



Illicit Magic
Stella Mayweather Paranormal Series #1

Camilla Chafer

ONE

For as long as I can remember, I've been alone. I don't mean in the literal sense. I've had people around me, in the foster homes I've been in, in school, in the places where I've worked, but I've never had a family. I've never had someone to love and I've never had anyone who seemed even remotely concerned about me, never mind love me back. It's not an easy way to live, but I am alive, so it's certainly possible.

I'm Stella Mayweather, a sometimes office temp, a person people seem wary of which does affect my enjoyment of life, no matter how much I say I don't mind. I'm twenty four and have long golden brown hair that falls in gentle waves from a centre parting that just happens naturally. I've got green eyes and through my face is slightly sweetheart shaped in a way that I've never thought characteristically pretty and my nose slim and roman, I think myself attractive in a look-twice-to-check sort of way. I'm slightly taller than average at five feet five but I've always wished for an inch or two more. What girl hasn't?

Occasionally I click that other people think I'm good looking in a handsome way and that gives me a little rush of pride even though the description isn't just plain pretty, but then I often chided myself that I'd rather be handsome than an oxymoron. I certainly don't flinch when I see myself in the mirror and I try my best not to be vain. I like the way I look.

I'm just not sure I like the things that I can *do*.

Strange things happen near me, to me. Strange things happen to other people too.

I've had a lot of time to think about this what with my many moments of quality alone time. Over the past few months, I've thought more and more that all the weird things I've put down to accidents throughout my life are because *of me* rather than a random, if not frequent, collection of events.

I am sure these random, sometimes frightening events are why I don't have friends. People are too cautious of me for that, and when I thought about it properly, I, of them. It's a two vibe that, while not a bad vibe exactly, still puts a barrier in between me and the rest of the world. In my lonelier moments I've often thought that it's no way to live.

I can't stay in any job too long because of these strange happenings; people get scared easily of things, and people, like me, that they don't understand.

Unfortunately being a serial temp means some kind of reputation always precedes me, thankfully it always seems to include I'm a hard worker first if not bizarrely clumsy, second. Clumsy! I sighed. If only. At least I get to switch jobs a lot and by the time people think I'm weird and start avoiding me, I've probably already moved on.

Who would want people to be scared of them? That's what I was thinking when I checked out my reflection in the bathroom mirror at my latest temp job. It was 5.30pm on the dot, the office was starting to close down for the night and I was ready to walk home right after I dragged a comb through my hair. It needed a wash thanks to a day spent filing dusty folders in boxes ready to archive. Not one of my favourite temping jobs but the boredom and dust factor paid extra. Plus, two weeks in and I was already being slung odd looks so I couldn't wait to be out of there and back in my flat.

No, scaring people doesn't give me the kind of rush of power movie megalomaniacs get. Being labelled a weirdo meant I've never had a boyfriend or a best friend and tonight, like so many others, was going to be another dull TV night.

I remembered during a temp job last month I'd searched online using names I vaguely remembered from school. I'd spent a curious hour on Facebook looking at their profiles; reading their non-privacy protected wall posts and marvelling at how they seemed to still keep in touch with each other after all this time. I didn't have that because, as far as I know, they were all very happy to get away from me and nobody ever wondered where I, the freaky girl who everyone avoided, might be.

I gave my reflection a wry smile, smoothed my hair with my hands and slipped the comb into my bag. I left the bathroom, letting the door bang slightly behind me, crossed the landing and merged into the line of people snaking their way downstairs before we could spread out to pass across the lobby. My boot heels echoed as they hit the tiles.

"Night, Stella." The burly bald-headed security guard, Steve, waved a hand at me and I waved back. He'd taken a shine to me and that little interaction might well have been the highlight of my day. Everyone else had ignored me. Even the unpaid intern girl had cast pitying glances at me until she took their cue and started ignoring me too.

