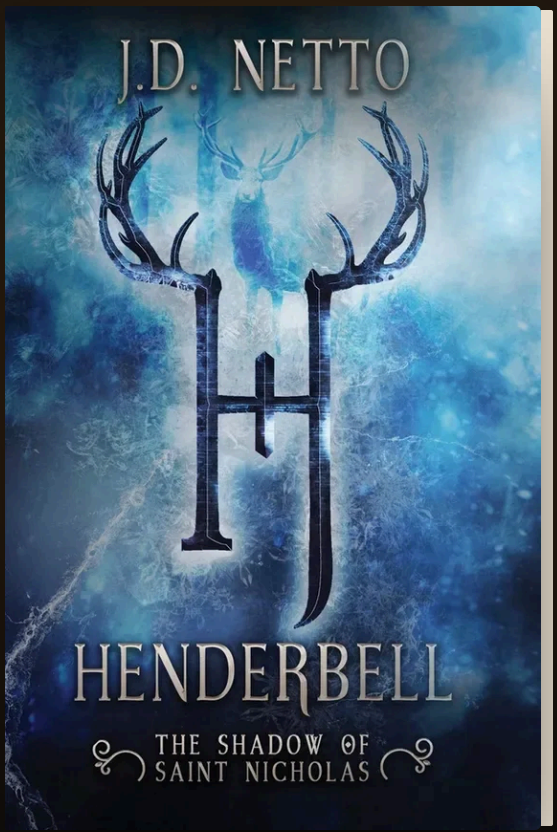

HENDERBELL

The Shadow of Saint Nicholas

THE FIRST THREE CHAPTERS

CHAPTER ONE

ONE

Staring at the Christmas tree in our living room during the holiday season always brought me comfort.

After a miserable day listening to teachers blabber about subjects I didn't care for, I was ready to sink into the couch, hit play on my favorite playlist, and split my attention between social media and the Christmas lights. Seeing the lit pine tree reminded me of the days when my parents actually enjoyed each other's company and my house was somewhat peaceful. My family used to come together on Christmas Eve, alternating every year between our place and my grandparents' house in Dorthcester, Massachusetts. But everything changed after some big fight four years ago. Now all I had left were the usual phone calls from my grandparents saying they weren't going to make it and my parents' predictable excuses.

There was always talk of sending my sister and me to Dorthcester for Christmas, but I knew better than to get my hopes up.

The last four years had consisted of watching my parents fight and bicker. Part of me blamed the alcohol, which became my dad's top priority after the fight. The other blamed my mom for being so passive about the whole situation. Then I blamed myself for starting to despise their company—even when they weren't going at it, which was a rare thing to

see. During this time of year, if I wasn't hanging out by the tree, I was locked in my room, drawing, writing, and reading. I enjoyed escaping my world. And yes, the intense all-year-round heat in Palmsand, Florida didn't inspire me to go out much. I wasn't a beach person since tanning involved me turning as red as a bell pepper.

High school didn't help either. During class, my mind would wander, along with my pen. I became a professional at drowning everyone out so I could sketch a dragon, a castle, a mountain, or some form of magical creature on any piece of paper in front of me.

But my love for art, and inability to grow out of it, led to loneliness. While scrolling down my social media feed, I found a throwback photo of Billy holding his sketch of a medieval knight. He'd won an award for that drawing in seventh grade. But what intrigued me most was that he cropped me out of the picture, leaving himself and Cliff

on full display. The caption: Friends until the end. They abandoned me in freshman year. Their reason: Enzo stayed weird. I stayed weird. These were the same guys who would come over so we could go on bookstore trips. Who introduced me to movie scores and writing playlists on the internet.

I scrolled down to read the comments on the photo.

CliffUpYours: You cut out Fairy Enzo. You savage.

BillyVanilly20: Enzo who?

I hit the block button and laid my phone facedown on my chest, turning up the music.

