

CHAPTER 1: IT BEGINS

by Paul Watson

The estate of Lord Peter Stone, Duke of Stafford, where the man himself is busy. Assuming you count scowling at the files spread over his dining table to be busy. “Why is he sending me these? He’s trying to bore me to death. Well, I suppose nothing else has worked.”

“You’re kvetching again, dear. I’m sure Jonathon isn’t doing this to deliberately test your patience.”

“Well, I’m not.” he takes a long slurp from his mug of tea, “Look at this. There’s nothing here that’s of any...”

“Excuse me, sir. There is a car at the front gate.”

“Visitors? We’re not expecting anyone, are we?”

“No, sir. Your social diary remains a wasteland.”

“I see. And don’t think I don’t hear the reproach there, Adam.”

“No, sir.”

“Why are you bringing this fact to me, rather than just sending whoever’s there on their merry way?”

“The young lady in question was most insistent on speaking to you, sir.”

“Don’t you go getting soft on me. A pretty face is not enough. I am married.”

“Good of you to remember.”

“Yes, sir. She said her name was Latitia Morn, of MI13, and that she was here on urgent business.”

“Did she now? Well, if Westenra is sending...wait, what name was it?”

“Morn, sir. Latitia Morn.”

Stone rummages through his files, “This her?” he shows the young face, dark skin and closely trimmed hair staring back in the way all identity photographs require.

“Yes, sir.”

“Well, well, well, in that case, let her in. Take her to the kitchen and I’ll meet her there.”

“Sir?”

“I need to change. Meeting her in my dressing gown would give entirely the wrong impression.”

“No matter how accurate it would be.”

The gates of the estate, Latitia sits in her rattletrap car, engine running, waiting. *This was a bad idea. It is such a bad idea. It’s so bad you’d think Jacob...* she stops that line of thought. *What are you doing here? You’re suspended, pending investigation. And here you are interfering in agency business. If you’re lucky, this Stone guy will send you away. You should just go. He’s not going to meet you. Technically, you’re impersonating an agent, which must be a criminal offence, so best case he turns you...*

The tall wrought iron gates start to slowly swing inwards, “His Lordship will see you now.”

“He will?” she replies with a startled yelp and a large swallow.

“Please keep to the roads and paths. We wouldn’t want anything...unfortunate to happen to you.”

“Unfortunate? What do you mean ‘unfortu...’?” but the clipped voice on the other end of the speaker system is clearly not going to elaborate.

Well, too late to back out now. She slowly rolls down the long gravel drive to the house. *This is a secure facility? It looks more like Downton Abbey. Or Pemberley.* It doesn’t look more secure as she approaches, but she can’t escape the feeling of being watched from all sides.

The bushes around the estate lawns, “What? There’s a chariot on the drive? Patrol, halt.

Willowbloom, you’re in charge until I get back. Get them hidden.” The newly promoted patrolman salutes, but Peasebloosom’s already turning away, following her scout through the bushes to peek out.

“That is...it’s almost falling apart. And that smoke can’t be right. Why would anyone with a carriage so poor come to the castle?”

“Well...”

"That was rhetorical, Buttercup, which means I was talking to myself. You go back to the others."
"Are you sure, Sergeant? We're not supposed to leave anyone alone on..."
"Did I just give you an order, Buttercup?"
"Yes, Sergeant." she replies meekly.
"Are you currently obeying that order?"
"Yes, ma'am, I mean, no, ma'am, I mean...I'll fall in with the patrol, ma'am."
"That's better." she turns back to peering between the leaves, "Ooooooh. That aura is something else. Is that what humans are wearing these days? Drab and boring. Poor things. No style at all. Well, she's on the paths, so not my beeswax, I guess. Of course, it wouldn't hurt to be certain. I'll just check her carriage when she's inside. For security purposes."

Latitia climbs the marble steps up to the recessed porchway and rings the bell, the tolling sounding ominous. The door opens. Adam stands there, filling the doorway with sheer presence, "Agent Latitia Morn?"

"Well, um, I..." she straightens, adjusting her suit jacket, regulation black on the regulation white shirt, although the wrinkles are definitely her own invention, "Yes, that's me."

"If you intend no harm to those within his Lordship's house, you may enter."

"What? Oh, no, no, I'm trying to..." she steps across the threshold, feeling a tingle run over her skin, her birthmarks itching in response.

"Follow me, ma'am." he sets off across the foyer, the black and white tiles making dizzying patterns under her feet as she follows.

"Uhm, sorry, but who..."

"Adam, ma'am. Just Adam. Lord Stone's gentleman's gentleman." he opens the door, "Through here."

She follows his stride into the kitchen. "His Lordship will be with you shortly. Would you like some tea?"

"I...I...yes please." *Stop acting like a frightened bimbo in a horror movie! You're an Agent of the Crown. Kinda. Act like it.* "Do you manage this place?"

"Yes, Agent. I have a staff, obviously. The dusting alone would be too much for one man otherwise."

