

CHAPTER ONE

Arkham

November 9, 1929

Professor Harvey Walters laid his hand heavily on the brass stair rail and paused to catch his breath. *You're an old man, Harvey, slow down*, he admonished himself quietly. *Just one more flight and then you can have a breather at the picture window for a spell.*

He juggled the package under his arm into a slightly more comfortable position and started out again, absently humming a few bars of Gilbert & Sullivan between somewhat labored breaths.

Four flights of admittedly somewhat steep stairs was nearly enough to defeat him these days it seemed, but as his birthday the proceeding spring had seen him closer to seventy than sixty he supposed he couldn't argue the case too much for it being otherwise. Besides, he'd readily concede if asked if a life in academia hadn't exactly outfitted him for extended periods of exercise, even when a young man. Still, how old age crept up and blindsided you time and again often managed to surprise him, particularly on days like today when his mind was fully preoccupied on other matters.

The service staircase in question was drafty, dim, and more than a little forlorn in an impersonal white-washed walls sort of way, occupying a tower annex at the back of the Miskatonic University's Administration building accessing no more or less than a series of storerooms, the backs of office floors, spare rooms, and general dead space. The idea, he supposed, was to provide discreet access for the custodial staff and a way out in case of fire for the more public-facing parts of the building, but in practice, the elevators they had installed twenty years back had rather left the rear stairs in disuse, which had been all to the good in this case. After all, a secret people passed by on a daily basis without even seeing was more likely to remain hidden than something concealed by pure artifice and contrivance, in his experience.

What he referred to as "the picture window" in his mind was, of course, simply a larger-than-average window on the final landing before the roof access, but it did afford a surprisingly pleasant view of the grounds to the rear of the university, the playing fields, and the boating pond leading down to the river and the thickets. Shrouded now by mist as it seemed it so often was these days, the scene was still striking if somewhat unwholesome in aspect, like the memory of a dream if not entirely a welcome one. The muted shadows of the few figures moving across the playing fields were suggestive and strangely lifeless thanks to the mist and failing light. One seeming no more than a child in aspect seemed to pause for a moment and look back up at him, but just as soon faded, a ghost in the fog.

He wasn't just getting his breath back—he was honest enough to admit to himself—he was stalling, putting off what he was about to do, the meeting he was about to have. "Get a grip, old boy," he muttered under his breath, and turned to walk toward the second of a trio of otherwise identical numbered doors which led to the only rooms on this uppermost landing.

He knocked, a key turned, and the door swung open as the sole inhabitant of room 402 let him in.

"Good afternoon, Professor Walters, do come in," she said warmly, and seeing the package under his arm continued, "Oh, you shouldn't have brought it yourself. I'm sure Mulligan would have brought it up for me later on."

Harvey Walters's heart caught in his chest and skipped a beat when his eyes laid on her, just as it always did now, but he could not say why. She was the same, the same as she always had been in every particular save one, and that single oddly dull grey streak that ran through her blond hair now could hardly be the cause of his reaction, could it? Nor was it the guilt.

"It's no trouble, no trouble at all, after all, I found the blessed thing for you, didn't I? May as well see the whole job through. Not to mention our esteemed head custodian can be somewhat hard to find at times," Harvey said as jovially as he could manage. "Besides, I wanted to have a talk with you, before you...you know...see how you were."

"Before I went away, you mean? That's very kind of you Professor Walters, and thank you. I really can't thank you enough for what you have done for me, the dean as well."

"It's been nothing, really, no more than we were bound to do, given the circumstances."

Daisy fixed him with a probing look. "You're a good man, Harvey Walters; you know that?"

Harvey found himself demurring uncomfortably at the compliment.

"The dean, however, I'm not so sure about," she said with a smile, and Harvey assayed one of his own in return, but the jest was a little hollow to him as it wasn't perhaps that far from the truth.

Harvey had genuinely sought to help Daisy both because he liked her, and because he felt it was his moral duty; for much

that had happened he shared part of the responsibility, not by malice or ineptness, but perhaps by ignorance and omission of care—responsibility all the same. The dean and certain others of the faculty that knew of Daisy's covert presence took their part for reasons of their own; not least of all a fear of dreadful scandal and perhaps criminal prosecution should the past be exposed.

