

CHAPTER THREE

The battered truck bounced along the rutted road, though to call it a road was a stretch. *More like barely visible dirt track*, thought Finn Edwards as he steered the heavy Model T through the darkened forest. Billington Woods was a few miles northwest of Arkham, seldom visited and isolated, which made it perfect for tonight's meeting. Only the faintest glimmer of moonlight penetrated the thick forest canopy, and after a few hits of Jimmy's whiskey, keeping the truck straight was an even greater challenge than normal.

"Jaysus, Finn, are you tryin' to hit every bloody pothole in this damn road?" snapped Sean as a lit match fell from his hands. He cursed and stamped it out before lighting another and applying the flame to the tip of his cigarette.

"You think you can do better, do ye?" demanded Finn, tired of Sean's constant bitching. West Roxbury born and bred, his whining accent annoyed the hell out of Finn, but he was a favorite of the Boston gangs, so he bit his tongue.

"Ah, sure now, Finn's doing a grand job see," said Jimmy from behind him, already three sheets to the wind, having finished his whiskey by the time they'd hit the Aylesbury pike. Jimmy turned

around to look at the growling truck following them through the woods. "Better than Fergal anyhow, that boy's all over the road like a drunken nun."

Fergal was the youngest of the four of them, and nobody liked him. Too earnest in his desire to please, he was irritating in the way only someone who tried too hard to be liked can be irritating. Which was why Jimmy and Sean rode with Finn.

It had been a risk coming out this way, what with that poor dead girl found down at the athletics field, but the boys from Newburyport were coming tonight with the booze from Canada, so what choice did they have?

"Cheers for the support, Jimmy," said Finn. "But in your state, I'm not sure you're the best judge of my driving skills."

"Yeah, shut your mouth, Jimmy," added Sean, peering ahead as though he could penetrate the gloom. His cigarette filled the cab with smoke, but he didn't think to offer Finn or Jimmy a puff. That was typical of Sean Cafferty, though: a man who didn't give a rat's ass for anyone but himself. If he weren't so connected, Finn would have taken out his knife and gutted him right there and then.

"If ye'd let me turn on the lights I could see better," suggested Finn.

"Don't be an eejit, man," said Sean, taking out his heavy .45 automatic and making sure the magazine was fully loaded. "You want to tell the world we're here?"

"There's no one out here but us," said Finn. "Ain't that the point?"

"No lights," said Sean, and Finn shrugged, returning his attention to the road. They'd driven for nearly a mile, best he could tell, and the trees showed no sign of thinning. It looked like nary an axe nor saw had ever been taken to these trees, like they had always existed and always would. They reminded Finn of the fairy tales his mam would tell him of the Fey and the green men with thistle-down hair who lived beneath the hills and stole children away in the dead of night. This was an ancient forest, one that could easily give rise to the darker kinds of fairy tales. Finn shivered, his Celtic soul alive with the possibilities of strange beings and malicious

sprites making their homes within this place.

"The house should be just ahead, Finn," said Sean, holding his cigarette close to a crumpled map he had pulled out of his long coat.

Finn nodded, already seeing the trees thinning out ahead. The road became less rutted and moonlight illuminated a wide expanse of flat ground, overgrown with tall grasses and bushes that hadn't been trimmed back since God knows when. In the center of the clearing stood what had once been an elaborate three-story mansion, built in the Colonial style, but which had now fallen into disrepair. Vines clung to its walls, and the white paint on its wooden boards was peeling and stained with decades of neglect.

Four giant pilasters framed the entrance to the house, and the splintered wooden doors hung on sagging hinges. Starlight reflected on shards of broken glass in window frames, and a curious air of sadness hung over the place, as though the house itself mourned its faded grandeur.

Two trucks in the livery of a Newburyport bakery sat in front of the dilapidated mansion, loaded to the gunwales with wooden barrels. Half a dozen men in short jackets and flat-caps stood around the trucks. They carried a mix of rifles and pistols and were smoking and pacing, looking like prowling tigers Finn had seen at the movies. No sooner had Finn's vehicle come into sight, than they lined up in front of the fully laden trucks.

"Careful now," said Sean, tucking his pistol into his coat pocket. "Everyone got their iron?"

"Aye," said Finn, snapping off the safety on his pistol, a matte black .38 revolver.

