

# Chapter 1: Ghoul

*New York. September 1945.*

A light rain was pattering the leaves of the trees lining the hill behind me that led via a ticket-puncher of a fall to the Hutchinson River fifty feet below.

I'd parked my '42 Packard Super Eight Convertible on the gravel shoulder, just south of the blind curve. The car had been owned by a collector who'd bought it brand-new off the lot two weeks before Packard stopped making cars and converted their factories to building war machines, and three weeks before the poor sap dropped dead of a heart attack. Despite the war ending three weeks ago after the Japs surrendered aboard the USS Missouri in Tokyo Bay, it would be another year before luxury Packards were rolling off the assembly lines again. I'd bought mine from the collector's widow for seventy-eight hundred cash with one hundred and thirty-seven miles on the odometer. It was Ghost Grey, one of only fifty ever made, and she lurked in the pale moonlight that was leaking through the gathering clouds overhead like a shark cruising the ocean depths.

Leaning against the sultry curve of the front fender, the tip of the Lucky Strike I was smoking lighting my face in hellish shades of blood red, I wondered again what was keeping Carmichael.

Zee had planted the idea in the crooked copper's head that he'd find something of interest out here in the lonely nowhere of the Hutchinson River Parkway near the Bronx-Westchester border, but I'd been waiting for twenty minutes already while the rain slowly soaked my Dobb's fedora and ran in toy rivers from the bottom edge of a tailored Chesterfield overcoat that had cost more dough than a factory-worker would see in six months. It was coming on two past

the witching hour, I was on my second Lucky, and starting to feel that familiar warning itch between my shoulder blades.

The state bulls had hired me that morning to solve the case of three missing persons, presumed past tense, all from the farms around the area where I was now standing. One of them had been an eight-year-old kid taken from his bedroom four days ago. The kid's ghost had visited Miss Evelyn Harrow the same night he disappeared, but I'd been out of town on another case.

The long and short of it was that we knew what had killed those people.

What. Not who.

Magic and things that go bump in the night had re-entered the world nearly a hundred years ago when the island of Avalon appeared suddenly in the ocean thirty miles west of Belmullet, Ireland, in 1850, tearing the bottom out of a fishing trawler and sending the crew in lifeboats back home with stories that were written off as the ravings of men who'd been at sea for far too long. Or they'd been hitting the sauce.

Eventually, though, some mug had gone to look.

And by 'Avalon' I do mean the legendary island; the one where King Arthur and his Knights of the Round Table created fairy tales before the island vanished the first time, and 'serious scholars' of later years decided it was all moonshine and star dust. Archeologists slapped the moniker on it after it popped back, when they dug up the bones of old Roman forts and the ruins of a not-so-Roman castle, along with a rat's nest of tunnels that crawled criss-cross under the island. Some of the history aces who went into those tunnels came back changed.

Some never came back.

Folks gave the place a wide berth for years, but with enough time, people can get numb to anything. Twelve years on, the first fishing

village was planted, and soon farmers came as well, finding the land fertile and the grazing good for sheep. Settlers kept coming, even after wild yarns filtered back to Great Britain of people developing strange talents, most after they'd poked their noses into the tunnels, though sometimes it hit at random like a bolt from the blue.

Then, forty years later, in the early evening of August 2nd, 1890, Avalon took a powder, vanishing again as though it had never been there, all nine thousand inhabitants disappearing with it. By then, the magic had started leaking, with people in the British Isles and even Western Europe developing abilities that science couldn't explain, and with nightmare creatures appearing; monsters that had crawled out of myth and legend, and who didn't give a plug nickel for the opinions of 'serious scholars'.

By the time my brother Brand ran off in 1917 after killing a man in a drunken brawl, the magic had begun showing up in a few places in the eastern U.S. and Canada, Northern Africa, and even western Russia. It was crawling ever outwards, reaching dark fingers across the surface of the earth, claiming more and more territory as its own.

Still, Eve had been an outlier. On the same day that Avalon pulled a fade fifty-six years ago, every written scrap about the island wiped clean, and its picture fading off maps like chalk in the rain, Evelyn Harrow was born at St. Mary's Hospital in Brooklyn. Eve was stillborn, the cord wrapped around her neck, her tiny face corpse-gray. Five minutes after she was delivered with no heartbeat, the sawbones was filling in her death certificate when the baby coughed and began breathing normally.