I hefted my bag strap so it rested in between my shoulder blades and braced myself for the outside chill as I stepped through the revolving door and out of the shockingly ugly seventies-constructed building.

Sadness for a life that could have been isn't something I dwell on anymore. I'm not sad for myself and I don't feel sorry for myself because I have learned to cope with it over the years and besides, plenty of people have had worst luck than me and it isn't even their doing. I reminded myself of that so often that it was a permanent refrain swimming around in my brain.

I exhaled deeply as the cool air outside the building hit me. I flipped up the collar of my coat, dug my leather gloves out from my pockets and wriggled my fingers inside the cosy jersey lining. It might be spring but it was still cold and I kept my head dipped down from the wind as I started my walk home. I could imagine my co-workers going off to their families – children, parents, siblings, flatmates – but the pang of envy I'd have once felt had all but gone.

Growing up, I lived with foster families; good ones and bad ones. After a while I learned to cope with the ones who didn't seem to want me, just the cash payment. In the last few years of my teens I never even bothered unpacking because the social workers seemed to arrive even quicker than ever to shunt me to a new place.

I think they were all very glad when I turned eighteen and they didn't have to be responsible for me anymore. I couldn't read their minds but I could see the flickers of fear and knew that they had heard stories about me.

There was the time when I was cross about the house where they were taking me – I think I'd been quite happy with the family I was with, they had a nice dog I recalled but I couldn't remember much more this many years later – and the social worker's beaten-up car veered off the road and smashed into a stationary SUV only minutes after we got in. I'd been wishing that something would stop me from leaving. We weren't hurt – though both cars were write-offs – but after one glance into her frightened face I never saw that woman again.

The next social worker to shunt me on to a new home slipped incongruously on the dry path slabs winding from the house to the garden gate and broke her wrist in a clean break. Right after, as she was cradling her arm and whimpering, I looked at her and could see the fear and loathing in her eyes. She called me something unpardonable then I didn't see her again either.

I didn't mean to cause these accidents but I think I *did* cause them. I think that because right before these sorts of things happened, I'd been hoping that something would stop them. Stop these well-meaning people with their coloured card folders and notes and checklists to tick, from shunting me from pillar to post, from house to house (I never called them home, these sleeping and eating places where people were paid to foster children but never be particularly interested in them). Of course,

when something did actually happen, I was shocked but not enough to stop wishing. And when these accidents became too regular, well, that's when people started to be scared of me and I started to wonder what was really going on with me.

I walked past the bus stop, even though it was on my route, because the weather was clear and still just light and the foot bus made for a good workout.

At school, I had tried very hard not to wish for anything and occasionally I had friends but peer pressure and fear of 'the weird girl' plus being shuffled around a lot and changing schools too frequently didn't make for an easy childhood.

So here I was, well into adulthood, living in a not particularly nice flat in a not particularly nice part of London, working temporary jobs for an agency who had my virtues down as 'clumsy, but at least turns up, types fast and doesn't steal anything.' The latter point, I gathered, was the only thing that ensured I got jobs despite the rumours that I was odd, and ensured I got paid a semi-feeble fee that mostly went on renting the not particularly nice flat, which was really a euphemism for 'grubby, overpriced studio for people out of choices'.

And here, again, not quite soon enough, was my walk home, after another day of keeping my head down. It was all basic stuff wherever I went; I filed, made tea, booked people in and made boring phone calls and any other menial task the regular workers felt too above themselves to do. In a rare moment of extravagance, I'd bought a little red digital music player so I could listen to music or audio books during the most boring jobs, like my current one archiving files, and mostly I was glad to be left alone to get through the daily nine to five.

Every so often an accident that couldn't be explained away happened and then I'd be shuffled off to another post for a few days or weeks.