"Got me piece right here," said Jimmy, waving his own gun.

"Put that away, you bloody idiot," snapped Sean. "You want them to start shooting already?"

Finn pulled the truck around and hauled on the handbrake as he killed the engine.

"Nice and slow, eh boys?" said Sean, stepping down from the truck. Finn and Jimmy did likewise and Fergal joined them a second later, looking as excited to be here as he was afraid.

Sean and the leader of the Newburyport gang made a great

show of friendship, but it sounded about as false as Finn's last confession at St. Michael's. He let Sean do the talking, and as money was exchanged, he swept his gaze over the Newburyport boys. They were a tough bunch, on edge and ready for trouble. Finn didn't blame them. They had made the twelve mile journey from the north with a hell of a lot of whiskey imported illegally from Canada, and if they'd been caught with that much booze, it would be ten years minimum in jail. The Arkham police were notoriously strict in punishing those who broke the Volstead Act and flouted the rules on prohibition.

Finn turned his attention to the mansion, finding it sad that such a fine building had been allowed to fall into such a state of decrepitude. He'd heard it still belonged to the Billington family, but if that were true, they clearly didn't want to have anything to do with the place. Moonlight gleamed colorfully from a window around the side of the building, and the sagging roof looked ready to collapse.

The empty windows on the attic floor gaped like screaming mouths, and moonlight picked out the few remaining shards of fang-like glass. Black gunk drooled from the broken sills, and Finn blinked as he saw something pale floating in the midst of the darkness of the easternmost window. He peered at the window and the blob withdrew, but for the briefest moment, it had looked like a head.

"Jimmy," he whispered. "Did you see that?"

"See what?" slurred Jimmy.

"Up there in the top floor window. I swore I saw something."

"Nah, just your imagination, Finn lad."

Finn shook his head. "No, I definitely saw something."

Fergal nudged him in the ribs. "I saw it, Finn."

"You sure, Fergal? Don't be shitting me or I'll put me fist down your throat and tear out your lungs."

"Aye, Finn. I swear on me mother's life."

That was enough for Finn, and he went over to where Sean was dealing with the Newburyport lads. Sean gave him a withering look as he approached.

"What is it ye'll be wanting, Finn?" asked Sean.

"Thought I saw something," he said, nodding toward the house. "Someone inside."

Sean looked up at the windows. "Don't be daft, man. There's been nobody here in years."

"Could be cops," said Finn.

"I thought you said this place was safe," said the bootlegger from Newburyport.

"And so it is, Harry," said Sean, raising his hands before him in a calming gesture. "Finn's just got an overactive imagination is all. Too many tales of leprechauns at his mam's knee. Ain't that right, Finn?"

"I should check, though, eh? Best to be sure."

Sean sighed, and Finn knew the Boston lads would hear of this. Finn didn't care. He'd rather be a foot soldier than a leader anyway.

"Fine," said Sean at last. "If you're so sure, take Jimmy and go look in the house, but be quick about it."

"Like a thirsty man on Paddy's Day," promised Finn.

"Aye, well see that you are. These barrels aren't gonna load themselves, y'see."

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By the time the cops got Rita back to Dorothy Upman Hall it was late and the moon glared down like a bright cat's eye in the dark. The uniformed patrolman asked her if she wanted an escort to her room, but Rita shook her head. She saw Amanda at the door to the dorm and knew she had all the escort she needed.

Amanda came running over to her and threw her arms around Rita.

"Goodness, are you okay? I've been so worried about you."

"I'm fine," said Rita. "Can we get inside?"

"Sure, of course, sorry," said Amanda, leading her inside the building. Rita was still wearing her running clothes, though the cops had given her a coarse woolen blanket to keep warm. They climbed the stairs to their room, and heads appeared at opened doors as word spread that Rita had returned. She saw expressions of concern, interest, and fear, like she'd brought something dark with her.

Amanda took no notice and bundled her into their room, turning to shut the door firmly behind them. Rita smiled at Amanda.

"Thanks, Mandy," said Rita, sitting cross-legged on her bed. Mandy climbed up beside her and they sat facing one another, the enormity of what Rita had unwittingly stumbled across filling the space between them.

"You're quite welcome, Rita. Honestly, I can't imagine what it must have been like to find that girl out there. You poor dear. Are you okay?"