That same doctor spent two years on the couches of three different shrinks after claiming that the miracle baby had looked right at him, her ash-grey eyes boring into his soul, and in the voice of a grown woman who had spoken with a French accent had said, "Tell Marguerite I forgive her."

Evelyn Harrow had been jawing with ghosts ever since.

Knowing the nasty habits of the creature that had killed and consumed the three missing people, I knew that by tonight it would be hungry again.

‘Icy’ Teapenny was as gorgeous a dame as she was prickly. There was only enough room in Isyphenia’s world for one person who mattered: a red-haired gal who was a gifted forensic mage and whose gifts were always for hire, for the right price. Sometimes her price could be measured in C-notes, but more often it was information she demanded in return for her unique services.

Fortunately, information was my stock and trade.

Twenty minutes before, after parking my car on the gravel beside the steel railing overlooking the river, I’d taken the Mason jar of blood from the glove compartment and emptied it on a spot thirty feet behind the trunk of my Packard. Icy had told me it was human juice, the real deal, and after I gave her a questioning look, rolled her pretty green eyes and assured me that no one had died for it. It was also enchanted; bait for the nightmare we were hunting. The crimson pool that spread across the gravel had shimmered in the pale moonlight that was bravely struggling its way through the gathering clouds before disappearing, melting into the hard-pack at my feet.

I hadn’t thought to ask Icy if rain would weaken the effect, and as the drops grew heavier, splattering loudly off the brim of my fedora, I cursed Carmichael again for being late.

Just as I was about to call off the operation, headlights appeared dimly through the streams falling from the brim of my hat and reflected off the wet pavement as they crawled up the hill toward me. I had to lower my chin to shield my eyes with my lid as Carmichael hit me with his searchlight before rolling to a stop on the gravel shoulder, parking his blocky Ford black-and-white with ‘State Police’

printed on the doors precisely on the spot where the blood Icy had provided had pulled its Houdini act.

The stage was set. Now we were just waiting for the star of the show.

Carmichael slammed his door as he got out, cursing after his foot landed in a rain-filled pothole. His front tire had bumped through it when he'd parked, water splashing in a wave outwards from the rubber before running rapidly back in. The dumb flatfoot had to have known the puddle was there, but Officer Trent Carmichael had never been the sharpest knife in the drawer. That was another reason we'd picked him to be our patsy.

Yanking his cap down tightly over narrow-set eyes, Carmichael stalked toward me, raising his flashlight to aim it straight into my mug while pulling the edge of his jacket free of the .38 on his right hip in a move I guess he thought was intimidating.

"Chandler," he barked, "I shoulda known I'd find you mixed up in this. Funny how you're always around just before somebody takes the fall. It's enough to make a cop wonder how you always seem to know more than any man's got a right to."

I flicked my half-smoked Strike over my shoulder, where it sailed over the hood of my car and plunged to its death beyond the guardrail, then glared pointedly at Carmichael. After a moment, he took the hint and lowered the flashlight, taking the beam out of my eyes.

"I'm good at what I do, Officer Carmichael," I answered pleasantly, glancing up at the rain, "And what brings you out on a fine night like this?"

Lightning flashed in the distance to my right, followed seconds later by a low rumble. In the stark brilliance that had painted the side of the crooked cop's face, I saw why he'd been late. Carmichael'd been taking a runout powder with John Barleycorn. He was soused,

tanked, sailing three sheets to the wind, probably from the cheap hooch his unofficial employers brewed. That might make our little Off-Broadway production easier if Carmichael could manage not to fall off the stage.

“I ask the questions, Shamus,” he answered, “What the hell are you doing out here? Three people in the area been murdered in the last two weeks. I find it suspicious, you bein’ out here for no reason.”

He glared a challenge at me, and I saw my opening.

I grinned like I didn’t mean it and replied, “You seem tense, Carmichael. What’s wrong? Your bosses’ whores start charging you for their services?”