Striding onwards towards home, I thought back to last autumn. I had managed an entire two months on a reasonable weekly rate at an office supply firm which only ended because my pot-bellied, sweaty boss, Albert, had put his hand on my thigh, a little too far up, a little too intentionally and far too forcefully, at the Christmas bash. My concentration was destroyed and a fully loaded bookshelf, previously bolted to the floor, had uprooted itself and landed on him, missing me by a hair's breadth. No one could work out how it the bookshelf had shaken itself from its bolts. I heard the odious Albert was in hospital for quite a while.

I would have felt mildly sorry for him, guilty even because I'd probably urged that bookshelf out of its position – I had been wishing for it – but he had tried to shirk paying the agency my fee and it had taken them some time to wangle the money out him. It wasn't my favourite Christmas, out of a whole bunch of mediocre Christmases.

This had all been gleaned from my loose-mouthed manager at the temping agency in Charing Cross while she assessed me in the New Year with her unwavering eyes

and contemplated whether she thought I was as weird as her co-workers thought. Evidently, she didn't mind as she kept sending me work and I kept turning up and she kept getting her commission. That her co-workers had called me a witch was something she was polite enough to keep to herself. I had glimpsed it on an email sat on her computer when she had turned away to pick up a print out with the details of my latest assignment.

It wasn't the first time I'd heard the word 'witch' levelled at me but it was starting to rattle me, especially given the spate of recent murders.

So far my lonely life was working out, sort of, until today. I'd turned up to work as normal. I'd hefted files into books, labelled and taped them up on repeat. I took lunch by myself, sat on the nylon carpet floor of the filing room, my back to the cool metal cabinets, while reading a glossy magazine I'd lifted from the reception area. The afternoon was spent boxing up more of the several feet of files that the regular employees had left to grow into a big old mess before anyone had thought to do anything about it.

When I finally stepped out of the office and briefly watched other workers giggle and wave to each other, make plans for the weekend or give each other grim warnings of walking alone in the dark, the last of daylight had just about slunk away, leaving dusk licking at the fringes of my solitary little world.

It was colder than you would expect from London in March. Somehow the universe had lost the memo that it was almost summer and through the course of the day the sky had turned from pale cloudy blue to a dull sludgy grey and there was condensation in the air from the afternoon rainfall. I wished I didn't have to trudge home but I got on with it one foot after the other, little steps that took me closer to the not particularly nice flat and a microwave dinner that I'd eat on the sofa in front of the TV.

That was my plan until I was half way home that night. It was a simple plan, a boring plan, but it was mine.

And then all hell broke loose.

Every step away from the monstrous architecture of my current office block took me further away from the safety of bustling buildings and the broad-windowed coffee shops and delis that lived on every corner. Just these few miles alone housed hundreds of thousands of people every day before they dispersed like homing pigeons into the suburbs.

It had taken me only twenty minutes to leave the homeward-bound crowd behind as I plodded further north, every footstep taking me into the quieter surroundings of London's residential streets. With my shoulders hunched up and my eyes on the pavement, I took little notice of people around me as I slipped past them. As usual they were merely on the periphery of my consciousness; faceless people that were

barely worth raising my eyes for as I walked on auto-pilot through these familiar streets. It was safer for them that way. Safer for me too.

The noise that jolted my brain awake from its post-work stupor wasn't anything unusual, but it was ... out of place. A single footfall, a heavy one, then there was a shuffle and a stomp of feet. Most of all it was the quiet that surrounded that first stomp. It felt – and I struggled to put the thought together coherently – the quiet felt *wrong*.

I blinked and felt the muscles in my face twitch as I went on alert. I hadn't even noticed that the street noise I'd been ignoring so intently had slipped away entirely. I strained to hear. No dogs barked, no doors opened or closed and the hum of engines seemed to have stopped in time.

I barely slowed my pace but my body and brain were on alert. I tipped my chin upwards, blinking at the wet air and wrinkled my nose to sniff the silent breeze, not sure what I should be looking for but knowing that my senses were telling me to be wary. I had learned already not to doubt my instincts just as I'd learned not to focus too intently on anyone, lest anything unfortunate happened. They invariably did anyway.

