

## Chapter 1

The house would wake soon. Katlin knew it and she was afraid. It was dark and stormy outside. The clouds raced across the moon. They cast shadows and the shadows took form and hid themselves in the darkest corners of the room. The shadows were quiet now, but Katlin knew that they were just waiting. They liked it that way. They liked it when they could shrink and hide and be quiet for a while; for then ... just when she thought it was safe to close her eyes and sleep they would leap out of the darkness and turn themselves into ghostly shapes that screamed and swooped and floated in the air just above her head.

Soon the raindrops would come. They would hit the windows with their long, razor-sharp nails that scratched and slide slowly, very, very slowly etching their pathway down the glass.

The house liked darkness and storms.

Soon she would hear the soft, gentle persistent tap, tap, tap on her bedroom door.

She tried to hide her fear with bedclothes that covered her head and her teddy-bear clutched so tightly in her arms that, if he could speak, he would say in his posh, polite teddy-bear voice,

'Please stop Katlin; it hurts when you squeeze so tight.'

Katlin knew that he could not speak. She knew that he was just a bear-shaped thing stuffed soft with wadding. But she also knew that sometimes, when the storm and the shapes came, he was afraid. And, because he was afraid, she must not be, for she was the only friend that he had and he needed her.

Soon she would hear the soft, gentle persistent tap, tap, tap on her bedroom door.

Then she would hear the voice of the little girl and the little girl would call out and say,

'I have come for you Katlin. Come and play.'

Then the little girl would tap some more.

Tap, tap, tap on her bedroom door.

'I have come for you Katlin. Come and play.'

Once, when she was younger Katlin had got out of bed and opened her bedroom door. The little girl had been waiting. She'd stretched out her hand and beckoned.

But there was something wrong with the little girl and Katlin knew it. There was something wrong with her perfect curls and her white doll-like face. There was something wrong with her red rose-bud lips that spoke, but did not move and her big blue eyes that stared, but not blink.

Perhaps she was mistaken, but Katlin often thought that the house, the little girl and the shadows were stronger and more powerful when she was already afraid.

Mostly, when she was younger she didn't used to be afraid so much. She was afraid of normal stuff like having to eat cabbage with her Sunday lunch or getting told off for jumping in the puddles and playing in the lovely, gooey mud that squelched between her fingers.

But lately, the house, the little girl and the shadows had grown stronger. Tonight they were very, very strong. They were very strong because, tonight her father had been angry and had shouted so loudly at her mother that two pillows and a duvet could not drown it out. Then something had crashed and smashed violently to the floor. Then a door had slammed shut and she'd heard her mother crying. The sound had drifted gently through doorways and crept softly up the stairs. The house, the little girl and the shadows smiled at that. They liked it that way.

Katlin wanted to go to her mother, but she was afraid. She was afraid of the night and the darkness and the shapes and the sounds of the storm and the little girl that would soon come tap, tap, tapping on her bedroom door.

She was but six years old, but already Katlin knew that there were two sorts of demons in the world. There was the sort that arrived with the storm, hid in the shadows and crept out from the darkness. But, mostly they did not hurt. Then there were the ones that always did; the human kind. The ones that made your mother cry.

The house liked demons. It did not care which type it fed upon.

Murgatroid was waiting. He sat on the corner of Katlin's bed and waited. He didn't like it when the storm came. He didn't like it when the little girl came, for he knew that the little girl did not belong in this world. Her world had called to her. It wanted to bring her into the light, but she would not go.

Murgatroid had tried to help. The first time she'd come he'd felt it before Katlin had. He'd tried to protect his mistress, to show her how strong, powerful and

protective he was. But he wasn't strong and powerful and protective, not in this life he wasn't, he was just a normal cat.

When the little girl had come he'd wanted to flatten her against the wall with one small swish of his tail. But he just couldn't do it. Panic had hit him then. Where had his power gone?

Perhaps he needed an energy re-charge, maybe a nice juicy fish or a catnip-roasted chicken fillet?

No that wasn't it.

Perhaps all he needed was a bit of raw and crunchy mouse, with a moth and spider salad on the side. NO! What was going on? He couldn't possibly be thinking of raw and crunchy mouse. How gross was that? Get a grip Murgatroid.

Perhaps his powerful paw that pointed was just a teeny-weeny bit off target?

No that wasn't it.

Then it hit him, full-on in the stomach, where the fresh Salmon should be. He just couldn't do it, and he just couldn't do it because he just didn't have the power. How humiliating was that? It was worse, much, much worse than having to pretend to be scared of that fat, poncey, pathetic Pekinese that lived next door. It couldn't even chase properly. Mostly he even had to wait until it caught up with him so that could run, 'like I'm really, really scared - I don't think so mutt-head!' - up the tree.

So he hadn't been able to protect Katlin when the little girl came, she'd looked at him with her creepy staring eyes and he'd just crumbled. He was ashamed to admit it, but he'd actually managed to dive and hid his head under the duvet even before Katlin's head got under there. But, looking at the positives, he had left his bum and his tail completely exposed. And, the fur on his tail had been standing on end like it had just been plugged into the electric socket. Now that would have been really, really scary for the little girl ... except that both of these bits had been shaking and quaking in fear.

It was no good. It had to stop. He just had to get his power back. Katlin was depending on him.

## Chapter 2

The house watched the sun rise. It hated it when the sun rose warm and strong and beautiful. It hated it because soon the daylight would come and the daylight would take its power and grind it into nothingness, until the night came again.

It hated the way that the birds came and perched and sang in the branches of the trees on the other side of the garden wall. It didn't like trees or birds or singing or happiness.

The house had its own tree in the earth that it called its garden, but it had no leaves or birds, for life had long since been taken from it by the evil in the earth in which its roots lay buried. The tree that the house loved stood, bark-less and withered and its skeletal arms stretched out as lily-white and lifeless as the bones of the dead.

Nothing good or beautiful could grow in its garden. It liked it that way.

Once, in a time and a place that most humans would know nothing of, the last battle of the souls had raged here. It was the battle between good and evil and it had raged for so long that time itself could no longer count the millennium of it.

Many had died - men, women, children, cats, dogs, rabbits, foxes, birds, badgers, otters, weasels, shrews and mice - had all taken up arms to protect the goodness of the land. Hundreds upon thousands had died, until the battle-field cried out in pity for all the souls of those who died upon it.

There had been a truce then, for a while. Evil had its back to the wall and could not win. Good was exhausted and would not endure more butchery. And so an agreement was reached. There was one space where evil could rein independent and free from interference. The plot was large enough for the building of a house with a very large garden.

For hundreds upon thousands of years in human-time nothing that lived could bear to fly, move, slink, slither or take one single breath upon that land. Then a man, who had no soul and cared nothing for its evil, built a house upon it.