

## WHO AMONG US... - sample chapter

### PART 1

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The first sign of trouble began on Katzenberg, on the pavements outside Frieda Schoenhofer's office. Early morning pedestrians, tipped off by messages and phone calls, heard the peel of a solitary bell and quickened their pace; others stopped and changed direction. All of them, distracted and disturbed by the promise of another Bamberg incident, headed up the hill towards the Cathedral and the morbid invitation of the bell.

Frieda grinned, secured her motor bike and joined the growing line of pilgrims. Her phone rang and a voice said, "Have you seen him yet? You owe us a thousand euros, loser."

She trotted uphill, eager to race ahead of the crowd. The chatter diminished. The noise of the bell increased. Her heart pounded when she rounded the southern end of the Cathedral where the Domplatz opened out and the wind unleashed its energy. A huge mob had gathered along the edge of a swollen police cordon. Frieda used her crash helmet to push through to the front, forcing her way forward from Bamberg sunlight to Cathedral shadow until the police tape stopped her from going any farther.

Outside the north entrance, plain clothes cops wrestled with an inflatable forensics marquee. A squad car made way for a van with three officers balancing on the roof. And above them all, hanging from the ornate cornice surmounting the portal, a rope and a bell, and beneath the bell the trussed up body of a naked corpse swinging upside down in the turbulence like a human pendulum. With every dizzying pass from left to right, right to left, the bell rang and celebrated another moment of Bamberg's tormented history.

Frieda's phone rang again and the same voice sang to her, "Ding dong the witch is dead, witch is dead, witch is dead. Ding dong the wicked witch is dead. . . ."

She ended the call and laughed so loud Kriminalkommissar Oliver Tollmann heard her. He pulled out of the contest with the struggling marquee and led Frieda down the police tape away from the crowd. "You find this funny?"

"No, no. Not him. Not exactly. No. Sorry. He wasn't a witch, that's all."

"What do you mean?"

"Nothing. Someone is mistaken." Frieda's soft, almost reluctant voice contrasted with the bright enthusiasm in her eyes; her exuberant smile, wide and generous, masked a latent indifference to the pain of others.

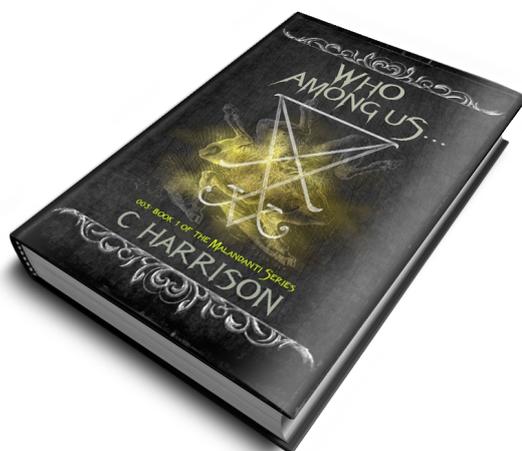
Tollmann's features creased with repulsion, transforming every time the bell rang; a gentle clang that increased his frustration at the efforts to reach the dangling body.

"They're not quite tall enough, are they?" Frieda said. "I thought there was a minimum height to join the police? Is he dead?"

"Of course he's dead . . . Don't, stop. Stop doing that."

"Doing what?"

"Who did this, Frieda?"



"I don't know."

"You do know. You're always around somewhere when these things happen."

"You're being paranoid. How did he die?"

"You tell me."

"How should I know?"

Even from a distance and with the frantic scene populated by police and police vehicles, Frieda could see a line of blood traced across the ground beneath the path of the swinging body. "Throat cut?"

"Fucking nail through his neck or a . . . a coach bolt or something, I don't know. Why am I telling you? You already know. It's all linked isn't it?"

"What is?"

"You. The covens. You did this?"

"What, him? I didn't do this. I can't reach up there."

"Well, who did?"

"Someone above the law."

"What?"

"Come on, you know they're everywhere."