Like most city-dwellers, I'd perfected my mental blinkers so I could ignore the constant humdrum of activity that occurred all around me in the capital. So far, my thoughts on my walk home that evening were as mundane as they could possibly be; after reminiscing about my past I'd switched to what I needed to add to the grocery list, for one, what show might be on my elderly TV later, should I buy some thicker tights for the cold spring, why had I worn a skirt when it wasn't quite warm enough yet? Those fleeting thoughts were safe, familiar, unlike the strange awareness of activity that I felt humming in the air now. I'd focused on the mundane trivialities of my life and neglected to take note of what was going on around me. I hoped I wouldn't pay for that mistake.

I didn't know what evil smelled like, if it could even have a scent, but I was sure I could feel menace in the air. It was thick and heavy, like left over cigarette smoke clinging to day old clothes and it was reaching towards me. Acrid and poisonous air, more so than the usual fuel-scented city smog that drifted across the pavements at this time of day, mixed with the hour-old rain ... a cold chill dashed down my spine and I shivered.

Slowing just a pace or so, I casually glanced over my shoulder, twitching my head from side to side so I could toss my hair out of my collar like that was all I meant to do. From the corners of my eyes, I scanned the road but I didn't see anything so I kept on my way, my ears primed for any sound, my muscles on alert though I couldn't fathom why.

They say that you should trust your sixth sense. Mine never teased.

Stomp.

There it was again.

My hearing spiked as I tried to zone in on the direction of that heavy footfall. I didn't have to wait long. It was followed by another then there was the faintest sound of more footsteps falling in to join the first. It was like they had just appeared, footsteps falling from nowhere. But what shook me was that they were beating down on the pavement exactly in time. Footsteps in London – in the tail end of rush hour as everyone packed up and jostled to get home on crammed buses, the stifling tube or, like me, walking home if the distance was close enough to allow it – was hardly unusual but the staccato *stomp, stomp, stomp* of their regimented treads made my muscles tighten in fear. It was too weird to be coincidence.

I wanted to run.

Instead I allowed myself to quicken my pace and, after a moment, the footsteps quickened with me.

I exhaled one long breath that plumed in the air in front of me before disappearing in the wet breeze. Somewhere behind me I heard a grunt, an ugly guttural sound. I couldn't be sure of the distance but it wasn't nearly far enough away for my liking.

If I hadn't been certain before, I was now. I was being followed.

Think, I told myself. What would some kick-ass girl do? She'd run, I thought, surprising myself. No question about it. Kick-ass heroines get themselves killed. Practical ones ran. I was nothing if not practical.

I was nearly at the intersection of the main road. Seeing an opportunity to shake off my pursuers I banked quickly to the left, around the side of a 24-hour Booze Bin with big posters in the window announcing wine on a two-for-one deal for Friday nights. I stumbled past the crowd of teens hanging near the doorway, hoods pulled up to hide their pasty faces as they clinked their little bottles of illicit alco-pops. One leaned in to light a cigarette from the barely glowing embers of his friend's fag and puffed a nasty little cloud of smoke in my face. I glared at him and he shrunk back.

Okay, so maybe I was passively-aggressively kick-ass but at least I could scare a teenybopper successfully.

A quick scan confirmed that other than that little group, the street was empty of people. I darted forward trying to put as much distance between me and the footsteps as I could. I hadn't power walked further than fifty feet before I realised that the footsteps had – and my heart sank a little – followed me. I hardly dared spare the time to look behind me as my power walk turned into a sprint, my leather bag on its long strap banging uncomfortably against my hip as the contents slid around. For the third time today, I cursed this morning's decision to wear a skirt, and, for good

measure, threw in regret for my long leather boots that were really no match for a good pair of running trainers. They were already beginning to rub my heels uncomfortably.

But then, how could I have known today would end like this? Crap days really should come with fashion warnings, I mused, not that I was exactly up on fashion.

