrong. Prophecy!” As he continued to tell her a bedtime story based on scientific journal abstracts, she drifted peacefully to sleep.

“Sleep tight. We’ve got a big day tomorrow.”

The next day was blisteringly hot. Father and daughter were in the middle of a field in the south-west of the country; the air was salty from the sea spray. They both donned their oversized sun hats and got to work.

“If my research is correct, we should begin the dig here.” They both got out their spades and began to dig enthusiastically. Hopeful that today might be the day they find it.

After a long thirsty day in the field, they had already dug over a meter down into the crumbling mantel, without anything to show for their efforts.

“Dad, I think we’re digging in the wrong place.”

“You might be right. Let’s give it maybe an hour longer today and then we’ll call it a day. As you know, in science we never fail, we just learn what not to do.” Everything was always a lesson with him. As he thrust his spade into the earth again, this time he hit something. Something solid. It might just have been a rock, but, as per protocol, he put down the spade and took up the trowel. This was when the detail work began. As he gently moved the dirt away from the protrusion, it was clear it was bone.

“Let’s not get too excited,” he said, although he was feeling overwhelmed with excitement himself. As he gently moved more dirt away, he could see the bone was a skull. Over the next hour, they both gently and meticulously uncovered the skeleton. Finally, he lifted the skull carefully out of the ground and stood up to inspect it in the light of the sun.

“We’ll take that,” came a voice from behind him. A tall threatening man, wearing a black suit and sunglasses, had appeared out of nowhere.

“Who are you? I bought this land – whatever is on it is mine. Get off my land, or I’ll call the police and have you removed.”

“You seem to be unaware of your situation. We will be taking that, all of it, and all of your research. And if you ever speak of this again, we will discredit you and you will never work again. And if you are stupid enough to continue to do this type of research, we will do much worse. Is that clear?” The threatening man had not come alone – another man grabbed the daughter and a gun was pointed to her head.

“Let me go. Let me go,” she screamed, struggling and trying to bite her captor. But seeing his daughter being held was enough of a threat for her dad to give up today’s battle. As he handed over the skull, the aggressors shoved her into her father’s arms.

“Good choice. Now go home and never speak of this again. And choose a different research topic. Have a nice day,” the tall man said as he signalled his goons to retrieve the skeleton.

Father and daughter ran to their car. He drove furiously home, fearful for his family’s safety. She looked out of the window, now knowing they had seen the proof that there were other beings on this planet.

## CHAPTER 1 — NEW BEGINNINGS

In a city just like any other, underneath a railway bridge they call the Hielanman's Umbrella, there was an invisible barrier where the world magically transforms. The earthly existence becomes dark, mysterious, ever so slightly dangerous; there was also a faint smell of old chip fat and depression. Emerging from this murky underworld of the railway bridge, the city streets are designed in neat little blocks. Apparently, the town planners in this city loved a square; uniformity made it very easy to draw the street map. On the surface this city was just like any other, but this particular metropolis was far from normal.

Not far from this netherworld there is a street with a myriad of modern office blocks, with panels of blinding glass and chrome, and the obligatory colour-changing LED lights. These modern monoliths stand proudly beside the brown, slightly bleak Cold War buildings from another era. This single street is dank, with dirt ingrained into the fabric of the buildings from decades of traffic, people and neglect. On this grimy street, you will find the real power movers and shakers in the political world. This street is home to local government, a government ministry, a government central department, and some departments that don't officially exist. These organisations all coexist – or should that be all tolerate each other – whilst claiming their own territory within this half-mile of the city. Each of these departments politick, scheme and try to outmanoeuvre each other at every turn. They posture and exude

control and power, in a continual tug of war. They are however completely and utterly deluded, as they have no idea about the reality of their situation.