Harvey's own sense of responsibility was to the bright young woman Daisy had once been, and also to the altogether more troubling and mysterious woman she had since become; that was also why he had agreed in part to help her current course of action, even if he didn't understand the full ramifications of what she planned. He did, however, begin to grasp the possible dire consequences should she fail, and that was more than enough for him.

"You're sure then, quite sure?" he asked.

"Yes," she said firmly. "The die is cast. Tea?" she asked, closing the subject firmly.

"Thank you," he replied absently as she swept some loose papers off a chair by the high classroom-style window and sat him down, before moving behind a poorly painted Chinese screen to set a kettle boiling on a camper's Primus stove.

Harvey was left looking at the room for what he supposed might well be the last time with sudden melancholy. The screen was like much in the improvised study-cum-living space, looted from various abandoned university stores; in the screen's case no doubt, he thought, a relic from some forgotten drama society play or other. Tacked to one side was a lopsided map of the Mis-katonic Valley: Arkham, Deans Corners, Aylesbury, Dunwich, right out to Kingsport on the coast, with fragments of closer detail maps tacked to strategic locations, along with three pin-marked points connected in red thread. It's actual meaning, like much in the room, was lost on him. What wasn't bric-a-brac

was paper, old manuscripts and older books, laid around in great profusion, but to his eye it all seemed—finished—somehow used up and discarded, forlorn.

“If you put it on the desk, I’ll open it up in a minute.” Daisy Walker’s voice floated from behind the screen, making him jump.

Harvey looked down, surprised to see he was still holding the brown paper-wrapped package almost defensively in his lap. He read its smudged shipping stamps and carriage label for what must have been the twentieth time since receiving it from the courier agent.

M. Mason—Antiquities & Curios—London—Prague—Shanghai.

With deliberation and curious reluctance to let the package go, he set it on the table just so, and went back to his chair. As he did so, he noticed a battered notebook that was darkly familiar to him, now half-stuffed with extra papers and bound shut with a small greenish-black strap that looked to him like alligator hide. He had no urge to confirm his suspicions, very little in fact would have convinced him to pick up that notebook again, even though once he had kept it himself for many months in trust for its owner. *No*, he realized with a cold feeling in his bones, he would rather have put his hand in hot coals and pluck one out of a fire than open up that notebook and read its contents.

All his life Harvey Walters had been around books. He loved them and would gladly confess it to anybody that asked. He loved the history and the wisdom that could be found within them, the stories, the knowledge; they were to him like gateways to other worlds. Now, there was an irony to be sure. Quite late in his career as an academic of some middling repute, Harvey Walters had learned to his cost—he and the others, old Armitage (somewhere in Switzerland now for his health and well out of it), Angell, and the rest—had learned that some knowledge carried a heavy price and some books were perilous. Such books were

often ancient things: a legend passed down and often adulterated, copies of copies passed like bad pennies down the ages, the *Necronomicon*, *De Vermis Mysteries*, *The Song of Khorazin*—all of them. He had never considered before now the particular fact of the genesis of such a book—its birth—but was he not seeing one now? The notebook of Daisy Walker; a prosaic enough name, but just as dangerous as the rest of that litany of names, perhaps more so. And here he was, aiding and abetting...what exactly?

Again his mind turned to the past and he turned it over in his thoughts again. He had felt responsible—they all had—for what had happened to Daisy. She had just been a promising young librarian then, clever, always that, but not driven, nor overly ambitious, just, well, kindly. Her brush with death, the amnesia that had followed, it had been their fault collectively, remiss in tidying up after the mess with Dunwich, putting things right. Perilous books indeed. Then something else came, something he still did not understand, and swept her up in something far worse, and he'd returned that notebook to her, he had hoped...somehow it would help her, armor her... Had that been it, was that his worst sin? Or had the matter somehow been out of his hands; had it simply been meant to be? Was he truly so noble as she had suggested? Or was such thinking just his own way of assuaging his guilt for what was to come after; the Kingsport massacre and the rest.

She walked back around the screen carrying a tray loaded with a mismatched tea service and smiled warmly, and Professor Harvey Walters wondered in a moment of razor-edged clarity, *When was it, I wonder, that I stopped being afraid for you, Daisy Walker, and started being afraid of you?*