"I'm okay, really," said Rita. "I promise."

"You sure?" said Amanda, taking her hands.

"Yeah, I'm sure," said Rita, trying to convince herself with repetition. "It was horrible, but I've seen some pretty bad things in my time. I mean, this was one of the worst, but growing up in New Orleans, you see some messed up stuff."

"Coming from Muncie, Indiana, you don't get to see much of anything," replied Amanda. "And for once, I'm pretty darn glad of that. I wouldn't want to see anything as horrible as a dead girl. Even one I didn't know. Oh! You didn't know her did you?"

Rita shook her head. "No, never seen her before."

"It's just horrible," said Amanda. "Ever since I came to Arkham I've had this strange feeling that, I don't know, that something was just...off. I know that probably sounds stupid."

"Don't sound stupid at all," said Rita. "I feel it, too. I felt it as soon as I stepped off the train from Boston. It's like this place is sick and nobody knows it. Or they know it, but they don't want to admit it. If Mama Josette was here, she'd say this town has got itself some bad mojo."

"Who's Mama Josette?"

"A *mambo* from New Orleans," said Rita. Seeing Amanda's confusion, she added, "It's like a voodoo queen, but a good one. The *mambo* only use good magic; it's the *bokor* who turn it to evil."

"Magic?"

"Yeah, I know what you're going to say, but back in Louisiana it's as real as you and me. This whole town's got bad mojo right down to its bones. It's sick to its heart."

"So why do you stay here?"

Rita snorted with grim amusement. "Where the hell else I got to go? I either make it here or I go back to being dirt poor on the banks of the Mississippi. Anyways, don't be giving me no hard time about this. You just told me you know this place is bad, too. Those dreams prove it."

"I don't want to talk about that just now," said Amanda, swinging her legs off the bed.

Rita grabbed her arm and said, "Your dreams. You never had them till you came to Arkham. We both know this town stinks worse than a Mississippi slaughterhouse at low tide."

"I don't know..."

But Rita wasn't convinced.

"Don't try and back out on me, Mandy," she warned, smiling to mask her seriousness. "I'm your friend, but I will knock you upside the head if you lie to me."

"You're right," said Amanda at last. "Ever since I got lost on the way to Professor Grayson's class and I saw...something. A painting, I think. I don't remember, like I tried to blot it out or something. It's weird."

"Uh-huh," said Rita, nodding. "Bad mojo."

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Finn pushed the mansion's door with the barrel of his gun. It creaked open on rusted hinges, just as he knew it would, and silver light illuminated a dusty hall of warped floorboards and cloth-draped furniture. The whole house creaked and a puff of powdered plaster dust fell from the ceiling as Finn stepped inside, his pistol sweeping left to right in case anyone was lying in wait for them.

"Kind of creepy, huh?" said Jimmy.

"Yeah, creepy is what it is," agreed Finn. He could hear a faint background hum, an electrical buzz like what could be heard from the ground when a trolley car was coming around the corner. He tried to pinpoint the source, but gave up when it seemed to be coming from all around him. It felt strongest when he tilted his head to the ceiling, but it was hard to be sure.

It was just a noise, but it raised the hackles on Finn's neck with

its strangeness. He'd never heard anything quite like it, and wasn't sure he was keen to learn what was producing such a quietly menacing noise.

"So d'you want to tell me what we're looking for?" asked Jimmy.

Finn shushed him, and looked toward the grand staircase in the center of the wide hallway they now stood in. Wide doors led off to either side, but Finn ignored them, climbing to the second floor and a landing carpeted in a thick layer of dust. The humming was stronger here, and he wondered if there was some kind of machinery stored in one of these upper rooms.

"Do you hear that?" he whispered to Jimmy.

"Hear what?"

"That buzzing noise. Or a hum, I'm not sure."

"I don't hear nothing, but I ain't got the sharpest lugs."

"Among other things," muttered Finn, moving on.

The ceiling creaked, like there was something moving in the attic above. That made sense. That was where Finn had seen the pale pink blob in the window, and whoever he'd seen was still there.

"Find a way up," said Finn. "Stairs, attic ladders, something."

Jimmy nodded and took the left portion of the landing. Finn moved down the shadowy hallway on the right, keeping his gun out before him and checking each doorknob as he passed. One was locked, the other led into a small bedroom that clearly hadn't been used in decades. Sheet-draped furniture was scattered throughout the room like oblong ghosts, but one look at the undisturbed dust told Finn that nobody was hiding underneath.

