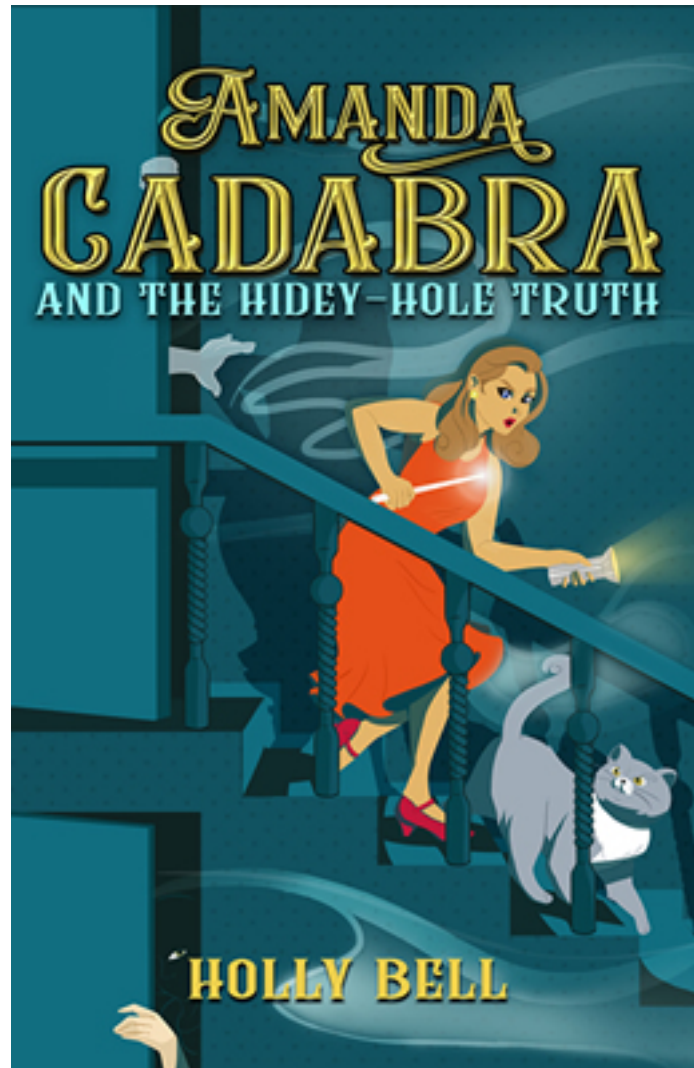


Amanda Cadabra and The Hidey Hole Truth

by

Holly Bell



Contents

[Introduction](#)

[Chapter 1: The Day of the Incident](#)

[Chapter 2: Death and Magic](#)

[Chapter 3: Tea and Evasion](#)

[Chapter 4: Sunken Madley](#)

[Chapter 5: Gut Feeling](#)

[Chapter 6: The First Sign](#)

[Chapter 7: Careers Advice](#)

[Chapter 8: Wicc'huldol and Amanda's First Test](#)

[Chapter 9: Romeo and Juliet, Becoming Amanda and the Voice in the Night](#)

[Chapter 10: Perran Cadabra and Magic Fever](#)

[Chapter 11: Heirlooms](#)

[Chapter 12: The Student's Choice and The Familiar](#)

[Chapter 13: Dr Bergstrom's Invention and the Power of Petite](#)

[Chapter 14: Preparing](#)

[Chapter 15: Claire and a Brave New World](#)

[Chapter 16: A Surprise Visit and The Smell](#)

[Chapter 17: The St Piran](#)

[Chapter 18: Managing Thomas, and Granny Transforms Herself](#)

[Chapter 19: What Thomas Heard](#)

[Chapter 20: New Men](#)

[Chapter 21: The Banister Job](#)

[Chapter 22: Footsteps Above and Something On The Stairs](#)

[Chapter 23: Clairy Godmother and At The Top of the Stairs](#)

[Chapter 24: The Floor of Peacock](#)

[Chapter 25: The Vision in the Library](#)

[Chapter 26: The Ice Queen](#)

[Chapter 27: Blackmail](#)

[Chapter 28: Going Underground](#)

[Chapter 29: Ryan Ford](#)

[Chapter 30: Revenge](#)

[Chapter 31: Histories](#)

[Chapter 32: Warning](#)