"Who is everywhere?"

"Whoever is committing these lawless acts."

"You're taking the piss now."

"I have to go. I have a meeting this morning."

"How convenient. How is business?"

"It's very good. Thank you for asking. And you should be grateful."

"Why?"

"Because without all this crime you'd be out of a job. Look at all the employment it creates." She walked away.

Tollmann wasn't finished. "They'll get to me eventually."

"Why is that?"

"They don't think I'm up to it. They think all this is beyond me. And do you know what?"

"What?"

"Good." Tollmann's body shook. "Fuck them. I don't care any more, if they demote me, transfer me back to traffic, whatever. Fuck it. This goes beyond Bamberg and nobody gives a shit."

Frieda wanted to place a comforting hand on Tollmann's arm and reassure him, but her hands were full and she knew there was more to come, more misery waiting for him. She was curious to see the form it would take.

"This is not a Bamberg problem. This is a European problem," he said.

"Why are you telling me?"

"Because you're part of it. And you do know the people involved. You know how far it extends."

Frieda puffed her cheeks. "If you need any help, for what it's worth," she nodded towards the spire of the Cathedral's Gothic tower. "Watch what happens up there."

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On a normal day the office of Schoenhofer crackled and fizzed with ideas. A white open plan field of static electricity from a permanent brainstorm, a permastorm, of money-making ideas.

But today was different. Today, the investment strategies of advisers made way for the modus operandi of murderers. Being tied into a contract didn't have the same urgency as being tied to a bell. Frieda heard an unfamiliar murmur, the unwelcome sound of trivial speculation. Gossip.

She kept her coat on and was ready to go straight back out again, but she noticed the new lawyer sitting at her workstation, hands clamped around a cup of coffee. "Are you okay?" said Frieda.

The lawyer shook her head.

"What's the problem?"

"The Cathedral."

"Did you see the victim?" said Frieda. The lawyer shook her head again. "If you didn't actually see it then you can't be so traumatised by it. You're imagining demons. Stay at work and distract yourself."

"I was in the square," she said. "I heard other people talking about it."

"But you didn't actually see anything. Stop torturing yourself. You'll be okay once you start working on something."

The business bric-a-brac on Frieda's own desk challenged her every morning. She couldn't sit down without assessing it, and every morning came to the same conclusion. The complicated phone, the dozing laptop, the wooden puzzles, they all served a purpose, all had their reason to occupy those few square centimetres of office desk real estate. . . .

"Your meeting. . . ." Frieda's PA leaned around the door frame and waved a tablet.

She checked her watch. "Yes. My meeting."

"Quite a morning. People are wondering who he was, how he got there, who would do something like that?"

"Theo Wenders, nail through the neck, very bad people." Frieda tutted. "Very very bad people."

Now that the morning's murder had been explained Schoenhofer came alive. Office phones trilled, printers cleared their throats and the whole mechanised digitised paraphernalia of commerce reanimated. Frieda checked her rucksack once more and headed out.

"What time are you back?" said her PA.

"No idea."

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To the north of Bamberg lay the medieval pile of the Ransahlhof, and to the north of the Ransahlhof stood the Hunting Tower. The hollow column protruded from bare scrubland when it was first constructed, but centuries of forest growth left the tower imprisoned by invasive vegetation so dense only the owners and several satellites knew it existed. Every time Frieda arrived the automatic gates welcomed her with a gasp of rusty bronchitis and a prolonged squeal of geriatric metal hinges.

And every time she arrived on the Ducati she reminded herself to visit next time in the Aston Martin. The rippled cobbles of the drive squirmed through the woodland scrub like a hardened serpent, rattling the Ducati's frame and threatening to shake off Frieda's helmet.

The drive arrived at the crumbling bole of the tower and its long eroded decoration and stonework covered by an autumnal rash of creeping vines. Stonework from which eight enemies of the Ransahlhof's owners were hung on meat hooks in 1593.