The mockery of the things I liked created the perfect storm—

draining my creativity and desire to do anything. You're told to ignore the comments, but even though you do, the damage is still imminent. My attention returned to the tree; the peaceful sight disturbed by a shadow outside the window. My heart raced as I sat up on the couch and paused the music, my headphones sliding down to rest around my neck. I knew he

was drunk because he walked like a wobbling sausage. I hadn't heard him park his car in the driveway, which meant someone dropped him off.

The wooden steps leading to the porch creaked at the same time as my mom rushed downstairs. Her presence brought along the strong stench of cigarettes. Her hair was tied into a bun, eyes red, and chin quivering.

"You're not getting in here!" she shouted, grabbing the door handle. "Enzo, go to your room! Make sure your sister stays in hers."

I jumped up from the couch at the sound of my dad thudding against the door. "You're sleeping on the street today!" Mom screamed. Keys rattled on the other side.

"Let me in, Evelyn," Dad drawled, unlocking the door. "You've been gone since last night! It's almost dinner time!" My mom braced one foot, her other knee pressed against the door. "You're staying out there tonight." She looked at me, eyes fuming. "Enzo, I told you to go to your room!"

I couldn't just leave her. I feared Dad was going to do what he always did whenever he was drunk.

"Evelyn, quit whining and let me in," he insisted, pushing the door with a shoulder.

"What's going on?" Ava appeared on the stairs, her faithful companion, a brown teddy bear named Mr. Wombington, in her grasp. She wore her favorite pajamas covered in pink and white stripes. Her brown hair was tied back, wisps falling over her eyes.

"Ava, sweetheart, go—"

He slammed the door, thrusting Mom to the floor. Ava screamed. "What do you think you're doing?" I marched toward him, body trembling with anger. "You can't just spend the night out and come back home like everything is okay."

"I pay your bills, kid." He stabbed a finger at me. "And this is my house. You better shut up or I'll kick you out." He fell on the couch. I cringed at the smell of alcohol.

"Enzo." Mom got to her feet, eyes glistening. "Please go upstairs with your sister."

"Are you going to be—"

"Now, Enzo!" she shouted.

I ran upstairs, grabbed Ava's hand, and dragged her to my room.

"Bane, I can't fuc— "

I shut the door behind me before Ava heard another word.

"Are you alright?" I asked behind ragged breaths.

"You don't have to look at me like that." She sat on my bed, fixing her hair behind her ears. "I've heard the F-word a million times already. I'm nine, not stupid."

"What if we listen to some music?" My voice trembled as I approached my vinyl collection. I flipped through them with fumbling hands.

"Mr. Wombington and I would like that," she said.

I found an Elvis Presley Christmas vinyl and played it at a decent volume. I sat at the foot of the bed as my parents' screams turned to distant muffles.

"I can always hear them, you know." She kept her head down, her thumb caressing the teddy bear. "I know." My heart tried to pry my chest open. "Then why play the music?" she asked. "We know they're fighting."

"So we can pretend everything is okay," I replied to the sound of "White Christmas."

When I was a kid, I would pretend I was offin some faraway land fighting dragons, riding horses, and meeting all sorts of magical creatures. I'd spend hours in my room drawing the strangest beings, all very real in my head. Pretending used to be a joyous escape. But as I grew older, pretending became a sorrowful excuse to avoid my real life.

Maybe pretending was the thing that hurt me the most. I didn't have to face my reality so long as I kept on pretending. I glanced at my bookshelf on the opposite side of the room and shuddered. I lowered the volume on the record player when I noticed Ava had fallen asleep

clutching her teddy bear as if it could keep her safe. I got up and pressed my ear to the door, trying to hear any screaming or yelling. It was quiet.

I opened the door and tiptoed my way downstairs. The Christmas ornaments were scattered shards in the living room. The tree was on top of the couch, the star still clinging to its tip. The sight became a blur as tears welled in my eyes. I thought about my sister and what she would think. I thought about how unfair all of this was. I feared the part of me that wished them away.