I saw it coming when he swung the flashlight at my mug, and moved with it, so it didn’t sting near as much as it might have. I’d spent my Dublin youth in the local boxing clubs and back alleys, learning how to use my fists as hammers, and my head for something other than a punching bag. I spun as Carmichael followed through, leaning over the hood of the Packard and faking a moan while I held my jaw with my left hand, my right dangling at my side.

Carmichael took the offering, and I felt a cuff snap around my wrist before he yanked my left arm around behind me and made a matched set. Then he grabbed the back of my overcoat and pulled me upright with surprising coordination, considering his current state of questionable consciousness and the fact that he stood five inches shy of my own 6’1”.

“Alright, wise guy,” he said, “You’re under arrest on suspicion of abduction and murder.”

He steered me toward his cruiser, and through the rain I heard the sound I’d been waiting for, right on cue. Just on the other side of the road, nearly undetectable in the growing storm that had intensified yet again when Carmichael had slugged me, there was an almost metallic scrape on the pavement, a sound so ghostly in the drenching

gloom of that dark night that I doubted anyone but me could have heard it. Not even Zee, who couldn't be more than a few feet away, hidden from both Carmichael and myself by one of the kid's many unique talents.

As we reached his black and white, Carmichael kept pushing me past the back door, toward the rear of the cruiser. He kept a firm grip on the cuffs, twisting the chain so the sharp metal was cutting into my wrists and leaving me facing the road as he circled around to unlock the trunk. That wasn't good. I saw a flicker of pale motion in the corner of my eye, twenty feet away, where the gravel ended on our side of the road. Time was running short.

"The trunk, Carmichael? What did I do to deserve the royal treatment?" I asked.

"Shut up, wise guy," he snarled, "We ain't goin' to the station. The boss wants to talk to you. Keep your smart mouth shut for a change, and you might live to see the sunrise."

I heard the trunk pop, and as it creaked upwards on rusty hinges, I twisted to my left, ignoring the bite of the cuffs as I tore them from Carmichael's grasp. A pale nightmare rose out of the dark and sliced the officer open from his right hip to his left collarbone, blood and guts spewing into the night, as I threw myself to the ground, tucking my shoulder and putting out a small effort of one of my own unique talents, the cuffs springing free of my wrists as I rolled clear.

Carmichael dropped like a sack of hammers into his own widening pool of rain-soaked guts, and my assistant and protégé Zachary Bernstein appeared behind him just off the rear bumper of the cruiser, my rifled Parker Brothers double-barreled AHE shotgun already snugged to the kid's shoulder and aimed dead-center on the ghoul's chest. I heard the roar of Zee giving the ghost-pale ravening nightmare both barrels, and the slugs I'd loaded it with tore off the

creature's left arm and made an art deco pattern with half of its ribcage on the gravel and pavement behind it.

I'd found Zee two years before, a fifteen-year-old orphan grifting on the streets of Queens. Zee had been cleaning up, running the 'blind newsboy' scam. He was selling papers, wearing dark glasses, and carrying a white cane. When a mark would buy a rag, Zee would make skin contact while handing back the change. In a voice too deep for his young years, he would recite the exact contents of the mark's wallet, along with the name of his mistress, or the illegal contents of his office safe. The twist would 'tip' the newsboy a tenner to buy his silence, a week's wages for most folks.

Zee was one of those kids who was street-savvy but underestimated his own worth. I rescued him just as Boss Vito's thugs were moving in to nab him. Evelyn agreed to put the kid up in her brownstone, and the skinny Jewish psychic had been with us ever since. A year ago, I'd promoted him to 'assistant' and put him on the payroll. The kid's talents didn't stop at reading minds. He could do other things too, like turning invisible. He'd been standing not six feet to my left during the entire time I'd been dancing with Carmichael.

The slugs that nearly tore the ghoul in half wouldn't keep it down long. The damned things were nigh-impossible to kill, and as I brushed dirt from my sodden overcoat, I saw its flesh already crawling back along the ragged edges of the gaping wound as though time itself was running backward. The monster was still staring sightlessly at the sky, rain splattering off its undead eyes, but that copacetic state wouldn't last for more than a few seconds.

