

A
DROP
OF
HAUNTED
BLOOD

Rory North

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Chapter One

Swords, Stones, and Potted Plants

Felix glared at the raccoon perched on top of the trash can. “Listen, buddy,” he said. “I respect you. But if you don’t let me throw this bag in there, we’re going to have a problem.” He took a slow step forward. The raccoon didn’t budge.

“Seriously, my sister has a sword. Don’t make me get her.” Felix doubted Helena would be eager to use her weapon on local wildlife, but that was the only comforting thought he could come up with. Thick gray clouds obscured the first rays of morning sun, and the lights from his house weren’t doing much to illuminate the end of the driveway where the trash can waited for pickup. He couldn’t help but feel a little uneasy.

The raccoon’s head tipped to the side. Did it understand that it was being threatened? What were the chances it had rabies? The last thing Felix needed was a trip to the hospital. But he was already running behind, and if he missed the bus again this week, Mom would definitely stop letting him stay out late with the tennis team.

“All right. You asked for it.” Felix lifted the trash bag and swung. The raccoon hissed and flashed its upsettingly large fangs before leaping off the can and into the bushes lining the edge of the driveway. Felix stumbled forward. He crashed into the trash can, and the whole thing tipped over, spilling bags onto the cement.

There was a decent chance Mom was watching from the kitchen window, so he bit back a string of curses as he righted the can and shoved the bags back inside. He added this morning’s trash on top, slammed the lid shut, and turned around. The raccoon sat on its hind legs ten feet away, eyes on him.

“The hell is your problem?” Felix had never had particularly strong feelings about raccoons, but this same unnaturally large one had been out here every morning for the past week.

The raccoon blinked. Felix shuddered.

When he walked back into the kitchen, Helena looked up from the textbook she was reading and crammed another bite of cereal into her mouth. As usual, she’d gotten up early enough to be ready long before everyone else was even awake. The dirty blonde hair she’d gotten from Dad was pulled up in a ponytail, and she wore a bright blue shirt with her university’s logo on it. Her longsword lay unsheathed across the counter in front of her. Felix could already hear Mom’s lecture about leaving weapons there.

Helena swallowed. “You okay?” She asked, brow furrowing.

“I’m fine,” Felix told her. He rested his arms on the counter and leaned forward so that he could see his face reflected in the sword’s shiny blade. “That raccoon was out there again.”

May walked into the room as the words were leaving his mouth. “Aw, are you still scared of that raccoon?” she teased.

Felix groaned. “I’m not scared of it. I just don’t want rabies!” His reflection’s green eyes narrowed. “And it was your turn to take out the trash, anyway.”

“Then why’d you do it?” May asked.

“You were taking one of your long ass showers, and the bus is going to be here in five minutes!”

“I’m not going to school today,” May said. She tucked a piece of her chin-length dark brown hair—she shared the color with both Mom and her twin—behind her ear. “Neither is Ezra.”

Felix looked up. “What? Why not?”

“We have a doctor’s appointment.”

“Why don’t I have one?”

“It’s a twin thing.”

Helena rolled her eyes. “It’s not a twin thing. They need a few booster shots before they go to college this fall.” She closed the textbook she’d been reading, and Felix’s brain hurt just seeing the words “Advanced Physics” on the cover. “May, we should go look for that raccoon later today and make sure it’s not—” She hesitated. “Make sure it doesn’t have rabies.”

May folded her arms. “You think it could be...sick?”

“Probably not, but I want to be sure.”

Great. They were having one of their weird little conversations again. Felix lowered his chin to his arms and glared at Helena’s sword. This close, he could see the tiny geometric symbols carved into the metal and around the teal-colored grip. When he’d asked Helena what they meant years ago, she’d mumbled something about buying it secondhand.

“Should we get Mom to help?” May asked.

Helena shook her head. “No, I think we can handle it ourselves.”

Mom entered the kitchen a moment later. Ezra trailed behind. “Ezra, where did you put my phone?” Mom stopped in her tracks when she saw Felix. “Felix, your hair!”

Felix ran a hand through the mess of light brown hair he hadn’t touched since waking up. “Uh...” Mom usually didn’t pay close enough attention in the morning to catch when he hadn’t brushed his hair.

“Come here.”

The distant rattle of the school bus reached them. “That’s the bus. I have to go.” Felix started backing toward the front door.

“Helena can drop you off on her way to class.” Mom’s stern gaze moved to the kitchen, where Helena was already grabbing her sword off the counter.