[Chapter 33: Luke](#)

[Chapter 34: The Hidey-Hole](#)

[Chapter 35: Tempests](#)

[Chapter 36: Into the Woods](#)

[Chapter 37: Revealed, and The Way Home](#)

[Chapter 38: The Epergne](#)

[Chapter 39: Spells](#)

[Chapter 40: Confessions](#)

[Chapter 41: The Appointment](#)

[Chapter 42: Puzzle and Innocence](#)

[Chapter 43: Surprise, Surprise](#)

[Chapter 44: Lost Love](#)

[Chapter 45: The Finding Spell](#)

[Chapter 46: Tempest the Hero, and Claire Returns](#)

[Chapter 47: Golden Rules and Unexpected Flowers](#)

[Author's Note](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Acknowledgments](#)

[Questions for Reading Clubs](#)

[Glossary of British English](#)

[Accents and Wicc'hadol](#)

Chapter 1

The Day of the Incident

‘Fresh blood,’ observed Mrs Cadabra.

Detective Sergeant Thomas Trelawney looked at her doubtfully. She registered that he was in his late thirties, tall, light-haired, grey-suited and attractive in a manner appropriate to a policeman.

‘Do come in.’

He stepped over the threshold and into the clean, bright hall and she closed the door behind him.

Trelawney’s boss, Chief Inspector Hogarth, was on the verge of retirement and had sent his junior to acquaint himself with a case that had remained open for 28 years.

Mrs Cadabra led the way into the living room, gestured to the sergeant to sit down, then decisively pulled a photo album from one of the stacked bookshelves flanking the brick fireplace. She laid it open on his knees and pointed to a portrait of a power-dressed couple holding a baby.

‘1987. Our darling Amanda, held by my obnoxious daughter,’ she uttered in clipped tones. ‘That’s her husband. I need only say that they were well matched. And if that assessment gives me a motive for murder, Sergeant, then you’re welcome to investigate it,’ she declared challengingly.

Trelawney suppressed a grin. Hogarth had told him what to expect in the redoubtable old lady sitting beside him on the chintz sofa. He had not exaggerated. Senara Cadabra was every inch the imperious aristocrat to which Hogarth had compared her. She lifted a hand to tuck in a hairgrip, pinning her white victory roll even more tightly into place. One of her piercing violet eyes was slightly larger than the other. This, coupled with her upright posture and cut-glass English accent, created an unnerving effect.

Mrs Cadabra glanced down at the photograph. Mercifully, there was no sign of Amanda’s gifts at that time, she commented to herself. Not *then*.

‘Lamentably,’ she continued, ‘Amanda’s parents had no time for her — or interest in her — and she was mostly cared for by my husband and myself. However, if you were to assume that little Amanda was traumatised by the sudden change in her situation following the “incident”, you’d be wrong,’ she stated, keen to stay one step ahead of any conclusions that the sergeant might be drawing.

While the detective sergeant jotted in his ubiquitous police notebook, he took a surreptitious look at his surroundings. The Cadabra’s circumstances were noticeably comfortable. Their house lay a mere thirteen miles from The Houses of Parliament to the south and just three miles from the Hertfordshire border to the north. The village of Sunken Madley was populated not only by locals, some with lineage reaching back the 1500s when the manor and church were built, but also by a selection of reclusive celebrities. Seeking privacy, and with a taste for gracious living, the VIPs had

acquired several of the grander residences. By contrast, the Cadabra's house was a modest three-bedroom cottage at the end of Orchard Row, just where the village gave way to a field of apple trees, now flowering with faintly blushing, bridal blossom. Number 26 had a spacious garden accommodating a small neat lawn, well-kept vegetable beds and, most importantly, a sizeable furniture restorer's workshop.

Trelawney brought his gaze back to the photograph of the infant Amanda and her parents. Mrs Cadabra flicked towards the front of the album, each page taking them further back in time. Gesturing dismissively, she indicated her three other unsmiling children, Amanda's aunts and uncles, and their smirking, blank-eyed or scowling offspring. Mrs Cadabra turned a few more pages back to her own generation, remarking on her siblings and their brood with equal distaste.

'As for my own children, I could never bear any of them once they became teenagers.' She barked out a laugh. 'I bore them once; I feel that was quite enough.' Trelawney allowed himself a smile for the first time. It did not go unnoticed by Mrs Cadabra, who awarded it eight of ten for charm.