He moved on. The last room was a small bathroom, and he was about to close the door and catch up with Jimmy when he noticed the door in the corner of the room was open a fraction. He'd thought it an airing cupboard, but the hideous droning noise seemed louder here, like there was some kind of generator or transformer up there.

Finn backed out of the bathroom and looked across the landing. Jimmy was puking his whiskey in the corner, and Finn waited until he looked over before beckoning him with a curt wave of his gun. He looked back into the room and he smelled Jimmy before he saw him.

"Christ, you stink," he said. "Come on."

Without waiting for a reply, Finn eased open the door in the corner of the room, smelling a stink worse than Jimmy's vomit-spattered shoes. The buzzing sound was louder now, like a hive of angry bees poised to drop on him from a great height. It took an effort of will to peer around the doorframe. A narrow set of stairs led toward the attic, and with his gun stretched out before him, Finn took a hesitant step upward.

He turned back to Jimmy and whispered, "Keep to the edges, Jimmy. It'll make the steps creak less."

Slowly Finn climbed the steps, his heart in his mouth, thudding like a great kettle drum and sounding unfeasibly loud. His breath echoed in his skull and a suffocating fear arose in him, as though his entire body were fighting against his ascent. Behind him, Jimmy stumbled and let loose a loud curse. Finn bit back an angry retort. Any hope of surprising the attic observer was now gone.

If he couldn't have surprise, he'd have ferocity. Though fear attempted to keep him rooted to the spot, he charged the rest of the way with a battle cry worthy of Cúchulain himself. He burst into the attic, a vast space enclosed by exposed rafters and the underside of the roof. Moonlight painted bright strips on the floor, and in the center of the arched space, suspended above a slender pedestal of brass was an irregular silver sphere that spun like a whirring globe. Finn took in all this sensory input as soon as he entered the attic, but the strange, hybrid...*things* hovering above the pedestal and working on the sphere with clicking, chitinous, multi-jointed limbs, those took him a moment longer.

His raised gun lowered as he struggled to make sense of what he was seeing. Grotesque, with bulbous insectoid bodies and crab-like pincers, the monsters flew on ragged, bat-like wings that seemed not to flap, but simultaneously coexist at each stage required for flight. Where Finn might have expected a head or some form of sensory apparatus, there was nothing more than a gelatinous blob of glistening meat, like a brain shorn of its enclosing skull.

Finn tried to rationalize what he was seeing with what he knew of the world, trying to shoehorn these creatures into a neat box where things made sense. It wasn't working, and the sheer alien

horror of these beings threatened to unhinge his mind.

Then Jimmy blundered into the attic, tripping over his own clumsiness to fall flat on his face. He landed hard and his pistol went off with a deafening bang, blowing out the remains of a window. Finn jumped at the noise, his descent into madness momentarily stalled. The creatures swung around in the air, the meaty lumps of their heads spinning through a kaleidoscope of color. The buzzing increased in intensity, and Finn raised his pistol as one of them swooped toward him.

His pistol boomed and his bullets slapped into the pulpy mass of the creature's body, but didn't appear to harm it in the slightest. Finn dropped to the ground as its slashing pincers clawed at him. The sleeve of his coat tore, but his skin was untouched. He rolled and fired again, emptying his pistol in a flurry of shots, until the hammer clicked down on an empty chamber.

"In the name of Christ!" shouted Jimmy, looking up from the floor and finally laying eyes on the hideous flying things. "What the bloody hell is going on here, Finn?"

Finn didn't answer him, throwing his gun away and scrambling over to where Jimmy's weapon had landed. His own bullets had done nothing to the creature, but he felt better being armed. Even before he reached the gun, he heard fresh gunfire coming from outside the house. Had Sean and Fergal seen what was happening somehow and come to their aid? He doubted it, but it was a pleasant notion.

He grabbed Jimmy's fallen pistol and rolled onto his backside in time to see the two creatures tear into his hapless comrade. There was nothing frenzied or animalistic about their attack. Razor sharp pincers sliced at Jimmy's chest and belly, and blood sprayed the flying monsters as they expertly sliced him open, like a butcher dressing a carcass for the shop window.

