

# CHAPTER ONE

## *Smoke and Mirrors*

Magic is something that most people stop believing in around their eighth birthday. They think that the only magic in the world was in a Disney film they saw as a child or that it came from a magician for hire at one of those birthday parties that has no doubt emotionally scarred all in attendance for the rest of their lives. Well, I can tell you they are wrong. The all-too familiar man in a black-tailed coat, bow tie, and top hat who pulls a suffocated rabbit out of thin air is *not* magic. I've seen magic at its best, its worst, most beautiful, and unfortunately for me, at its most terrifying . . . but then, again, I'm not most people.

Before I go into detail about my first real tangle with magic, I think it's best if I introduce myself. My name is Jon, and I'm an Aquarius, a university classics and ancient history graduate who is self-conscious about being slightly overweight and considers sarcasm to not only be the best form of humour but also uses it as *the* go-to defence mechanism. I inherited a collector's shop in Amersham, just on the outskirts of London. I say antiques collector's shop, but I don't really tend to see too many regular antique hunters cross my doorstep, the reason being that my collector's items are all, or have some connection to, the occult and magical world. For example, I have a two-headed King George coin that always comes up tails, a vanity hand mirror that shows your death as if it were happening right there and then, which is said to be a gift from Doctor Dee to his gracious Queen, allowing her to reign a little longer than expected by most, especially those who attempted to have her assassinated, and a very rare 1602 book of secrets that keeps translating itself into different languages every time a page is turned.

You would think that this makes my life one of excitement and mystery, but the only mystery in my life is the social element that seemed to evaporate when I took over Smoke and Mirrors as a full-time business. That's the name of the shop, Smoke and Mirrors. Cool, huh? We do some face-to-face transactions, but mostly, I pay the rent with online sales, especially around the witches' festivals Samhain, Yule, Imbolg, Ostara, Beltane, Midsummer, Lammas, and Mabon. I keep the accounts on the shop and try to find new ways

to promote the business by reading *The Dumb Guy's Guide to Running a Successful Business* over and over. Unfortunately, this means that the most stimulating conversation I have on a day-to-day basis is with myself, where I usually point out that talking to one's self is the first sign of madness. After agreeing with my familiar statements on insanity, I normally like to keep my head down and only deal with the supposed magical or occult antiques that cross my path in the predictable fashion. But, occasionally, something will jump out of nowhere and catch my attention. This happened when a short round man, soaked through to the bone, opened my shop door, ringing the obligatory bell and signalling it was time for me to become customer-friendly. He squelched his worn leather shoes across my Turkish rug; actually, it was my grandfather's rug. The man claimed that it was a magic carpet from the east, and he took great care in keeping it spotless, leaving great smears from one end to the other. For a man so small in stature, he really did have big feet, and it was those oversized feet that made me examine the man a little more closely.

In complete opposition to my charming yet classic brown side parting of the kind that never goes out of fashion, his thin greying hair stuck to his domed head as all comb-overs do, but it was the penny-sized rounded spectacles and button nose that gave him the appearance of a mole. It didn't help that even with his bottle-cap lenses he still had trouble making out whatever was in front of him until it was an inch from the tip of his nose. I would normally have welcomed this man to a seat and a hot drink, but there was something unsettling about him, and it wasn't just his grey tired skin hanging from his cheekbones or the fact that he had left his mark on my grandfather's rug; it was his black little eyes that stared in a trance-like state as he seemed to examine me in an inhuman manner.

There is only so long that you can pretend not to notice someone until the whole affair becomes uncomfortable, so I decided to begin the usual proceedings. 'Is there anything in particular I can help you find?' I said, moving around a stack of books on Wallachian folklore. His pitch-black glare intensified as his eyes shrunk, and he focused on my face. I kept talking, which is a habit I have when I'm nervous, and to be fair, this man's beady little eyes made me exactly that. 'Are you looking for bargain? Because I've just got a new order of hex bags that have come in from Haitian Central, finest quality.'

'Wayward? You seem different,' said the Mole-man in a rasping voice as if he were in need of an inhaler. Between his beady eyes and rasping lungs, I was surprised he had made it to adulthood.

‘That would suggest we’ve met, and I never forget a face. I’m the owner and proprietor of this collection of fine antiques, and you won’t find a better range of occult and magical tools of the trade than right here at Smoke and Mirrors,’ I said with all the grace of a used-car salesman as I pulled my waistcoat back into shape and straightened my tie.