'Thank you for your frankness, Mrs Cadabra. And now, could you please tell me what you remember of the events leading up to the incident?'

Mrs Cadabra repositioned herself, straightening her back more than ever. 'My husband and I had each received a note and —'

'Was there anything that stood out about it?' interjected Trelawney. 'Was it typed or written? The kind of paper, the envelope —?'

'It was handwritten in purple-black ink and —'

'Did you recognise the —?' he began.

'— the writing?' she forestalled Trelawney, 'No, I did not.'

'Normal paper?'

'Interesting that you should ask. It was quite peculiar, thick but oddly transparent.'

'What did it say?' he asked, making notes.

'It said that transport would arrive on 9th September at 9 o'clock in the morning. We would be taken to a location, and there, apparently, we would learn something to our advantage. It went on to say,' said Mrs Cadabra, leaning towards him for emphasis, 'and I remember this precisely: "It is essential, however, that all members of your family be present."''

'Curious,' commented Trelawney.

'Exactly. And it was signed "A well-wisher". Hm! Well-wisher indeed!' said Mrs Cadabra indignantly, twitching the cushion behind her more firmly into place.

'I see,' said Trelawney, 'And what did you and Mr Cadabra make of all this?'

'Why, that it was fishy, of course!' she exclaimed, stating the obvious.

'But you decided to go?'

'Yes,' stated Mrs Cadabra, 'but *reluctantly*. And not to serve our own interests, of course. Hardly. No, it was so that if we should we derive some benefit from the exercise, we could have left it to Amanda. That is the only reason that it would have been worth enduring the company of our odious family for any length of a journey.'

'Did anyone in the family encourage you to go?' Trelawney enquired.

'Oh yes.' Mrs Cadabra's face registered her distaste. 'We received quite a flurry of unwelcome messages from them, but we'd already made up our minds to attend. They were all desperately keen, needless to say. A more mercenary bunch you'd be hard pushed to find.' She snapped the album shut and put it down on the inlaid coffee table.

Trelawney sat back. 'So what happened on the day of the incident?' he asked.

‘Poor little Amanda had been awake all night with a frightful cough. She was only three, and she’d never been a very strong child. And since she’d developed asthma, we’d had to be especially careful. Well, by that morning, Amanda’s condition had worsened, and she was clearly not fit for the journey,’ recalled Senara Cadabra with an emphatic shake of her head. ‘And considering our unease about the whole affair, we decided that neither we, nor our Amanda, should have any part of it. So when the transport arrived, we didn’t get on board. It sat there and waited for fifteen minutes and then finally left.’ She folded her hands. ‘And that was that.’

‘You didn’t go out to tell the driver that you weren’t going?’ pressed Trelawney.

‘No,’ replied Mrs Cadabra. ‘We simply didn’t want anything to do with it.’

‘Did you notice the vehicle?’

‘I did. It obscured the view of our Princess Margaret roses,’ said Mrs Cadabra indignantly.

‘And what did it —?’

‘Horse manure.’

‘I beg your pardon?’ asked Trelawney, startled.

‘Oh, I mean no disrespect to the dear Princess herself,’ Mrs Cadabra assured him. ‘No, indeed. Just that it’s the best thing for roses. But only after three years of composting. *Not* when fresh. I’m sure Her Royal Highness would echo my every word.’ Having successfully diverted the subject to horticulture, she placed one still delicate hand over the other, signifying that she considered the discussion of the transport to be closed.

Trelawney, however, returned to the matter at hand. ‘But the *vehicle*, what was it like? Can you recall?’

‘It was a grey minibus of some description,’ she answered.

‘Good condition?’ continued Trelawney.

‘Yes, I think so,’ she answered, with a careless shrug of her shoulders. ‘I am not a motor car engineer, but it certainly didn’t seem to be in an advanced state of disrepair, if that’s what you’re asking.’

‘You didn’t notice anything special about it?’ Mrs Cadabra shook her head. ‘The registration?’ Trelawney looked at her hopefully.

‘No idea. I heard it start up. By the time I went to look out of the window, it had gone.’

‘And these notes that you received. What became of them?’

‘They disappeared,’ she declared.

‘Disappeared?’

‘Vanished. Without a trace.’