Finn backed away on his rear, bumping into something behind him. He heard a screech that sounded like tearing metal or a busted axle grinding a gear shaft, and looked up in time to see the silver sphere on the pedestal wobble out of alignment and fall to the dusty floorboards. It hit with a heavy crunch that was surely out of proportion to its weight, and no sooner had it landed than

the two creatures dropped Jimmy's dissected remains and spun around to face him.

Without quite knowing why, Finn scooped up the silver sphere and ran to the shattered windows. He had no plan save getting out of this room, and the flying things were between him and the stairs. The fall would kill him, he was sure, but it was preferable to being cut open like a frog in a grade schooler's biology lesson.

The buzzing creatures zipped toward him, but Finn was already moving. He hurled himself through the broken window. He missed most of the glass, but a spiteful shard caught the hem of his trousers and probably saved his life. Instead of sailing out into the air and falling three stories to the ground, he swung back toward the mansion like a pendulum on the fulcrum of his caught trouser leg.

He slammed into the wall and dropped straight down as the cloth gave way, landing hard on the angled pediment of the building's columned portico. The sound of gunfire punctuated the night, though Finn had no time to wonder what the hell had gone wrong with the deal. The wall next to him erupted in dry explosions of plasterwork and lath as a burst of automatic weapons' fire arced upward.

"Jesus jumping Christ!" yelled Finn, rolling out of the line of fire. Still clutching Jimmy's gun and the silver sphere, Finn slid down the roof and off the end of the pediment. Something below him blew up in a mushrooming pillar of fire, but before he could wonder what it was, he landed with a thump in the bushes to the side of the main entrance. Though it hadn't killed him, the fall had winded him badly. Finn fought for breath as he waited for the pain of broken limbs to flare up his spine.

The pain never arrived, but his breath came in terrified hikes. The darkness was banished in the light of burning trucks. Both vehicles belonging to the Newburyport lads were gone, and in their place were burned out wrecks, ablaze from end to end. Burning whiskey filled the air with a sour mash reek, casting leaping shadows as dozens of figures struggled in life-or-death fights.

"What the hell...?" said Finn. "What in the name of the wee man is going on here?"

He saw Sean and Fergal, firing wildly into the trees, as the Newburyport lads picked themselves up from the explosion of their trucks. Blackened bodies lay strewn around, and wiry figures darted from the trees with squealing shrieks. Finn couldn't see them clearly, but that was a mercy, as one form fell upon a fire-blackened corpse and tore a lump of seared meat from its haunches. This was too much. Flying bloody insect monsters, and now a cannibal horde... Christ, he had to get away!

Finn scooped up the silver sphere and edged around the corner of the building, keeping low to the ground as the battle raged in the glare of the burning liquor. He ducked around the corner and ran for the trees, not daring to look behind him, not daring to stop for fear of what he might see at his shoulder if he did. At last he reached the shadows of the forest, and pressed his back to the thick bole of a tree. Horrified tears welled in his eyes, but he blinked them away as anger took over from fear.

He risked a glance around the tree, catching a last snapshot of the horror unfolding behind him. Finn saw Sean borne to the ground by three pallid-skinned savages who bit and tore at the skin of his face. Fergal ran into the forest with a pair in pursuit. Mobsters' guns blazed to little effect. The fires were dying as the liquor burned up. He heard a crash of glass and a resurgent buzzing noise of unnatural wings that couldn't possibly allow flight.

"Christ, who the hell *are* these guys?" gasped Finn.

Scampering forms, like men but hunched and degenerate, loped through the clearing before the house, and in their midst walked a hooded man swathed from head to foot in crimson robes like some ancient pagan priest. The creatures did not touch him, but gathered around him like supplicants. Finn couldn't see the man's face, the hood wreathing his features in shadow.

Though this was simply a man, not some blood-hungry cannibal or hideous monster from beyond the realms of understanding, Finn felt his terror mount at the sight of him. Terrible evil, palpable and without mercy, flowed from this dreadful figure, as though all the malice and horror in the world were bound to his mortal form.

"Oh Jesus Christ and all his saints, save me now," hissed Finn.

Unable to bear the sight a moment longer, Finn turned and ran blindly into the forest.

He didn't know where he was going; all he knew was that he had to get away from that damnable crimson priest.