"Right. Yes. Obviously."

"Milk? Sugar?"

"Oh, yes, wait, no sugar."

He passes her a mug from an Easter Egg. Latitia spots a saucer of milk on the floor.

"Thank you. You have a cat?"

"Oh, no, that's for the house spirits."

"House...will his Lordship be long?" she asks, aping Adam's term of address.

"He will be down shortly. For a given value of shortly. Punctuality is not one of his Lordship's most practised skills."

"Oh. It is important..."

"Of course, Agent Morn, but you'd have more luck changing the seasons than hurrying his Lordship."

Another door opens. Lord Stone is now dressed in an expensive, tailored to fit black suit and white shirt, considerably better quality and better ironed than Latitia's. His white hair is swept back, beard trimmed, his shoulders stooped, a pair of owlsh glasses over his nose.

"Telling tales on me already, Adam?"

"Merely preparing the Agent, sir."

Stone's eyes narrow. "Of course."

Adam nods and Stone sits across the wooden table. "So, Agent Morn, what can I do for MI13?"

"I'm here to warn you."

A thick grey eyebrow rises.

"I...we have information that a raid will proceed on this, on your property to steal the Philosopher's

Stone from the..."

"Well, that will be disappointing for whoever's coming. No one's seen hide nor hair of that since I...my great-great-great, you get the idea, grandfather's time."

"Oh?"

"Ancient history. Why the personal visit? I may be a luddite but I do have a telephone. If MI13 wished to warn me..."

Latitia's shoulders sag. "MI13 don't wish to warn you."

"Really? But you are MI13, are you not?"

"I'm not here officially. I'm..."

"Oh, really? I thought you said you had urgent business."

"It is urgent. It just...might not be...official."

"*The Hellspawn, amazingly, tells the truth.*" a masculine voice reports loudly in his mind.

Stone scowls.

"It is important, though. It's..."

"I'm sure. Tell me, Provisional Agent Morn, what do you know about necromancy?"

"Necromancy?" she stops, her brain trying to keep up with the sudden shift in conversation, "It's a magic practice dealing with life and death, primarily death. Used primarily for divination, communicating with dead spirits and...for darker purposes like animating corpses."

"Very good. Directly out of the handbook. Have much experience with it?"

"No, not my area of expertise. Why are you..."

He drops a folder onto the table. "Because according to this dossier, MI13 suspects your involvement in the murder and subsequent soul theft of a young researcher by the name of..."

"...Jacob Samuels." she whispers.

"The very same. So, let's start from the beginning, shall we?"

Latitia sighs. "You know."

"That you're not quite a full agent? That you're currently suspended pending investigation? Yes."

"I didn't kill him. Why..."

"*Truth.*"

"Yes, the why is a bit unclear. So, you tell me what you know and I'll ask questions where it's not what I know."

"Right. Sure." she scratches her arm.

"Let's start with how you know Jacob Samuels."

"We were in the same intake. He was a research student, I was active status. He ran into me, literally, on the way to lectures and I made him take me out to make up for it."

"Mmhmm, mmhmm." Stone nods.

"That didn't lead anywhere romantic, but we became friends. Researcher track is faster than agent, so he was a full researcher while I'm...not quite an agent yet."

"Although, without this incident, you were well on the way to becoming one, no?"

"Doesn't matter now. Even if I'm not found guilty, there's no way they'd put me as an agent."

"Mmhmm. So, you were friends with the deceased for...?"

"Two years more or less. Then last week he came to me and said he'd found something."

"Something?"

She dumps a bag onto the table, pulling out a document folder, "Look. Jacob sent me these just before he..." she trails off. "He said they were being researched but they don't obviously tie together. He thought there was a deeper meaning and that meaning was a plan for a raid here."

"Why didn't you turn these over to the investigation?"

"Are you crazy? If they knew I had these, there's no way they'd believe me that I wasn't involved."

"I can see their point. It does look suspicious. But, for now, do continue."

"I spent all night after he sent them poring over them and his observations were valid. He is...was a very good researcher."

"Did he tell you why he didn't report this through the proper channels?"

"Jacob can get...could get a bit...paranoid, conspiratorial. These files were being researched, which

meant someone in MI13 was researching them. He didn't trust his supervisor not to be in on it. So he sent them to me. I was going to report them to my super but...well, I'm sure that's all in the report."

"All true. For the spawn of Satan, the girl is quite truthful."

"Quite. A young agent, hungry to clinch her status, brings in a conspiracy theory that casts her as the hero. and the unfortunate boy who could corroborate or refute her findings is found dead earlier that morning. It's something out of a low-budget James Bond."

"I didn't kill him! He was my friend!"

"I'm just saying how it looks. Now..."

"Excuse me, sir. Deputy Director Fergusson is at the gates. He insists on seeing you right away."

"About what?"

"I surmise it is about your guest, sir. Specifically his evident desire to take her into custody."