Despite being an early riser, Helena tended to run late, too. Better not to risk it. Felix grabbed his green baseball cap off the dining table as he passed it. “I’ll just wear this all day. Look, it matches my hoodie.”

“I thought I asked you to stop leaving hats lying around.”

“That’s why I’m taking it!” Felix continued to inch backward toward the front of the house.

Before Mom could respond, Ezra picked up one of his plants off the counter—something with white flowers Felix could never remember the name of—and looked up. “Did someone rearrange these? This one’s supposed to get more light.”

“Sorry, Ezra, I moved them while I was cooking last night.” Mom turned her attention back to Felix, absentmindedly twisting one of the silver rings on her hand as she did. She usually did that when she was anticipating something. What was going to happen when he

left for school? What secret conversation was the rest of his family going to have without him?

May decided now would be a great time to chime in. “How come Ezra gets to keep his plants around the house, but I have to keep my rock collection in my room?”

“Not now, May.”

The bus was almost to the stop outside, judging by the roar of its engine. Felix waved as he pushed open the front door. “Bye, love you!”

Mom sighed. “Love you.” A smile crossed her face. “Good luck on your history test!”

Oops. Felix had forgotten about that. “Uh, yeah, thanks!” He’d have to cram during lunch. The door clicked shut behind him, and he set off down the driveway.

Dad stood next to the mailbox, clutching a few envelopes in his hands and staring intently at something in the distance. “Bye Dad, love you!” Felix called as he passed.

That snapped Dad out of whatever trance he’d been in. “Hey, Felix,” he said as he turned. “You have tennis practice today, right?”

Felix nodded. “I’ll be back around dinner.”

Dad looked a little surprised at that. “Not staying out late with the team?”

“Nope. Got homework.” Felix felt a twinge of annoyance at the question. Did everyone else want him out of the house today?

He reached the bus just as the last kid—besides him—was scrambling on. Felix hurried on after them, nodded at the bus driver, and made his way to the very back row where Jace waited.

“Wow, you actually made it today,” Jace said, lifting his backpack so Felix could sit down.

“Yeah, well, I almost had to fight that raccoon again.” Felix sank into the seat next to the window and threw one last glance at his house, where Dad was walking inside. Felix’s gaze darted back to the sidewalk, and he frowned.

“Maybe you should try locking up your trash can,” Jace suggested.

Felix barely heard him, too focused on the man standing at the end of his driveway, his back turned to the bus. His slicked back blonde hair, white suit pants, and matching white jacket with gold embroidered edges seemed excessive for the suburbs. Especially at seven in the morning.

“Who’s that?” Felix asked.

Jace glanced around the bus. “Who?”

The man looked back over his shoulder. His eyes glowed like a wild animal’s in the low light.

“What the hell?” Felix blurted.

“Huh?”

“Did you see that guy’s eyes?”

Jace leaned past Felix to peer out the window, but the bus was pulling away from the curb, and the man had turned back around. “That guy in front of your house?”

“Yeah. His eyes were glowing.”

“Are you sure you weren’t seeing things?” Jace asked. “It’s still kinda dark.”

Felix shifted uncomfortably in his seat. “I don’t know. He seemed sketchy.”

“You think he’s going to rob your house?”

“No. Probably not. I’m sure it’s fine.” Trying to shake off his concern, Felix added, “He’s probably just one of my parents’ weird friends.”

“I mean to be fair, your family’s kind of weird too.”

“What? No they’re not.”

“Your sister carries around a sword.”

Okay. Fair point.

Jace continued. “If he’s one of their friends, wouldn’t you recognize him?”

Felix shook his head. “No, I don’t really know any of them that well.” His parents’ friends only seemed to visit when he was going to bed, or leaving for tennis or school. This guy could’ve been one of them, he supposed. Maybe Felix had briefly met him already and forgotten about it.

Even with that rationalization, he was still unsettled. His anxiety persisted through the bus ride, but when he arrived at school, it was overwhelmed by the stress of the history test. Felix took every spare moment he had to review his messy notes and before long, he’d all but forgotten the strange man standing in front of his house.

The test left him feeling less than great, but he still had hope that he’d get away with a decent score. There were only a couple months left of school, anyway, and his grades were high enough to carry him through a few iffy exams.

Once school was over, Felix didn’t have much time to think about his grades or the strange man before tennis practice was in full swing.

It was past five by the time the team wrapped up. Jace approached Felix as he squeezed his racket into his backpack. “Hey,

wanna get burgers and shakes?” Jace asked. “It’s discount night for our school. I think the rest of the team is going.”