The day hadn't ended, I reminded myself, but I didn't want to finish the trail my thought processes had unfortunately latched on to, which weren't suggesting anything nice at all.

I jogged forward, not quite in a run, and another turning came up. I threw myself around the corner and as fast as I could down the road before dashing full throttle into the nearest shaded driveway. It was surrounded by overgrown hedge and I was glad the drive had its old tiles and hadn't been replaced with gravel like so many of the houses in the area. Crunching underfoot wouldn't give me away.

I pinched my nose between my gloved fingers to stop a sneeze and shrank back against the hedge and quickly circled my head to assess my surroundings. I was in the garden of a Victorian house with a big bay window that had a bad case of peeling paint. The ledge looked rotten. In the rolling dusk, combined with the overgrown hedge, it looked a decrepit house though it must have been lovely once when it wasn't so neglected. The lights were off and a curtain hung limply – not quite on every hook and a little too short – to one side like it was broken and forgotten. It didn't quite screen the shadowy room.

It should have been an impressive house and I felt sad that it had been unloved. Being somewhat of a TV property show aficionado, I couldn't help thinking that the add-on eighties porch sagging against the shadow of the street lamp was tantamount to housing abuse. However, I was thankful that I could conceal myself there behind the thick overgrown privet, standing in the crux of its right angle between the street and the nearest neighbour. I bent forward to rest my hands on my thighs and, grateful for the cover, I gasped breath into my heaving lungs after the sudden unexpected sprint.

It was only scant seconds before I heard the footsteps nearby. They had either seen me come about the corner, or guessed that I had. My heart thumped inside my chest. So much for shaking them off. They stopped somewhere in the street but I couldn't gauge how far away even though I could hear them stamp a little as the air took on a glacial chill. The hedge was too dense to see out, or in, and without looking I couldn't tell if they were looking towards my hiding place or away towards the main road. I hoped they would head that way, figuring I would be seeking a busy place and lights just like lone women were always told to. Lights meant safety. Crap. I was definitely in the wrong place.

Sharp, murmured voices passed me on the wind. I couldn't make out what they were saying but there was the sound of confusion and dissent, then a barked order calmed them. I caught the sole word 'silence' from a low voice as it hissed past me. The footsteps shuffled and stamped again but no one uttered a word. It was like they were all listening for me. I felt like a fox knowing that the beagles were just behind me, waiting to catch my scent.

Above me I could just see the first quarter of the moon breaking in the sky, casting a dim glow over the city. I was grateful we hadn't yet made it to daylight saving time and that the evenings still became dark early. My jacket was a dark padded cord, good for blending to both the hedge and low-light; the last days of spring had turned into an unexpected cold snap and my breath was catching like little puffs of cloud in the air so I pulled up my cheap navy striped scarf and covered my mouth so the plumes couldn't stray where they could be seen.

Without moving the rest of my body, I strained my head towards them, the scarf tightening about my neck. I tried to count how many footsteps I could hear as they shuffled, fanned out and regrouped.

With only my pounding heartbeat for company I waited for what seemed like eternity. I tried to count Mississippi's to gauge the time but my mind stumbled over the count and I threw the thought away. I waited for what seemed like hours for them to rush past me, or at least turn and stamp a different way, hoping miserably that they really hadn't seen me dart into this street.

I couldn't hear a thing. Had I made it up? Was I paranoid enough to think someone would bother following me? Probably. It wasn't the first time I'd been extra cautious, but it was the first time since the news has been full of murder. I shivered.

Edging my way across the privet, the leather of my long boots brushed against each other as I sidestepped, the toes scuffing the scrub of garden. Fronds of hedge needled my back through my winter coat as I brushed by and fresh drops of dew slid uncomfortably past my scarf and inside my collar.

With my mouth set in a firm, grim line, clamped so tightly shut I was close to grinding my teeth, I made the worst move I could have played.