With all those politicians and civil servants within a half-mile radius of each other, it is no surprise that along this same grimy street there are small businesses where those said politicians and civil servants may procure certain services. These businesses provide everything a busy city person needs to get through a stressful day of politicking and scheming: such as restaurants where those all-important lunch and evening “meetings” can be held; a sex shop; a hotel with rooms that rent by the hour (that includes 45 minutes for tea and nibbles). Well, these high-powered types need some stress relief after their very difficult day at work. Oh, and there is a pub for relaxation and to have a little libation after a hard day’s backstabbing. It is a government paradise, and all the small business owners accept the government procurement card, so it’s all expense-chargeable.

Within this world, where keeping power and control is the only goal. If they do some good along the way, well, that’s a nice little accident, but not exactly essential. The main thing they seek is to be endorsed for doing exactly what they want, to rapturous applause. It is the biggest magic show in the world; distraction is the key.

What these politicians don’t realise is that they don’t hold the power, they never have, not even a little tiny sliver of it. Oh, and don’t fall for the fable that the people have the power, oh dear, no, they can’t be allowed to have that. Real power and control to change anything can only be achieved if they hang around long enough to do something meaningful. Ministers, Prime or otherwise, or those with grand departmental titles only hold the reins for a few years before they are shuffled out and a new lot come in to keep the seat warm. They barely have time to find out where the toilets and the coffee machines are before it’s time to say bye-bye. The real power-makers are very pleased with this situation; it’s going exactly as planned. So, let’s revise what was previously stated – the biggest magic show isn’t the government of the

day distracting the voting citizens, it's those that keep the government ants busy and too distracted to make any real change. Abracadabra.

Like all major cities there are specialist hotels where the clientele's every whim can be catered to, and this city was no different; indeed, this city had a very specialist hotel. The Hotel Willow looks like any other hotel from the frontage, with a nod to a bygone era of opulence and decadence. The aesthetic was complete with a dark interior of black marble, oxblood red leather sofas and velvet upholstery. A heady mix of floral and musty scents are ingrained into the fabric of the building. On the reception desk there is a quaint, old-fashioned brass bell for patrons to ring for service. Now, this hotel provides a very specialised service, and when they say service, they mean service by the hour. Yes, it is one of "*those*" hotels. The proprietor of this particular establishment is Agatha. Agatha has seen some things in her time – she has many sordid and tawdry stories to tell, and she very often does.

The clientele include ministers, a few senior officials and, of course, the usual quota of representatives from the law-abiding and enforcing constabulary.

In Room 33, the Minister for Morality was getting his weekly "service" from Bella. She was one of the hotel's most popular ladies, a bubbly twenty-something, a modern lady with long ebony hair. She had many piercings, so many, in fact, that her Aunt Agatha would joke that Bella needed to avoid large magnets. For her meeting with the minister she was wearing a pink silk dressing gown with feather trim and feather-trimmed heeled slippers. He was sitting in a classic Chesterfield chair, fully clothed, with a glazed look and a vacant smile on his face. He was making various noises of enjoyment. Unbeknownst to him, he had been enchanted.

Bella was an exceptional witch. She had wanted to travel and see the world, but her mother insisted she learned the craft from her aunt. Bella had mastered the mesmer to such a degree that in the minister's head he believed he was getting exactly what he'd ordered, right down to the minute, strangely specific, detail. Whereas in reality, he was sitting in a chair grunting and grinding away like a horny mongoose.

The Hotel Willow isn't just one of "*those*" hotels, it is a very specialist hotel. As Bella sat in the comfy chair opposite the grinding, grunting minister, filing her nails, there was a knock at the door. Agatha opened it and entered, dressed in a dark green cloak with purple lining, a dark trouser suit and white trainers; as a tall lady she preferred comfort and over the years had developed a rather unique style.

"Not interrupting anything, am I?" Agatha said, laughing.

Bella also chuckled. "He's ordered the number three, he'll be spangled for another twenty minutes at least." Bella was a giggler. With her sunny disposition, she thought being a witch was the best job ever, and it was certainly never dull.