At ground level the shadow of the tower crossed the spot where Jacob of Rote's father landed after he was thrown off the top by Jacob in 1712. Frieda avoided the Bentleys and BMWs, Porsches and Ferraris, and parked her motorcycle next the shallow depression in the gravel created by the thud of the falling body. (Or so she liked to imagine.)

From here, Frieda left her helmet attached to the bike, and set off on a twenty minute hike through the claustrophobic woodland of the estate to the rotten carcass of the Ransahlhof. Beyond the canopies, high above the grabbing tree tops with their upturned claws and cackling rooks, the sky began to darken as heavy cloud rolled in from the east. The mood of the forest shifted from light to dark, like a shadowy heartbeat, every time the sun attempted to break the cloud.

The Ransahlhof introduced itself almost apologetically, as if taken by surprise. A collapsed pile of stones, an iron fence lunging from the brambles, and two decapitated stone pillars, their footpath long since devoured by encroaching groundcover. Up ahead, at the base of a weathered wall worn smooth by abrasive winds Karin Vogts, the coven leader, stood like a blackened sentinel outside the main entrance. She was already dressed for the ritual, her pointed hood lying flattened on a semi-collapsed wall. "We're waiting for one more," she said to Frieda. "If you change inside, use the ante-room. Everywhere else is rigged to go."

Inside the crumble and squalor twelve coven members waited in silence for the thirteenth: Dorothea, the widow. Late again - as she was for her husband's funeral.

Frieda was dressed in her robe and hood when Dorothea arrived in a fluster and full of apologies. Karin confirmed the coven was complete and led the gathering away to the underground chamber where the meeting would take place.

They followed the same route - the only route - deep into the building, retreating from the outside world, the real world. Candle light played across the walls and worn carvings of illustrations from Agrippa's *De Occulta Philosophia*: illuminated figures coming and going as the flickering flames touched them and gave momentary life.

The gentle echo of synchronised footsteps became a hypnotic rhythm. Frieda's mind wandered into a private darkness and her thoughts turned to Lena, the previous leader of the Bamberg coven. Lena preferred open spaces, large spaces, gathering points for the numerous covens from Wurzburg and Munich, Oberamergau and Nurnberg. She avoided the damp and the slime of the Ransahlhof where every corridor had its own unique breath: a lukewarm whisper or an icy draft. Where every turn of a corner slapped the face with an onrush of circulating air through the old passageways, as if lost in time, trying to find the exit. Trying to exhale. This is what happened when a building held its breath for too long.

For a moment the procession found itself outside in the dim cloudy daylight. They passed through the cavity created by a destructive fire that had burned away the roof and created a new courtyard. Frieda, woken by the change of light, saw the empty shell of the building and reminded herself to find Dmitri Neved. Find him and ask him again why his wife Lena went to England? Why she became obsessed with *Toten Herzen*, the rock band with the rumours and the secrets and possibly the answers to Lena's questions?

After the cold courtyard, the route plunged into the ever-darkening hole of a spiral staircase. The windows diminished in size until the candles provided the only hint of light.

Frieda wondered why the others chose to join the coven after Lena's had been wiped out on the mountain tops in England. The coven offered Frieda advantages, business opportunities, openings. But the others? What was in it for a dog breeder from Hungary? Was the headmaster spying on his own teacher? Did the twins simply enjoy dressing up? Membership of the coven demanded the surrender of identity and once inside the hoods the thirteen individuals became thirteen pairs of eyes, thirteen mouths. No expressions, no emotions. No signals. . . .

The journey ended when the sound of dripping water fell onto stony ground. Here, at the bottom of the abyss, a circular chamber waited for the arrival like a stagnant pocket of air. Hacked and carved out of the rock without undermining the foundations of the building, the chamber revealed its patterned floor, its decorated tiles and faded pentacle. Grim symbols of alchemy, of hermetic

secrets coloured grey by ancient layers of lichen bloomed into golden life as thirteen candles were set down. In the middle of the pentacle, the grinning face of Baphomet looked up at the coven assembling around the glow of the circle. His horns no longer displayed the virulent fires of his first incarnation when the chamber was created three hundred years ago. But his intent was permanent.