‘You are Wayward, George Wayward?’ he said with the same rasping voice, but before I could answer him, he exploded into a fit of coughing, struggling to catch his breath. I ran down the aisle of Hoodoo bags next to the dolls and puppets into the back of the shop where I had a basic yet adequate kitchen. Within a few more spluttering coughs, I had returned and was by his side, holding a glass of water. He made no sign to take the glass but only held out his palm, refusing the drink. He turned on the spot, and with his back to me, I saw his hand slip into his pocket followed by a flash of warm orange light and the sudden taste of sulphur. He took a large breath and turned, smiling with contentment; a long pipe now hung between his plump flaky lips.

‘You can’t smoke in here! Nearly everything in here needs to be kept in the best possible condition, including the fifteenth-century tapestry depicting the fall of Abramelin the Mage on the wall behind the counter, which is going to decrease in value every time you blow smoke at it,’ I explained with an irruptive and attempted authoritative manner.

‘But, George, you always let me smoke my pipe before. Why? We always smoked together,’ said the Mole-man with a look of hurt, expelling his contented smile. ‘OK, George, have it your way, but you might change your mind when you see what I have brought you. By the way, when did you start taking Shambala sap? Didn’t take you as the type to want to stay forever young? Although I can imagine the ladies appreciate a few less wrinkles,’ he said as he tapped out the contents of his thin pipe into the glass of water I still held and gave me a rattle of his wheezing laugh.

‘Now just a minute, mate. I think you’ve gone and mistaken me for someone else. My grandfather was George, but I’m Jon, not George.’ Both of us took a minute just looking at each other. I studied him as he studied me, his face full of confusion and mine full of suspicion. A moment turned into a minute and that minute turned into the uncomfortable silence I was trying to avoid earlier. He obviously didn’t believe or understand what I was saying because that same smile of contentment began to spread across his face as if old George had played a trick on him. I had to put a stop to it before he called me George again. ‘Wait a second. Please just listen to me for a moment. I’m not quite sure how you have

confused me for my grandfather, but you have. George, my grandfather, passed away two years ago, leaving this shop to me.’ The Mole-man’s face dropped as the realisation of George’s fate became a reality. ‘Is there something I can do for you, Mr. . . .’ I trailed off, hoping he would fill in the blank.

‘I think I should return at another time perhaps?’ he rasped quieter than before as water glistened in the white of his eyes. ‘But since you are the new proprietor, as you say, I must leave you my card.’ From his pocket came his business card, which he placed in my hand in such a fluid movement I wasn’t sure it had happened until I saw him back across the Turkish rug and halfway through the door, braving the rain once again as he spoke over his shoulder to me. ‘Goodbye, *Jon* Wayward. I will see you soon I am sure.’

‘Can I ask . . . If you knew my grandfather, how did you miss his funeral?’

‘I have been indisposed for many years, and I find it harder to keep track of time these days,’ he finished as the shop door closed behind him, and the bell rang out his exit. He left me with the thought of my grandfather who had raised me as his own. I was glad to recall that memory, then intrigued by the business card in my hand, which only had a name on it accompanied by his job title; it read ‘Procurer’, and I could see why my grandfather had done business with him and potentially had even been friends.

*Surely not*, I thought as I slowly calculated, without using my fingers; my grandfather had been eighty-one when he died, and the Mole-man was not a day over fifty. If he had worked with my grandfather, he would have been a child and not much help in the procuring of occult and magical artefacts. What kept my gaze firmly upon the business card in my hand was the symbol inscribed beneath his name; I hadn’t seen anything like it before. It was no language I had studied within the arcane texts, and it certainly wasn’t a translation of his name that stood out clearly above in swooping calligraphy; his name was Maurice, which somehow suited him perfectly.

Catching me by surprise, the bell rang out again as the shop door opened for the second time that day, and within the brief second it took for my next patron to walk through the door, I had forgotten all about Maurice the Mole-man and his quizzical ways. Standing no more than a foot away and very much in my personal space, once again dripping and marking my grandfather’s rug was the most beautiful woman I had ever seen framed by my very own shop door, and the best part was that she wasn’t just stopping to ask for directions. ‘Mr Wayward?’ she asked with the fragility of an angel.

‘Yes, please call me Jon.’ I rushed my words to make sure she knew I wasn’t my grandfather.

‘Jon Wayward, I need your help,’ she said, smoothing her dark hair down, looking as if she was almost on the verge of crying, and I knew from the moment she walked into my shop I would help her; it was just a matter of when. What can I say; I’m a sucker for a damsel in distress.

‘Let’s get you inside and warmed up,’ I said, taking her sleek black coat and ushering her further into the shop.