"Number three, eh? Dirty beggar. They really have no shame," Agatha tutted. Agatha was the matriarch of the Coven, with pure white short hair and piercing green eyes. She floated into a room with elegance preserved for the most delicate of stars. She had a habit of twisting the amethyst and peridot ring on her pinkie finger, gently touching its crystals to remind herself of their significance. She was genuinely disgusted at the minister's choice of relaxation, pursing her lips and creasing her eyes in revulsion as he began to oink like a pig and jerk about in the seat.

"Honestly, private schools have a lot to answer for. He needs weekly therapy, not a weekly service from us."

Bella looked over at the minister, winced and shook her head, as if she had sucked a sour lemon. "We just take the money, honey." She clicked her fingers as if singing a funky song.



“Yup, cash for kinky, that’s us. So, are you all excited about the Annual Coven congress?” Agatha asked, trying to distract both of them from the shenanigans in the corner of the room.

“Yeah, I’m looking forward to the circle workshop and getting some new supplies. Is Xander going to be there? I need my crystals recharged and no-one does it like him. I can only manage a weak recharge. I’m convinced he has a direct link to the source. It’s just fabulous. Are you all ready with your keynote?” Bella excitedly asked Agatha. Agatha was one of the main witches at this year’s convention. She was going to be opening the event with a rousing speech.

All the ladies within this establishment are witches. Yes, bonafide, wand-waving, cauldron-boiling, cat-loving, card-carrying witches. Agatha is a seventh daughter of a seventh daughter of a seventh daughter seven generations back. Each generation passes their memories through birth and magic to the next generation; this generational heritage makes Agatha a powerful witch, a very powerful one, at that.

“I’ve done the first draft. I’ve been thinking about the theme for this year and how we can really collaborate and coordinate making real change. Information-sharing protocols and all that good stuff,” Agatha confirmed.

“That sounds brilliant. It would be great if we could really make some worldwide difference. It’s really inspiring to think of what we could do. Who’s this year’s guest speaker?” Bella enquired. Bella deeply wanted to make a real difference – she was happy with learning the craft in the hotel, but she yearned to make her stamp on the globe.

“I tried to get Gavin, but he was busy with the Americans, so, drumroll please... I got Frank,” Agatha said very smugly, looking like the witch’s cat that got the cream.

“No! Wow! How did you manage that?” Bella was on the edge of her seat now, almost squealing – this was big news and she could barely contain her excitement.

“Him and I go way back. Like, waaaay back. I told him this year’s theme of collaboration and he was all over it. He knew it would be brilliant for his brand. He scratches our back, and he gets lots of new contacts for information. It’s a win-win,” Agatha confirmed, smiling.

“Ehhhhh, ehhhh, ohhhh, oink, oink, naughty, yeahhh, just there…” The minister was now becoming a bit more animated and making gyrating moves in the chair. It was cringey, embarrassing, and something no-one should have had the misfortune to witness. But the witches had their reasons for putting themselves through such retina-scarring scenes every day.

“Oh dear, he’s quick today. Right, better get on with it, then.” Agatha looked over at the minister then spoke directly to him. “Tell me your secrets.”

“I once made love to a teddy bear,” he said with a vacant grin, his eyes closed and a glazed, contented look on his face.

“Ewww, not those types of secrets. Creep. The real secrets, the ones about your work and the people you work with,” Agatha pressed, although mentally taking a note about the teddy bear. That little bit of information might possibly come in handy in the future.

The minister, in his continued mesmerised state, slowly and clearly said, “Operation COPPER PAN contains all birth names, aliases, and current locations of the known intelligence network. It’s on a floppy disc. I was collecting it on my trip here. It is in my briefcase. No-one can hack a floppy disc. Operation FELIX has details of the fuel storage facilities. They are in underground locations all over the country. Operation FIREFLY contains the plan to keep all citizens controlled, whilst me and my chums make a packet raising prices for the poor. Operation WASP is the plan to ensure there continues to be a patriarchal, male-biased society.” At that he guffawed.