Beyond him, beyond the flicker of light, the gloomy outlines of the coven and the smeared shadows cast against the rough stone walls, two doors opened out to a terrible darkness and two unending corridors of intense subterranean night time. Two nightmarish tunnels.

Karin's form hung like a slender faltering lampshade; the feeble candlelight unable to reach the top of her hood where it merged into the low lying darkness of the chamber. "Considering what has happened this morning I think we should take a moment to reflect. I thought it appropriate we should make an offering in fire. We neglect the power of fire to cleanse the air, to cleanse the atmospheric poisons."

Frieda stood opposite Simon Frenzel (nervous Simon) framed by the eye holes of her hood. His subdivided figure studied Karin and Frieda waited for his reaction to the rearranged format of the gathering, the hasty change of agenda.

"Let us offer fire." Karin held a length of hazel in her right hand and a small sapphire in her left. Palms up she positioned the sapphire above the hazel and blew across the gem until a small flame danced away from the surface of her glove. Sustained by willpower the flame lingered and listened to the coven's 14th century fire incantation.

'We call to the south and the equatorial heat, we call to the earth's internal fires, we call to the sun and the life giving inferno.'

The offering moved left to Karin's colleague, and on to the next and the next . . . a circular chorus line of flames: the headmaster and the twins; the dog breeder; each producing a small tongue of writhing fire. Frieda held out her hands, offered her own hazel wand and sapphire, and breathed into life the seventh flame. Frenzel studied her studying him through the haze.

The offerings continued around the circle and arrived at Frenzel's trembling hands. He hesitated. "I'm sorry, but I feel very cold. . . ."

"That's fine Simon. We can return to you." Karin allowed him a moment as the circle completed. Twelve figurines of fire cast a delicate glow across the patient hooded faces of the coven. And the fleshy mounds of Frenzel's upturned palms shook with nothing more than fear.

"I think we have a problem," said Karin.

"I think we have our intruder," said Frieda.

Frenzel bolted for the nearest open door. No one moved. Instead, they listened to his footsteps diminish, fade like an old memory until there was nothing to be heard. A calm fell over the circle. The eternal rhythm of the dripping water ticked away the seconds, the moments; ticked away Frenzel's disappearance, his hopeful escape and his inevitable return. . . .

Footsteps approached, a clattering flight from unseen dread. Frenzel burst from the darkness beyond the second open door. His momentum and surprise threw him down into the middle of the circle where he landed against the expectant face of Baphomet. He looked up at Frieda, astonishment visible through the holes of his hood. She was wrong about the hoods: when emotion was intense, when the man inside was desperate and terrified, the fabric deformed, the inner identity transferred to the outside where it soaked into the fibres like a hideous ink stain.

"Are you lost, Simon," said Karin. "All paths lead to our eventual death. That's the great practical joke of life. Everything comes down to this."

The coven lifted his exhausted body and carried it to the bell tower and a muted timber-lined room ringed by glassless windows boarded up with plywood that heaved with every gust of wind. Below the windows lay several tidy piles of broomsticks. The bell had been removed, leaving a

supporting framework of weathered wood and gristly metal. He was woven into it; legs tied to the matrix of diagonal spars, arms trussed to horizontal beams.

Panic dribbled from his mouth. "They know I'm here. They'll come. They know I'm here, they know where I am."

Karin leaned into the framework of the timbers. "Do you think we don't know you're being tracked? Well, let them come. It's a pity you can't see what happens."

"We don't mind waiting," said Frieda.

And so they did, and Frenzel was right. The police knew where he was and came for him. Frieda counted four marked police cars, two unmarked, blue lights rotating and flashing, but no sirens. The arrival thrashed through the scrub and bushes. Tyres dragged across the gravel as the brakes gripped.

Frenzel heard the arrival and yelled for attention.