“Sorry. I promised my parents I’d be home for dinner tonight,” Felix told him. “And I still have to finish that stats assignment.”

“No worries,” Ian chimed in as he walked by. “I can drop you off at your house on our way.”

Felix nodded at him. “Thanks.”

Fifteen minutes later, Ian was pulling up along the street in front of Felix’s house. Felix grabbed his backpack, waved goodbye to the others in the car, and stepped out onto the sidewalk.

The moment the car door shut behind him, a chill ran down his spine. The house was unusually silent for this time in the evening. Most of the lights were off, too. Felix tried to shake his apprehension, but there was something in the air that made him feel like his blood was humming. Ian’s car sped off, and Felix forced himself to move forward.

To his relief, as he approached the porch, the door creaked open, and Mom appeared in the entryway. Some part of him thought it was strange that the door had already been ajar, but the thought only lingered a moment. He waved. “Hey!”

Mom stood in the shadows out of reach of the setting sun, making her face impossible to see in any detail. Felix blinked, and she was gone.

He paused. “Mom?” he called again.

A light breeze pushed the door open a few more inches. The quiet that followed was broken only by the distant chirping of birds. Then, another gust. Felix stood frozen.

“Hey, dork,” came a voice from behind him. May’s voice.

Felix whirled around. “How did you get behind me?”

May tossed a pale blue-gray stone into the air. “You can see me, then.” It landed in her palm, and her fist closed around it.

“Why wouldn’t I be able to see you?”

May held up her free hand and flicked his forehead.

“Ow!” Felix clapped a hand to the spot. “What was that for?”

“I can touch you, too.” May placed the hand on her hip. “I probably shouldn’t be the one telling you this. Go find Mom. Or maybe Helena? She must be around, somewhere. We’re all still getting the hang of things.”

“Can’t you just tell me what’s going on?” Felix pleaded. The buzzing sensation in his veins was growing. Despite the fact that his sister looked perfectly calm, every part of his brain screamed that something was wrong.

May sighed. “Okay, don’t freak out. But I’m dead.”

Felix stared at her blankly. “What?”

“I’m a ghost.”

Felix...should have had a stronger reaction to that, he thought dimly. But it was impossible to process the statement fully. To really believe it. Not sure he could stand much longer on his shaking legs, he dropped to a sitting position in the damp grass. “If you’re dead, why are you talking to me?” he asked. Then, feeling a faint flicker of hope, he asked, “Is this a weird prank?”

“Yeah, go inside and see what happened. You won’t think it’s a prank, then.” May considered for a moment. “On second thought, maybe don’t do that. You’ve never seen a dead body before, have you?”

“Have you?” Felix asked incredulously.

May shrugged. “Yeah. Lots of times.”

Felix stared up at her. The sun wasn't hitting her quite right. Air shimmered around her, and for a moment he thought he could see the street on the other side of her form.

There had been more than he'd realized, hadn't there? More secrets. More missing passes. He asked the question he'd been wanting to ask for years. "What are you guys hiding from me?"

May grimaced. "A lot of things," he answered. "But we were going to tell you eventually!"

"Tell me what?"

"About our abilities." May held up a hand. "Which I'm not sure if I can use anymore. I can feel the pull, but...everything feels different when you're dead."

Felix shook his head. His eyes stung. "You can't be dead. Why aren't you sad?"

"Well, I've had time to adjust." May scratched her head. "I think it's been about an hour? I don't know, time's weird now."

"Be serious for once!" The first tears found their way out of Felix's eyes. "What the hell am I supposed to do?"

"I don't know, go ask Mom! If you can see me, you should be able to see her, too."

Felix felt like he'd been swallowed by an ocean. Like he was a stone dropped in a choppy sea. And there was an uncomfortable building pressure in his head. "Mom—is she—?"

"All of us are dead," May said plainly. Why was she so calm? None of this made any sense. "Honestly, we always knew something like this might happen. We sort of planned for it, actually. But I guess we should have prepared you, too. Sorry." She hesitated a moment. "There's supposed to be a way to put our souls back in our bodies,

but I don't know how it works. Or if it's actually possible like Mom and Dad said."

Her shoulders sagged as she continued. "And sorry we're not exactly in mourning. We're still trying to figure some stuff out. Helena's pissed. She killed the guy, but he'd already gotten her pretty bad. And the rest of us." A faraway look crept into her gaze. "He's one of the most dangerous people we know of. It's a miracle we lasted as long as we did."

"Some guy came into the house and killed you," Felix said blankly. Had he seen the killer that morning? Could he have stopped this?

