

PROLOGUE

STRANGENESS IN THE NIGHT

It was quiet in Portland, the calm, still quiet of a small town at two o'clock on a rainy Monday morning. The streets were empty, there was no traffic, and the only sound was the soft tap dance of the rain and the slow background beat of the surf rolling in on Mermaid Point.

Through the predawn silence, something moved in the middle of River Road — something huge and dark and struggling. The length of a bus, but not as high, it propelled itself, awkwardly and with great effort, sideways up the slight slope toward Main Street.

As it drew near the next streetlight, it raised one strange, dark eye — and the light went out. The thing opened its great maw to let out a soft, almost yawning hiss of satisfaction, then dragged itself on, leaving a trail of slime and a line of fizzled-out streetlights behind it.

Soon, its destination became clear. It was heading toward a big, old house on the slope below the Rock — a house with a widow's walk around a high-pitched roof, topped with an eccentric weather vane shaped like a crescent moon with several attendant stars.

Right now, even though there was no breeze, the weather vane was wavering between southwest and northwest — pointing in the rough general direction of the thing squelching ever closer to the house.

The creature paused at the intersection of Parkhill Street and Watchward Lane, and its huge, wide mouth opened again. But this time its whole body convulsed, ripples moving through its form like shaken jelly.

A moment later, with one final, particularly violent spasm, it vomited up half a dozen partially digested rats. The thing sniffed at them warily, then continued on its way, crushing its rejected dinner as it slid up the lane.

It moved faster as it neared its goal, helped by another shower of rain that made the cobbled lane wet and eased the monster's strange progress. Bright arc lights suddenly flickered on down at the marina and the fish market, urging the creature to greater speed. The night was ending, the boats were coming in, and soon there would be people about.

The monster needed to hide. Fortunately, it knew exactly where to go.