

BLACK CATHEDRAL

CHAPTER ONE

It was what had happened here, and what was about to happen again, that made it obvious this was the start of it all.

There was nothing very special about the house – a medium sized English suburban semi-detached, built some time in the nineteen thirties, complete with bay windows and a stained glass panel depicting sun-rays, set in the solid green-painted front door, so that it looked like sunlight captured on grass; nothing much to set it apart from its neighbors. Except for what had happened there.

The tree lined avenue was the picture of normality; cars parked either side against the neat verges, hedges precisely clipped, a child's bicycle on a front drive, the sound of an electric mower buzzing like a sun lazed bee. The house they were visiting looked welcoming, and would have been a pleasant place to spend the afternoon. Except for what was going to happen again.

Robert Carter hesitated, pushed open the front door and, after taking a deep inward breath, stepped into the house. Sian Davies, his assistant, followed close behind, her pad in hand, pen poised to take down notes and to keep an accurate record of events as they unfolded. Both of them were certain events would unfold.

Carter carried a small device, holding it out in front of him, sweeping the air in broad strokes, like a warrior brandishing his sword. The device looked very much like a photographer's light meter. It was no more than three inches square and an inch deep. On one end was a small white dome, on the front a dial with calibrations from one to one thousand. But while a photographer's meter measured light, Carter's machine could detect the slightest changes, the tiniest fluctuations, in magnetic fields. Perfect for suspected hauntings.

Carter was thirty-five, tall and slim with an athletic physique he owed to the four hours a week he spent at the gym, combined with regular games of squash and rackets. The exercise was complemented by a healthy diet, apart from far too many cigarettes, a light intake of alcohol, and occasional sex with willing partners.

Sian Davies had none of these attributes, and none of the virtues of a healthy lifestyle. She was short, dumpy, with spiky black hair and a small tattoo of a rose on her shoulder. And she had a crush on Robert Carter the size of a small country. Yet despite their close working relationship, Carter was a total mystery to her. There were rumors of a great love affair – some forbidden passion that had ended and left Carter a scarred, emotional wreck. Some of the rumors had even linked him with Jane Talbot, Department 13's brightest star, but Sian was not sure she set much store by them. She liked and respected Jane Talbot – aspiring in her own small way to be like her – and she knew Jane was happily married.

Sian was worldly enough to know that men like Robert Carter were always the targets for the mythmakers and rumormongers. The scurrilous stories told around the Department's water coolers were fed and nurtured by jealousy and envy. Sian preferred her own fantasies. They sustained her during long lonely nights and gave her a reason to get up every morning. Often they weren't the type of fantasy to share around the coffee machine at work.

'Ambient temperature in the house low and dropping rapidly.' Carter was speaking into a small microphone attached to the collar of his shirt and wired to a digital recorder he carried in his jacket pocket. As if to prove his point his breath was starting to mist in front of his face. There was also an oppressive atmosphere in the house. An atmosphere that couldn't be measured with meters but one that was almost palpable.

He trusted the readings on the various instruments he carried, and when they read that there were disturbances in the electromagnetic fields and unusual fluctuations in temperature he knew he had something definite to deal with. The instruments had their uses, but more often than not he preferred to rely on his own feelings; the vibes – primitive instincts inherited from mankind's prehistoric ancestors, so dulled in the majority of people to be absolutely worthless. In him they were honed to razor sharpness. So much so that he rarely began an investigation like this without careful preparation, building his mental defenses as carefully as a bricklayer builds a wall. Sometimes he worried he had built the wall so high, so strong, that nothing could penetrate it, not even if he wanted it to.

The house had been decorated some time in the nineteen-seventies, but the browns, yellows and pinks had faded with age and looked more muted now than when they were first applied. The Fleming's, the

owners of the house, were a couple in their seventies, both retired. It was Mrs. Fleming who had taken the steps to bring in the Department. Her younger brother was high up in the Whitehall pecking order, and a frantic phone call to him had set the wheels in motion. Another phone call was made to Department 13's head, Simon Crozier, with the request that the Department investigate the house. In deference to the request Carter had been sent; the Department's top field man, even if Crozier did hate his guts.

Carter reviewed the file in his mind. Six months ago the couple started hearing things that disturbed their prosaic little life. At first it was nothing more than a few scratches on the ceiling, the odd footfall on the bedroom floor when they were both downstairs, but nothing that couldn't be explained away rationally; a loose board settling into place, birds or mice setting up home in the eaves of the house, nothing to be alarmed about. They were both getting old and the mind could play tricks.

The smells were more alarming. According to the Fleming's the kitchen was often filled with the reek of ozone that smelled something like an electrical short circuit. In the lounge it was the odor of sour cream, and in the bedrooms the musty mud and straw smell of an animal pen. But it was the entrance hall that had the most distinctive and most repellent aroma. Mrs. Fleming described it as 'the smell of something washed up on a beach; dead and rotten' and, standing there in the hall, Carter had to agree. 'God, it stinks in here,' he said. Sian made a note in her pad.

