Chapter One

Dr. Fields

Easttown, Arkham

You didn't need to come. I didn't want you to come, Father."

Dr. Fields looked at his daughter and didn't know what to say. He had told young men that they would die before their time, had watched his wife die inch by painful inch as the cancer ate her from the inside, but faced with his only daughter standing defiant and ragged in these cramped and filthy rooms, he did not know what he should do.

He was a tall man, thin but healthy for his age, with blue eyes in a face framed by grey white hair. In his best suit, he was the kind of man to whom people gave respect and the time of day without thought, the kind of man who they had been happy to bring their aches, pains, and fears to for nearly thirty years. But standing in the middle of the gloomy room, his hat clutched in both hands, his feet neatly together, he looked more like a nervous child.

"I wanted to see you." He smiled, but could feel its weakness. He flicked his eyes up to her face, so thin and hard it reminded him of her mother in the last hollow weeks of her life. His daughter's matted blond hair sat in a tangle above a pinched sallow face

which spoke of meals left uneaten. Her eyes were hard and dark above a thin mouth set into an angry line. She wore a grey dress mottled with patterns that might have once been flowers and the oily smudges of old stains. She was not even thirty, but hard times and trouble had wrung youth from her and left her like a rag stained by bitterness and worn through by the harsh rub of life.

"I was worried about you," he said.

"Yeah?" she sneered, and turned away from him to search through a litter-piled sideboard for a cigarette.

He glanced around again. The apartment was on the ground floor and the bright light of summer came through the dusty windows in a gloomy haze. There was a metal-framed single bed on a sagging wooden floor, and a stove stained from heat and spills. Unwashed pots and dishes sat in a sink set into a narrow counter of wood across which mold had spread in damp brown patches. Piles of clothes covered furniture in tangled drifts that mingled with dust-covered pictures, bundles of books, and broken china. A heavy smell of damp, spoiled food, and dust hung in the air.

"You can't live like this, Amelia," he said, looking up at her as she found a pack of pre-rolled cigarettes and struck a match to light one. She exhaled a long plume of smoke.

"How I live is none of your business, Fath—" She bit off the last word, not looking at him.

"This place is not healthy," he said, casting his eyes over the squalor of the room. He saw a man's shoe half-hidden under a pile of dust-covered fabric. It was Henry's. Another part of a life that had fallen to ruin around his daughter, remnants of her past spread like the debris of a storm left at the tide's edge.

There was, he saw, one small area of order in the chaos and grime: a small table of cheap, stripped pine on which lay a neatly folded grey garment weighed down by what looked like a broach made of polished metal in the shape of two hands clasped together.

"Why did you come? My health?" She was glaring at him,

smoke curling from the cigarette as she held it to her mouth.

"Yes. Yes, in part," he said, trying to keep his voice level and soothing.

"That's not your concern," she snapped as she turned away from him again. She began shifting piles of clothes as if looking for something.

"I am your father: it has and always will be my concern," he said, a hard edge of authority and emotion coming into his tone—the father talking to the defiant little girl.

"You lost the right to say that a long time ago," she said, curling her lip.

"Look at this place, Amelia," he gestured around him, concern overriding the careful control in his voice. "Look at your life."

Suddenly she was facing him shaking with rage.

"Life, what life?" she bawled, her voice raw, her pale face flushed red. She kicked a pile of clothes and framed pictures. "This is it. This is all that I have." She looked at him, the hand holding the cigarette stabbing at the debris around the room, ash and sparks falling from its burning tip. "Scraps for the pawn broker so that I can get a few more cents to keep eating food and sleeping indoors." She had begun to cry as she shouted, and as she finished she slumped to the floor gripping her knees, her body shaking as tears streaked down her face.

He stood for a moment, uncertain what to do. He had always been unsure what to do with his daughter. The blood, pain, and suffering of others held no fear for him, but the girl on the floor crying filled him with hesitation and awkward uncertainty for everything that had been taken from her. He realized that he had not held her since she was a child. Even when her mother died, he had found a way through the pain on his own. He had held his face unmoving, his back straight, and let his daughter cry on the shoulders of others. He bent down, taking care to place his hat on the floor, and hugged her as she sobbed.

"Amelia," he said, his voice soft, but she kept on crying. He did not want to say anything else. For a moment, he glimpsed in his mind the father he might have been and wanted to hold onto the possibility that he could undo the past—his distance from his daughter and his poor choices. She continued to cry, but he found the resolve to say what he knew he must.

"Amelia," he began, pulling himself away from her so that he could look into her puffed and tear-streaked face. He thought that she looked like a child again—the same open wide eyes looking up at him that he remembered from a long time ago. "I came to see you because I had a letter from Dr. Zulock at Arkham Asylum. He says that you have not attended any treatments since you were discharged a month ago." She stopped crying.

"Dr. Zulock says you have taken up with a spiritual group rather than take his treatment." She pulled away from him, the tearful softness leaving her face. "It is important that you continue your treatment with Dr. Zulock. Your psychological state—"

"My state?" She was on her feet again, all her anger and defiance flowing back into her face. "My state? All you have ever been able to see is condition, disease, treatment, medicine. Treatment! There is no treatment, no medicine. You would have known that if you had been here when Thomas died, rather than at the end of a telegram." She was looking down at him, fists clenched at her sides, eyes wide with anger. He closed his eyes for a moment and let out a breath.