I moved fast, pulling a metal syringe, Miss Teapenney's second contribution to the evening, from the inside pocket of my suit jacket and jabbed it into the thing's neck, squeezing the plunger hard. A few drops of brilliant green fluid leaked out from around the seal, and I



smelled roses and fresh-turned earth. The ghoul had started stirring as I'd leaned over it, and my blood ran cold when its eyes locked on mine for one fear-fuelled second before closing as whatever concoction Icy had cooked up took hold. Even that hoodoo wouldn't keep it down for the count, though. As Zee headed for the trunk of my Packard, my second set of keys rattling in his hand, he told me that Brand was on his way, shouting to be heard over the pounding deluge.

I dragged the monster to the guardrail on the other side of Carmichael's cruiser in case some poor soul was out driving in the sheets of rain that were coming down now like spillage over a dam. The last thing we needed was a witness asking awkward questions. Despite the occasional newspaper article *not* in the outhouse tissue section of the newstands, most people still kept their eyes willingly closed to the evidence that the strange and macabre had returned to the world.

Life was simpler for them that way.

The thing was heavier than it had a right to be. The ghoul stood no taller than I did, and it was emaciated, ribs standing out in stark relief on skin that gleamed moon-white in the now-deafening rain. Thunder barked again, and the scene was briefly lit by the flashbulb of a lightning strike that was much closer than the last one. I heard a tree split not far away.

Zee met me at the guardrail with an armful of heavy tow chains and three Yale No. 6 high-security pin-tumbler padlocks; the kind with the optional hardened boron-steel shackle and mushroom-pin drivers. They had enough heft to dent a man's skull, and I hoped they'd also be enough to keep our guest of honor from causing any more trouble while we waited for the good Father to arrive.

With Zee's help, I wrapped the creature in three loops of heavy chain, two loops running between its legs for good measure, and

snugged the chains tight to the guardrail while Zachary clicked the padlocks closed. Then I reloaded the 12-gauge with two more slugs, and Zee and I settled back against the side of Carmichael's car just as the ghoul began to come around again, pale, ravaged flesh crawling up towards its missing shoulder. In minutes, the arm that Zee had blown off would be back, the thing would be at full strength, and likely to take what we'd done to it personally. I looked a question at my protégé, and he nodded. Brand would be here before then.

My brother and I had grown up in the Liberties, a warren of run-down Dublin tenements bordered by the Coombe and the intersection of Thomas and Francis streets. Ma had been a mouse of a woman who thought the saints had blessed her when she married our father, but Da had lost his job at the mine three years after and turned to drink. His temper got quick, and his fists quicker, but in Catholic Ireland, divorce wasn't done.

Brandon and I responded to Da's temper in different ways. Brand fought whenever and whoever he could, hardening himself for the day he could rid us of a hundred and fifty pounds of near-daily abuse. I sharpened my wits and learned to see the writing on the wall while there was still time to find somewhere else to be when the hammer fell.

In '16, when I was fourteen, and my brother seventeen, Brand and I watched the Easter Rising from our bedroom window. A Brit machine-gun post had been set up at the end of the street, and we found out later that a stray bullet had gone through a tenement wall and killed a three-month-old babe in its crib. The following year, Brand killed a young British soldier in a drunken bar fight. He lit out that same night for the continent. Months later, I got a letter from him. He'd joined the French Foreign Legion.

I stayed in Dublin, doing my best to take care of Ma after Da died in '21, the victim of tuberculosis and too much drink. Not much of

note happened until '37, when Brand came home, retired with a pension after twenty years of service. By then, Ma had gone to an early grave too.

To my shock, Brandon came home a changed man. In the last months of his service, he'd been fighting in the Rif Mountains of Morocco when a French 81mm mortar shell fell short and landed in the trench beside him. It spun in the mud, and a puff of smoke drifted from the casing as the fuse shorted out.

My brother left a killer and came home a saint.

As the ghoul began snarling, yanking at the chains hard enough that the metal of the guardrail was slowly bending, the giant bolts that anchored it straining against the eight-by-eight oak posts driven six feet into the ground, I heard the rattle of Brand's ancient Ford flatbed as it groaned its way up the hill toward us.

He parked behind Carmichael's cruiser and glared at me when he saw the cop's body on the ground. He knew Officer Trent Carmichael was bent as well as I did, but I guess Brand figured there ought to have been some way to do this without anyone getting dead.