The needle on the meter twitched significantly, leaping a quarter way around the dial. He frowned. 'There's a huge amount of electromagnetic energy coming from the kitchen. Let's go take a look.'

Sian felt the hairs of the back of her neck start to prickle. No matter how many of these investigations she attended, she never got over that first thrill of fear and dread. Experience had shown her that there was never anything much to fear – in fact she had only ever witnessed one manifestation, and that was of someone's dead pet Labrador. Not a very frightening image at all. But a feeling buried deep within her, and one she could not rationalize, told her that this house was very different to anything she had experienced before.

She knew from her reading of the file on the house that there had been a number of physical manifestations, and an alarming amount of damage to both the property and the residents, culminating with old Mr. Fleming being pushed down the stairs. The fall had broken his hip, and a prolonged stay in hospital had precipitated their moving out. He flatly refused to set foot in the house again until it was 'sorted out!'

Carter reached the doorway and glanced round. Sian was shifting from foot to foot, pretending to read from her notebook. 'Coming?' he said. He knew she was frightened, and probably with good reason. This house was different, he was sure of that.

The tone of his voice jerked her out of her inertia, and she followed him reluctantly. By the time she entered the kitchen Carter was standing in the center of the split and cracked vinyl floor, turning slowly in a circle, the meter extended at arm's length.

'There,' he said as the needle on the dial twitched again.

He was pointing at a door. Sian stared at it. It was probably nothing more than a broom cupboard and she knew Carter was expecting her to open it, but she really didn't want to. Crazy and macabre images were flashing through her mind; all sorts of gruesome tableaux were waiting for her behind that rather bland, cream-painted door. She started to back away.

Sensing her fear Carter laid the meter down on the kitchen table and stepped forward, grabbing the handle of the door and twisting it sharply. He yanked the door open and a nightmare of teeth, claws and fur flew out at him. He yelled a warning to Sian, turned and tripped on a torn piece of vinyl, tumbling to the floor, landing sharply on his knee. He hissed with pain and shock, glancing round as the cat skidded across the kitchen floor to the back door. Without even checking its stride, it shot out through the cat flap. Sian ran to the door but only just managed to catch a fleeting glimpse of tortoise shell fur as the animal dived into the overgrown shrubbery at the end of the garden.

She looked back at Carter who was struggling to get to his feet. Pain had etched lines across his face and colored it an ashen gray. She ran across to help him. Pulling a chair away from the table she helped him into it.

'Shit!' he said, rubbing his knee, a rueful smile hovering on his lips. 'And I've got a league match tonight.'

She smiled sympathetically, and absently stroked his hair. 'How long do you think the cat was in there?' she said, approaching the broom cupboard cautiously. 'The house has been empty for weeks, but there's no sign that it's been shut in there for any more than a few hours. No mess, and it certainly couldn't have survived that long without food and water.'

'It wasn't real,' Carter said. 'It didn't actually exist. Check your file again. The Fleming's had a cat matching the description of that one, but they found it with its throat cut six months ago. Besides,' he added as almost an afterthought, 'it passed straight through me, and the cat flap didn't open as it went through.' Gingerly he got to his feet. 'Come on,' he said. 'Let's have a look upstairs.' Sian wasn't surprised at his

casual acceptance of the supernatural. She didn't understand it, or share it, but she found it reassuring. It made her feel safe, well, safer.

The master bedroom was dead, cold and empty, and caused not so much as a flutter on Carter's meter. 'There's nothing here,' he said, and closed the door, shutting in the memories and the dust.

It was the same story in the other bedrooms and the bathroom. Even the smells that the Fleming's had described so eloquently in their report were subdued. There was a faint trace of an odor in some of the rooms, but nothing as strong as they had described.

'What do you think?' Sian said when they had checked all the rooms.

Carter leaned against the banister, looking down the stairwell. There was something here. He could feel it. The incident with the cat proved it. But what? 'I'm not sure,' he said. 'Let's check downstairs again.'

He was halfway down the stairs when he heard china smashing. Gritting his teeth against the pain in his knee he ran down the last few steps, pausing only to point his meter at the kitchen door again. The needle was swinging wildly, arcing backwards and forwards across the dial. He shivered and took a breath. Whatever was in there was giving off a huge electromagnetic charge, more powerful than anything he had encountered before.

They entered the kitchen together this time. The source of the noise was obvious straight away. Plates were lifting from the dresser as if grasped by invisible hands. One after another the plates were being destroyed, smashing down on the floor with such force that pieces of china were embedding themselves in the vinyl.

Whatever was causing the damage was instantly aware of them as soon as they entered the room. There was a momentary pause, and one of the willow pattern plates floated from the dresser, hung in the air for a second then, with frightening force, flew across the room towards them. Carter ducked and pushed Sian out of the way. The plate sailed through the gap between them and smashed on the wall behind, showering them with sharp shards of broken china. Sian cried out as a large fragment of crockery sliced through the sleeve of her shirt, then gasped with relief as she realized it had missed her flesh by millimeters.