I peeked my head forward, mere millimetres from the hedge but enough to see a gloved hand shoot towards me and grab my coat, the fingers clawing at my shoulder to grab a handful of material. A gasp escaped me. How had they gotten so close without me realising? Another hand, yellowed at the finger tips and reeking of tobacco, reached for my neck.

A gruff male voice snarled, "Gotcha!"

I shrieked and my whole body went rigid as I closed my eyes tightly. The air went thick and heavy around me, the cold momentarily disappeared and the blood in my

veins surged as electricity crackled through my body. For the merest second all the low light and dull sounds of the city disappeared as the power rushing through me overwhelmed and took possession of me.

I thought I would die in this moment, with the hand at my neck and the fear pumping alongside the electricity, but when I opened my eyes again I was the other side of the street looking at my attacker grasping at the air where a second ago my neck had been. I saw his fist punch savagely through the air where my jaw should have been. If I had still been there, he would have smashed it for sure.

I felt dizzy and willed myself not to faint. The last of the shriek ebbed in my throat as I realised that I had barely focused on the task but had ended up exactly where I had thought I should be when I'd glimpsed that section of empty street. Perhaps my strange gift – I had never decided what I should call it – only worked properly when I was terrified. It wasn't something I had even been able to closely control before. And right now, I wasn't afraid to admit that, even if it was only in my head, I was absolutely, gut-wrenchingly, terrified.

As I stood there gaping, there was a shout and a cry of anger. A huddle of stocky beings had fanned out behind my attacker and they seemed to multiply by the second. They were searching for me; their prize, such as I apparently was, had escaped. There must have been a dozen or so, broad shoulders clad in identical black wool coats, zipped to the chin like workmen. Woollen hats were drawn close over their foreheads and rested just above their eyes. Between the two garments, the gang's features were obscured so I could see nothing more than thin, snarled mouths and square chins. One of them had smeared black paint across his cheeks and I couldn't help thinking that he looked like he was at war.

I had never known such anger and it was all aimed at me.

I shouldn't have watched them for those few seconds, shouldn't have drank in their darkness, because it took them a fraction less time to spot me. A cry rang out. It echoed through the gang, passing from one to another like a rallying cry until the cacophony of anger and disgust reached me.

Any woman would be afraid of a gang of men chasing her. How many times had I heard the women at work in my varying temping jobs recently warn each other to 'walk straight home' and 'don't take short cuts' or 'don't be afraid to knock on a door with a light on if they were being followed'. They reminded each other with that vague hint of mawkish glee that horrible things could happen and weren't they good about being proactive and warning each other? 'Don't be afraid to spring for a taxi', they said, better safe than sorry, better than ending up dead, or worse. How hollow their words sounded to me. No one seemed to ever think to suggest that maybe, just maybe, someone should be warning killers off, rather than offering advice to their potential victims.

Of course I was afraid, my whole body was afraid, but not of a beating, or losing my wallet, or of rape – though I didn't want any of those things to happen to me – what I was afraid of was worse because I was sure now that there could only be one thing that had drawn them to me, instead of the millions of other women in the city. The suspicion dragged at me but I didn't have time to fully think it through as their words, like a chorus, hung in the air between us and sent a shiver down my spine. My pursuers confirmed my worst thoughts.

“The witch,” they hummed as one, spitting the words onto the wet air to float towards me. “Catch the witch. Burn the witch. *Burn her.*”

The men stepped as one off the kerb and swarmed towards me. The man who had done his best to smash my jaw didn't move, though he was poised to spring, and it was his solid glare that frightened me the most. He was capable of unspeakable things I was sure.

The fear that had been rising in me was utterly, utterly justified. I didn't need to think about it. I spun on my heel and ran as fast as I could, my shoulder bag whacking me painfully on the hip in the same place it had struck before as I hurtled away from the gang. I would bruise, but it hardly seemed to matter. That was by far the lesser of the evils that would follow me now.

I would be lucky if a bruise from my bag was all I escaped with.

Now I knew them for what they were.

My life depended on my escape.

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