

THE DAGON AND MISS JONES

She'd come up the stairs at the rear of the building like she knew I would be in the first room at the top. I was in the kitchen that separated the two rooms at the time, heating up some more day-old coffee when I heard her pound on the door.

I knew instantly when I sneaked a sideways glance toward Shel and Rick's door she'd found me.

I also knew those kids were dead. As hard as she'd been chasing me the past two days, she had to be starving. And once she started to feed, she didn't stop till there was nothing left.

It would have been me if I hadn't traded rooms with those kids. At the time, it seemed like the thing to do. The front one was just too small for two. All I needed was a place to plug in the laptop and transfer everything to the zip drive. And somewhere to hide the cash and the gun, of course. The rusted coil springs under the busted down old sofa bed provided the hiding place. And the wall socket next to it gave me the juice I needed to transfer the files.

That and a cup of coffee or two were what my night was supposed to be all about. Until she showed up.

"Looking for a chick calls herself Jones. She here?"

Her voice was the intolerable irritant in an unreachable place. The festering mosquito bite that keeps you awake at night, angry that it's there, yet terrified you'll never be relieved of it.

"No one here by that name," I heard Rick say. And knew right then they'd be his last words.

I stepped quickly through my doorway as I heard Rick's massive body being thrown across his room toward Shel. It wasn't the first time since this nightmare began I'd witnessed a life ended that way by my stalker. And I knew exactly what came next after she'd finished tenderizing her prey.

Last thing I saw before I slid the door shut was that she-creature lean her head back and transform into the thing she actually was, with all those teeth. Pointed, lethally sharp, layered in rows like nothing I'd ever seen. And then came her shriek. The one I'd been running from in the kind of nightmare you just can't wake yourself from.

I fumbled with the little latch on the door into the kitchen, knowing it was pointless. The time I'd just gained was a far better defense. Her meal would take at least long enough to shove the zip drive into the bag, grab the satchel and gun and hopefully put some pavement between me and the monster.

As I jumped over the railing straight down to the lower flight of stairs I heard her shriek again. It was one of triumph. Her feast was over and she was proudly sated. She was back on the hunt. And my feet were hitting the pavement, working double-time to make sure I wasn't her next meal.

The only thing I had going for me at that point was the tiny bit

of distance I'd just put between us, and what I had on that zip drive. It didn't matter I'd left the laptop behind. As soon as I transferred the data, I'd deleted it.

What mattered was I had the files. There was still one more zoologist left in the state I could turn to with them. One more chance to get another set of eyes and ears on what I'd recorded and photographed. One more reason to believe it's still possible to put the pieces of the puzzle together and find a way out of this hell.

If only I hadn't recorded those first two shrieks. That's where it all began. Or was it the research I did on that cult that brought it on?

The first shriek wasn't anything like hers. Hers came right at me from some faraway churning sea filled with an insatiable evil. But that first one, that one came up out of my bones. Out of something I recognized from the depth of a leviathan's bowels. That shriek rattled teeth and uncorked emotions I didn't even know existed.

And no matter how hard I tried I couldn't shake the feeling it was a warning cry. For me. The second one wasn't so much a response as it was an acceptance of the challenge.

The first professor I took the recordings to said they sounded like the shriek of a creature described in more than one ancient religious text. A fish-god the Mesopotamians called *Dagon*. The photos I'd captured of her feeding only seemed to confirm his theory.

He was dead within the hour. I've been running ever since. Cleared out my bank account, got my hands on a gun, and did my best to disappear.

He didn't live long enough to tell me what he thought of the first shriek, or to give it a name. But he didn't need to. I'd been doing research for a piece on the cult that worships a character from a

hundred-year-old work of fiction. That first shriek was one I would have known anywhere.

The cultists refer to it as the *Call of Cthulhu*.

It's never surprised me fiction is easier to believe than fact, and fact is scrutinized and dismissed as fiction. If anything, the confusion serves more than one evil.

And an ancient one slumbering beneath the ocean was warning me about one whose attention I'd attracted in the course of my work. I try not to think about why. *Why* has always been a pointless question to me. It really makes more sense to ask *why not*.

Besides, It seems to me the best way to vanquish evil is with a bigger, badder evil.

And I seem to have that one in my corner.