"I have never been sorrier than when you lost your child." He looked at his daughter, wishing her to believe him, knowing that she would not.

Her son, his grandchild, had contracted influenza in the waning months of the great epidemic. As the fever ran higher, he'd begun to cough up bright yellow goblets of phlegm. He had coughed for days. Then the coughing had stopped and his fever had run higher and higher. It had not stopped until the night the hospital doctors came to find Amelia Knowles and her husband Henry to

tell them that their only son had died. Henry Knowles had found comfort in a bottle soon after, and a month later had taken a train to Innsmouth and had walked to the end of the peer at dusk, a whiskey bottle in his hand. His body was never found.

"Thomas. My son was named Thomas."

"I know. I was not here but—"

"No you weren't, and when Henry went, you still weren't," she said, her voice hard.

"I…," he began, but he did not know what to say. The truth was that when he'd heard the devastating news he had been afraid, afraid of facing the cold wave of grief that he had felt when he had held his wife's hand as she died years before her time. Worn to shreds by the long war against the Spanish flu epidemic, a war he had been fighting patient by patient, he had had nothing left. For him, there had been nowhere to go for comfort, and at that time he had had nothing to give his daughter. So, he'd locked the door to his office in Boston and wept for his grandchild alone, leaving his daughter to the comfort of others. A week after the death of his son-in-law, Dr. Fields had received a private note from his old friend Dr. Giles Zulock of Arkham Asylum. The note had said that his daughter had suffered a psychological break and been committed to the asylum's care for her own safety.

"What good could you have done anyway?" she asked.

"Amelia, listen, you need treatment."

"I have all the help I need, and I need none of yours."

"This group you have taken up with—I don't know what they are, but I do not like what I hear." He had gone to see his old friend when he arrived in Arkham, and Dr. Zulock had warned him that his daughter had not only refused treatment after being discharged, but had taken up with some sort of religious sect. They were called "the Hand of Solace," he'd said. The group claimed to offer help to those who had suffered great loss, though what they did exactly, Dr. Zulock had not known.

"More doctors whispering. What are the whispers saying, Daddy?" She was speaking in a mocking, baby-like whine, a sneer on her lips as she watched him.

"That this group is like a church without God, and that they prey on the bereaved and broken. I do not know what they want from you but—"

"They don't want anything."

"Amelia, I wish I could believe that, but I don't," he said, a pleading note in his voice.

"You don't?" she asked, her voice mocking.

"No. I think it would be better if you did not associate with them anymore."

Her face was a mask of incredulous anger.

"You want me to leave them? To leave them, and go back to Dr. Zulock with his hypnosis, talking about my nightmares until I feel better?"

"Amelia…," he pleaded.

"Yes, yes, of course. Of course you want me to do that, Daddy. Leave the people who can do something and go back to something nice and safe. Somewhere a doctor signs a form and you can talk to him about how treatment is progressing." She turned away from him, walking to the small table with the folded grey garment and metal brooch. Her voice had become formal, cold, like a bank manger dealing with a regrettably unacceptable request. "Well, thank you for your concern, Dr. Fields, but I will find all the help I need in the hands of others." She picked up the polished metal brooch, turning its silvered surface in the light.

"What happened to you?" He could think of nothing else to say; he felt beaten, defeated, lost.

"What happened to *me*, Father?" she asked, her voice now calm and hard. "*Hell* happened to me, while you were looking the other way." She put the brooch down, walked to the door, and opened it. "I want you to leave now."

"Please listen, Amelia—"

"I have listened, Father," she said. "I have listened to you and your words are as worthless as your medicine."

He picked up his hat from the floor. She held the door open. The hallway outside was bright with the light of summer.

"Amelia. Please."

"Goodbye, Father." She did not look at him as he stepped outside.

"Amelia. Take care." The last word was lost as she closed the door.

Twenty minutes after he'd left, Amelia left her apartment. As she stepped down from the entrance hall of the rotting, gabled building, she was smiling. Sunshine spilled over the high peaked roofs into the narrow Easttown street, glinting off her matted hair. Tucked under her arm was a neatly folded grey garment and gripped in her hand was a brooch in the shape of two clasped hands.

The street was quiet and the air smelled of the drains warming under the cobbled sidewalks. She began to walk, looking as if she enjoyed every step and breath; she looked like a different girl from the one who had sobbed on the floor and shouted at her father. She looked like someone on a journey with hope and joy at its end.

From the shadows of the gap between two houses, Dr. Fields watched his daughter and felt his thoughts fill with worries and fears. For a second he wondered if he should just leave. Then he thought of the grey garment folded neatly on the small table away from the detritus of his daughter's life. He thought of the brooch of clasped hands and the worries that Dr. Zulock had shared with him about the Hand of Solace. A chill spread up his back. *No*, he thought. He would not fail his daughter again; he would not let her face the demons of life alone.

Dr. Fields slid from the shadows and began to follow his daughter through the sun-soaked streets of Arkham.