"Felix, this wasn't some random attack." May knelt down so that she was eye level with him. "We thought we'd have time to tell you what we were protecting."

"Tell me now, then!"

"I can't. Mom and Dad kept things from the rest of us, too." May's tone turned surprisingly bitter. Her gaze moved to the house behind Felix. "All I know is that there's some kind of magical war, and I'm not sure we know which side is the right one."

Magic? War? "You can't be serious."

"I hate to dump this all on you at once, but yeah. Our family has magical abilities. And now we're ghosts."

"Our family...except for me, right?"

"We all manifested our abilities around ten years old. When it happened, Mom and Dad would tell us everything. And it just...never happened for you." May grimaced. "We were getting ready to tell you everything, anyway, but knowing about magic when you don't have any can be dangerous. We wanted to keep you safe as long as possible."

A foggy memory surfaced in Felix's mind. Something about Ezra coming home from elementary school one day with vines tangled in his hair. How after that day, he would participate in the occasional secretive conversations the rest of the family had.

The pressure in Felix's head worsened. Something trickled down his face, below his nose. May frowned. Felix touched a finger to the skin above his lips, and when he pulled it away, he found it stained with blood.

Before he could speak, May reached out a hand, brow furrowing deeper. "Maybe you do have something."

Felix sniffed. "What?"

Her hand met his. There was a blinding flash of bright blue light. Felix closed his eyes and flung up his other hand to shield his face.

When he opened his eyes, May was gone.

"May?" Felix jumped to his feet. "Hello?"

Of course she'd leave him without any real explanation. Felix looked down and spotted the rock she'd been holding laying in the grass. He picked it up and ran a thumb over the markings carved into it, not unlike the ones on Helena's sword. He slid it into his pocket.

The world spun fast enough to put Felix on the verge of throwing up, but he couldn't stay out here. He sprinted up to the open front door. "Guys? Anyone?" His voice strained.

When he stepped inside, his backpack slipped off his shoulder and clattered to the floor. The body in the middle of the entryway, spilling blood onto the hardwood, was a man he didn't recognize.

Wait, no, he did. It was the man who'd stood in the driveway that morning, after all. The man's eyes were open, but they weren't glowing like they had been. Plain, hazel eyes stared blankly up at the ceiling. Empty.

Helena's sword was stuck in his chest.

Felix dared to take one step forward, and then another. He gingerly reached out a trembling hand to touch the hilt of the sword.

Helena was suddenly in front of him, manifesting from thin air. Her hands moved to rest on top of his. "Felix," she said softly. "Can you see me?"

"Of—of course I can see you," Felix stammered.

Helena lifted her eyes from their hands to meet his gaze. "I probably shouldn't be the one to explain everything," she said. "You need to find Mom."

"Where is she?"

"Felix, all of us are—" Helena closed her eyes and took a deep breath. "Do you feel anything out of the ordinary?"

"It's kind of hard to tell!" Felix exclaimed. "I have no idea what's going on or why there's a dead guy laying on our floor!"

"I know. I'm sorry. But if there ever were a time for you to find your ability, it would be now."

"Ability?" Felix's hand tightened around the sword's hilt. "May said that too. What does that mean?"

"Maybe we were right, and you don't have one. But I always hoped—" Helena's eyes opened. "Wait, you talked to May?"

"Yeah, she explained that you guys were ghosts, then touched my hand and disappeared. There was a bright light. My nose was bleeding." Felix's eyes widened. "Wait, did she...leave for good? Did I do something wrong?"

"No. You haven't done anything wrong." Helena studied his face, her head tipping to the side. "I'm going to try something, okay? Whatever happens, you need to go find Mom."

She lifted her hand and placed it on his shoulder. Felix squinted as another bright light flooded the entryway, replacing the evening gold with shades of blue-green. As quickly as she'd appeared, Helena was gone. Chest tight, Felix took a hesitant step forward, unable to keep himself from swaying.

It was then that he saw Helena's body, lying ten feet from the man's, her arm outstretched. "Helena?" Felix choked. *It's okay. It has to be. I was just talking to her.* He frantically looked around, taking in more blood as he did. "Hello? Is anyone else here?"

He stumbled past the man and Helena, growing dizzier by the second. One of his hands flew to his pocket and searched for his phone, but he couldn't find it. Had he left it in his backpack? Where was his backpack?

The next room he entered was the kitchen, and everything was a blur from there. There was a flash of dark blue light. A flash of dark green light. That was the last thing he remembered before he opened his eyes and found himself lying on his back, staring up at the ceiling.

A man leaned into view. "You dead, too?"