Agatha was still listening to his confessions, but now she was also busily looking in his briefcase, which was not locked. In between his protein bar, his security pass and his laptop was the unhackable floppy disc.

“Got it. Run down and copy this, will you? Floppy disc, indeed – they never learn.” She gave the disc to Bella.

“On it.” Bella took the disc and ran out the door. The Hotel Willow had every type of disc drive and all forms of data storage, including tape recorders, microfiches, and even nano-drives. If there was a way to store and share information, Hotel Willow was equipped with the hardware and software. They had state-of-the-art cyber encryption, and of course a dusting of magic helped with encryption to protect their own data. God forbid their data was ever disclosed. They could not have the world knowing with certainty about witches and the true reality, that would be disastrous.

Agatha turned to the minister, who at this point was now safely back in the world of his fantasy.

“Minister, you won’t remember this, but you will know it, you will feel it as true, and you will action it. Next time Operation WASP is mentioned, you will feel physically sick and embarrassed deep in your soul about how women are treated. You will want to feel better and make things better. Next time Operation FIREFLY is on the agenda you will know in your heart that the tighter you try to keep a grip of your control of the people, the more they will see it and the harder they will fight back. You will feel like a very worried little boy. As for Operation COPPER PAN, thank you very much, you’ve done a great service for your country.” Agatha implanted these feelings, these shadows directly into the minister’s subconscious. This was the fun part of the job. She specifically enjoyed anything where she felt she was fighting for women’s rights and freedoms.

Bella ran back into the room, breathless. "Here you go," she panted, and handed the floppy disc back to Agatha.

"Did you change the names and locations to fake ones?" Agatha asked.

"Of course, it's not my first rodeo," Bella scoffed.

"You're the best. Excellent work. We can't have them having the real information. As long as we are the only ones with accurate information, it makes it much more valuable. Now I'm off to pay the Chief Inspector a visit, see what goodies he has for us today," Agatha said as she exited the room.

Over the years, the underground vaults deep under the Hotel Willow had collected more national secrets than the entire Vatican secret archives, the US President's Book of Secrets and the Rosslyn Chapel vaults put together. Well, everyone has to have a hobby, don't they?

Bella rubbed her hands together, readying herself for the final part of the mesmer. She put her hands in the prayer position in front of her heart, closed her eyes and moved each hand in an opposite direction still with the palms touching. She then separated them and began to roll a ball of energy between her hands. She took a strand of the energy and marked the infinity sign over the head and shoulders of the minister. A yellow haze shimmered over him. Still in his mesmerised state, he stood up and moved to the bed, took off his clothes and lay on the top of the now crumpled bedsheets. It was a horrid fleshy vision. At this part of the service Bella always turned her head away; there are some sights no-one should be exposed to, and she certainly wasn't being paid enough to view the minister in a state of undress. He began to come around woozily from his magical sleep and started to get dressed again.

Bella thought to herself, *Thank God he's putting his clothes back on, I can look in his direction again.* But aloud she said to him, "Oh, you're a naughty boy. How was it for you?" She pretended to wipe the side of her mouth. As he was dressing, she noticed his buttock tattoo, which looked like it had been done with a branding iron, saying, *Lizzie's boy.* She

didn't know if it was useful information, but she'd store it away anyway. With information you never knew when it would be needed in the future, and the true business of Hotel Willow was information.

"Dear, that was one of the best sessions yet. Can I book in for same time next week?" the Minister practically pleaded.

"Of course. Do you want it charged to the government credit card again?" Bella knew the drill.

"Always, my dear. I put it under hospitality expenses." He guffawed and snorted, in a way only the truly corrupt can do, whilst apparently not feeling a single bit of guilt.

"Well, I do like to be hospitable," giggled Bella coquettishly, inwardly repulsed at this worm of a man. But at least his weakness was quite useful. Cash for kinky.

The minister left the establishment; another happy customer, nicely relaxed and ready for a day of backstabbing, unaware of the otherworldly beings manoeuvring around him.