‘Really?’ Trelawney remarked. He wrote in his book. ‘Mr Cadabra’s note as well?’

The back door to the kitchen closed audibly followed by a hollow clatter as discarded work boots hit the mat. There came the sound of a tap running.

‘You can ask him yourself,’ Mrs Cadabra said.

A tall, grey-haired man, in dark work trousers and jumper over shirt and tie, opened the living room door, and entered the room. He was of that generation of craftsmen who took so great a pride in their occupation and appearance that they wore a shirt and tie even to work. The persistent briskness of the British climate had prompted him to cover up with a sweater. He smiled a kind welcome at the case officer.

‘Ah, very generous of you to come all this way, Mr Trelawney, is it?’ Mr Cadabra held out a clean but French-polish-stained hand.

‘Detective Sergeant Trelawney, sir,’ said the policeman, accepting the handshake.

‘Please call me Perran. Although my wife likes strangers to call me Mr Cadabra.’ He gave her an affectionate twinkle, which she returned. ‘Has Senara been making you feel at home?’ The trace of a West Country burr in the man’s gentle voice appealed to the Cornwall-born-and-bred Trelawney.

‘Pleasure to meet you. Perran? A good Cornish name, if I may say so. Yes, Mrs Cadabra has been most helpfully relating the events of the day when ...’ Trelawney paused, tactfully avoiding an explicit reference to the sensitive details of the incident.

‘Yes ... a tragic business,’ said Mr Cadabra, helpfully filling the gap. ‘I *will* say, it’s good of the police to keep taking an interest after all these years. We’ve given up any hope of a resolution. But at any rate, is there anything I can tell you that my good lady hasn’t already shared with you?’

‘If you have time,’ said Trelawney politely.

‘Of course.’ Mr Cadabra carefully sat down on the edge of a Queen Anne armchair, aware that he was in his work clothes.

‘Your wife told me about a note. I understand that you received one of your own,’ Trelawney prompted.

‘Yes, that’s right.’

‘And there were some distinctive things about it?’

‘Oh, yes, purplish ink and odd paper,’ replied Mr Cadabra confirming what his wife had said.

‘Do you still have it?’ asked Trelawney, checking Senara’s statement.

‘No. No, it disappeared,’ Mr Cadabra said in a regretful voice. ‘I could have sworn I’d put it in my overalls pocket, but when I went to look for it, it was gone. I remember I turned out *all* of my pockets, thinking it might have got lost amongst the bits and pieces. But no.’

‘Thank you.’ Trelawney left a brief silence while his pencil scribbled away.

‘Now, could you both tell me what happened later that day?’ asked Trelawney looking from one to the other.

After a brief exchange of glances between the couple, it was Mrs Cadabra who answered, ‘About six hours after the car left, the telephone rang. We were in here. Perran was having his afternoon tea-break with me. I remember it as clearly as if it happened yesterday. It rang, and he put his hand on my arm and said the oddest thing.’ She looked at her husband. Perran nodded supportively. Trelawney’s pencil hovered about his open notebook, waiting.

Finally, Mrs Cadabra spoke.

“‘Senara,’ he said, ‘Whatever you do, *don’t* answer that.’”

Selected Reviews:

‘Delightful, enjoyable, well-written, very British cozy mysteries.’

Katherine Williams DeMoure-Aldrich recommends Holly Bell Author.

‘A Cozy Mystery That Had Me Hooked.

I loved this book and couldn't put it down. It's got everything that I look for in a 5-star read; great scenes that get the adrenaline pumping, an intelligent mystery or two to get the little grey cells whirling, nail biting tension and well written humour (there may even be a bit of romance on the horizon for our heroine).’

Flora Gatehouse reviewer – Amanda Cadabra and The Hidey-Hole Truth

‘An enchanting page-turner.’

Tim Brown, Author

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Book Trailer for Amanda Cadabra Book 1: <http://amandacadabra.com/trailer>

Book Trailer for Amanda Cadabra Book 2: <http://amandacadabra.com/cellar-of-secrets-trailer/>

Book Trailer for Amanda Cadabra Book 3:
<http://amandacadabra.com/trailer/flawless-plan-trailer/>

Book Trailer for Amanda Cadabra Book 4:
<http://amandacadabra.com/trailer/rise-of-sunken-madley-trailer/>

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