Starting as a low rumble a sound started to fill the room. It developed quickly into a chorus of whoops and squeals, underpinned by a deep guttural growling. As another plate was lifted from the dresser Carter grabbed Sian by the arm and propelled her out of the kitchen, yanking the door closed behind him. He heard the crash and felt the wood shudder as the plate smashed into it.

They were in the dining room. He turned to speak to Sian, but her attention was focused on the wall ahead. He followed her gaze.

There was a bulge underneath the wallpaper, about the size of a large walnut, and it was moving slowly across the wall at eye level. As it moved it formed a hump in the paper, but behind it the wallpaper was smooth, flattened down as if the hump had never been there.

Whatever was beneath the wallpaper was picking up speed. The paper made a soft hissing sound as it lifted away from the wall. Carter jerked his head round as he heard the same sound coming from behind him. There were three humps, moving parallel to each other diagonally across the wall, and more of the things were creeping up from the skirting board.

'We'd better get out of here,' he said, but Sian wasn't listening. She'd moved across the room and was staring at the first hump as it zigzagged back and forth, her face inches away from it.

Carter felt a spear of apprehension skewer him. 'Sian, get back!' he shouted, but as the words left his lips the wallpaper split and a large beetle emerged, black and glistening, with a hard iridescent carapace. The creature scuttled across the wall, then the carapace opened and it took flight, launching itself at Sian and attaching itself to the soft skin of her neck. She turned to Carter, too shocked to cry out, a look of absolute terror on her face, her fingers fluttering at her throat, anxious to pull the thing off but far too terrified to actually touch it.

Underneath the wallpaper the rest of the creatures were moving in frenzy, sensing the attack. As the paper lifted and fell in their path it whispered and hissed, filling the room with a soft susurration. Carter was across the room in two strides. 'Keep still,' he said as he grabbed the hard shell and squeezed, but the beetle's head was burrowing into her flesh, its legs forming sharp hooks, anchoring it to her skin. Sian was silent, but huge tears were forming in her beseeching eyes and rolling down her cheeks.

The grip of the creature was fierce and the effort of making it loosen its hold made the sweat bead on Carter's brow; then suddenly, with a sound like of sigh of resignation the creature released its hold on Sian's flesh. It writhed in Carter's grip, the scurrying movement of tiny legs making him shudder. The thing was squirming in his grasp and twisting its head in an effort to bite him.

As if acting on a signal from the first creature, the other bulges in the wall burst open, like paper eggs hatching, and the air was filled with the sound of twenty or more of the beetles testing their wings.

Carter threw the beetle to the floor, stamped on it then grabbed Sian's arm again and hauled her towards the French doors, batting the things away as they flew at them. He grasped the door handle but another beetle landed on his hand, clicking mandibles biting down hard, puncturing skin. He swore loudly

and brushed it off before the head could start burrowing. The door swung open but, as he forced Sian out into the garden, a dozen or more of the beetles landed on his back. He could feel the legs scrabbling up his jacket as they tried to reach his throat and he threw himself backwards against the wall, grunting with satisfaction as he heard the carapaces crack on impact. As the creatures dropped to the floor he threw himself through the open door, slamming it shut behind him, listening to the glass rattle as the beetles launched themselves at it in pursuit.

He stood on the patio, panting, trying to get his breath back. Sian was watching him with tear-smudged eyes. 'What were those things?' she said. 'I've never seen beetles like them before.'

'Well, I don't think you'll find them in any reference works on coleopterans,' Carter said, drawing the warm afternoon air into his lungs, 'At a guess I would say they were elementals, some kind of physical embodiment of the power, or powers, in that house. How's your neck?'

Her fingers went to the soft skin at the side of her throat and came away bloody. Carter pulled a clean handkerchief from his pocket, folded it into a pad and handed it to her. 'We'd better get you to the hospital. You're going to need a tetanus shot for that.'

Sian was shaking. 'But they were real,' she said, shock reducing her voice to no more than a whisper. 'At first I didn't think they had any substance... like the cat... but it hurt. Christ, it hurt!' She held the pad to the wound as tears welled in her eyes again. Carter wrapped an arm around her shoulders and led her back to their car parked in a bay at the back of the house. He opened the passenger door and ushered her inside. 'Wait here,' he said.

She grabbed the sleeve of his jacket. 'Where are you going?' she said, close to panic. She didn't want to be left alone. She was badly frightened and the fear was making her feel nauseous. She didn't want Robert to go back to the house, not take the risk again.

'Back in there,' he said, and saw the panic flare in her eyes. 'Don't worry. I'll be fine now I know what I'm up against.'

Sian chewed her lip, unconvinced. She was trying to conquer her fear, furious with herself for appearing so weak, so bloody girly! He'd never take her out on an assignment again. She'd screwed up and was anxious to make amends 'I'll come with you.'

'No, you won't. You've had enough for one day. This won't take long, then I'll take you to A and E, to get that wound looked at.' He slammed the door and started to walk back to the house. Halfway there he pulled out his cell phone and punched in a number.