I'd seen it as an opportunity to kill two crooked birds with one well-aimed stone.

I nodded toward the creature, where the guardrail was now twisted a foot out of line, as though impossibly hit by a speeding car from the cliff side, and tapped the face of my watch. Tick tock. Brand dropped the judgmental attitude and got down to business.

He strode in a circle around the creature, even climbing over the railing and risking the neck-breaker to the river below as he moved behind it, sprinkling holy water on the ground until he came back around to his starting point. He closed the circle just as one of the heavy padlocks snapped, and the ghoul began throwing its weight against the chains with the extra movement provided by the resulting

slack, the other two locks registering their displeasure at having been abandoned by their fellow.

Father Brandon O'Neill flipped open a Latin bible as he stood just on the far side of the invisible circle from the creature that, four days before, had silently abducted and eaten an eight-year-old boy. Zee popped open an umbrella, shielding the pages from the now-driving rain, and Brand began intoning in Latin from the passages known as the *Rituale Romanum*, “De Exorcizandis Obsessis a Daemonio”, the ‘smoke and wax’ psalm, and the traditional rites for destroying undead.

**“Exsúrgat Deus, et dissipéntur inimíci ejus;  
et fúgiant qui odérunt eum a fácie ejus.  
Sicut déficit fumus, deficiant;  
sicut fluit cera a fácie ignis,  
sic péreant peccatóres a fácie Dei.”**

*Let God arise, and let His enemies be scattered;  
let them that hate Him flee from before His face.  
As smoke vanisheth, so let them vanish away;  
as wax melteth before the fire,  
so let the wicked perish at the presence of God.*

Brand reached the next to last line just as lightning shattered a tree not thirty feet from us, sending its charred remains toppling over the edge of the ravine to sizzle and steam in the river below. Masked in the deafening clap of thunder from the strike that left me blinking spots from my vision, the ghoul had snapped the chains, broken links bouncing across the gravel, reflecting sallow glints from Carmichael’s dropped flashlight as they scattered over the hard rain-soaked ground.

The monster, its missing mitt back where it had abandoned ship from, launched itself toward Brand and Zee just as my brother completed the first passage, his booming voice reciting the Latin verses that resounded as the judgment of God, overcoming even the banshee fury of the growing storm. As the final syllable sounded, Brand's voice trumpeting '**facie Dei**'; a blast of defiance that challenged the receding thunder in volume, the circle of holy water, diluted not at all by the driving rain, flashed a counterpoint to the lightning strike of moments before, and the ghoul ricocheted off a solid wall of force mere feet from my brother, its pale, dead skin charring to ash where it made contact.

Father O'Neill didn't even flinch.

The ghoul threw itself at Brand again, snarling in rage, viscous strings of drool flying from yellowed fangs stained dark with human blood, and again it rebounded as the wrath of Brandon's god seared its skin.

My brother flipped to another page, a frayed silk bookmark holding its place, and began again to intone in Latin while the monster howled in frustration, pacing the circle, hunting in vain for an opening.

**“Ecce dedi vobis potestátem calcándi  
supra serpéntes et scorpiónes,  
et super omnem virtútem inimíci,  
et nihil vobis nocébit.”**

*Behold, I have given you power to tread  
upon serpents and scorpions,  
and upon all the power of the enemy,  
and nothing shall hurt you.*

At the final syllables, the creature cowered in fear, slinking back toward the guardrail, and Brand took one confident stride toward the invisible boundary, leaving Zee holding the umbrella behind him. As he reached the barrier, Brand snapped the bible shut and pulled from his ratty overcoat a golden crucifix, which he raised in the air, before commanding, this time in English,

***“Burn, spawn of hell!”***

The ghoul screeched in agony as white fire burst from its body, tearing ragged holes in its death-pale flesh, consuming it in ravening waves that ate the monster from the inside out. Lightning flashed again, this time on the far side of the river, just as a final blinding sunburst of holy judgment rendered the nightmare creature into a drifting cloud of ash. Thunder rumbled into the distance as the night fell suddenly silent, the rain stopping as though the tap had been shut off.

Despite all that I had seen in the past four years since Brandon and I emerged from that cave in France, I still wasn't certain that *I* believed in God, but I was *damned* sure that God believed in my brother.