"Even if they hear you, Simon, they still have to reach you up here. There's a reason why we chose the Ransahlhof to meet your employers. . . ."

The police barged through the fragile entrance. Poured into the building. Frieda watched, but could only imagine what happened next when the noise of fractured floors and burning timbers devoured the latest wave of visitors.

In the bell tower the building's agony rose up to Frenzel and the coven. The floor shuddered and the frame creaked like an old ship.

"Even if you kill me, they'll find you."

"No, they won't," said Karin.

The Ransahlhof rattled again and released another shriek of masonry.

"I'm married, did you know that?" said Frenzel. "I have three children. One has just started school. She loves to tell me what she studied when she comes home." He tugged at the ropes.

"That's emotional blackmail, Simon," said Karin. "Most of us have families. If you have your way we'll never see our families again. Do you think I'm going to put your children ahead of mine?"

"But we can all benefit. No one needs to suffer from this."

"What makes you think they'll miss you? You knew the risks when you signed up for this. Whatever misery your family endures is your fault. Your responsibility, Simon. Don't try to pass your responsibility onto someone else."

From inside the hoods, the men of the coven stared at Frenzel. They all had families, all had children. All of them fathers, brothers, sons. Frenzel appealed to them, to the humans inside the hoods.

Karin took a call on her phone. "An SEK back-up's on its way. We have fifteen minutes."

"Why didn't you warn Theo Wenders he was in danger?" said Frieda.

"I don't know," said Frenzel. "I didn't know you were so aware."

"Why didn't he warn you?"

Frenzel cried like an angry child and snatched at the ropes. Fumes from the fires below engulfed the bell tower.

"Don't tell me," said Frieda. "He didn't know. After four months did either of you learn anything?"

"You're all insane. You're all fucking evil. Fucking evil bastards."

Frieda closed the shutters of the bell tower.

"You're even wrong about that." Karin blew out the only candle. In the concealed corners and crevices of the roof, glowing eyes leered down at the captive still wrapped and trapped by the lattice of the bell tower's strangulating frame.

Frieda's heart thumped in time to the clump of footsteps across the timber floors swept by the brushwood of besoms. The coven gathered their waiting broomsticks, paused to allow the energy of

an ancient spell to charge the atmosphere and held on as the besoms twitched angrily. Unable to hold back the energy any longer, Frieda's besom sparked and fired forward, blasting through the flimsy shuttering of the bell tower window. She launched away from the Ransahlhof, hanging onto to the wood tucked under her left shoulder.

Like violent spores pulsing from stone fungus the coven members poured into the light and circled the tower, circled the ruined aftermath of the police arrival; the rubble and soot, scattered vehicles and ugly black smoke pouring from every ground floor orifice.

And once again Frieda saw him, sat on his backside, shocked and wounded: Kriminalkommissar Oliver Tollmann shielding his eyes as she flew like a bird. The others hurtled away to the north and the Hunting Tower, but Frieda couldn't resist a closer look. She swooped low, around the shoulder of the building and passed over Tollmann's head. A colossal static charge plucked him off the ground and dropped him several metres away where he landed in a clumsy bundle. One final look over her shoulder, uproarious laughter lost in the scream of the besom's shockwave and she was off, darting towards the Hunting Tower, exhilarated and ecstatic.

She dropped down next to Karin's Mercedes and listened to her conversation over the in-car phone. ". . . We've left him in the same place and this time can you dispose of him in a slightly less eccentric manner than Wenders? . . . A bet?" She glanced at Frieda. "Yeah, she's here now . . . Well, if you're confident then get on with it. I don't want to know." She hung up. "You bet they couldn't hang Theo Wenders from the Cathedral entrance?"

Frieda nodded and collected her breath. "They're full of shit. We can do this, we can do that. The stunt cost me a thousand Euros."

"And how much will this bet cost?"

"Five thousand. But they'll have to pay me this time. I'm sure of that." She lied. She wasn't sure. In spite of the challenge these people could be very inventive.