"Mom? Dad?" I yelled, dodging the shards. Blood boiled in my veins as I walked out the door.

I stepped onto the porch and into the Florida humidity—Mom's car was still in the driveway. "You can't keep doing this to those kids," someone said in the distance. I followed the voice, spotting my neighbor, Ms. Lumber, sitting on her porch with my parents. "If you keep this up…"

I hurried back to the house without listening to the rest. With one last look around the living room, I retreated to my bedroom.

I sat on the floor and reclined my back against the foot of my bed. It was time to stop pretending. I crawled toward my bookshelf and grabbed my sketchpad hidden between a few books. "Time to say goodbye," I whispered.

Anger erupted as I marched downstairs, walked into the kitchen, and ripped the notebook apart, tossing it in the trash.

CHAPTER TWO

TWO

"You guys have everything?" Mom asked, a cigarette in hand. "You're smoking this early in the morning?" I scowled while scrolling through a couple of digital drawings on the discovery page of my feed.

"Are you going to start acting up this early in the morning?" Wrinkles appeared on her forehead. "At least I'm not inhaling cancer."

She gave me a look of disapproval before heading to the stairs, spreading the stench of cigarette smoke even more. The smell always made my stomach churn.

"Did you have to throw out the tree?" She paused at my words. "Maybe we could've fixed it together."

"Why?" She glanced over her shoulder. "You and your sister will be gone. You're the ones who care about that stuff."

"Gotcha," I mumbled as she disappeared up the stairs. It was as if our absence was a relief to her.

Our bags were beside me. After last week's episode, they decided to ship my sister and me to Dorthcester to spend Christmas with our grandparents. I was honestly surprised they were coming through this time. When I questioned the reason, Mom said she and my father had a

few personal things to take care of. She probably thought I didn't see the divorce papers on the counter the day before yesterday.

When I was younger, I didn't think divorce would ever knock on my parents' door. That was until I saw their marriage crack in front of my eyes. Until life showed me how unpredictable it could be.

Ava and Mom appeared on the stairs. "I'm excited to see Grandma." Ava held her teddy bear in one arm and her heavy pink jacket in the other. She wore blue leggings and a beige knitted sweater. "I'll get to show Mr. Wombington their house!"

"Do you even remember what it looks like?" I tucked my hands inside the pockets of my favorite black sweatshirt. "It's been, what, four years since we've been there?"

"I was five, Enzo, not dumb." She scowled.

"Leave her alone, please." Mom opened the door to the porch, car keys in hand. "I don't have the patience to deal with nonsense today. Now come on."

"Where's Dad?" Ava asked.

"Probably drinking his life away somewhere. Enzo, you packed your drawing kit?" Rage gripped me. "Like you didn't see it in the trash last week."

"I really didn't." She reclined against the doorway with a frown. "Mind grabbing the bags?" "Whatever." My eyes rolled to the back of my head.

"It was about time you gave up those childish things. You'll be going to college in a couple of years. Time to think about the future. Spend time on things that actually matter."

I covered my ears with my noise-cancelling headphones, grabbed the bags, and wheeled them past her.

Her voice was muffled, but I could still make out the words. "You'll thank me in a couple of years."

n

Mom made no effort to talk during the drive. Ava watched some cartoon on her tablet while I listened to a shuffle mix. To my delight, I forgot to charge my headphones. My music died the moment we parked by the terminal doors.

"Enzo, keep an eye on Ava," Mom said as I unbuckled my seat belt.

"Will do." I was out of the car before I finished speaking.

"Bye, Mom," Ava said, standing beside me with Mr. Wombington.

Mom waved and said, "Close the door." "Think she'll be okay?" Ava asked, watching the car drive away.

"To be honest, I'm just relieved we're going to be away from them for a while."

"That's not a nice thing to say."

"They haven't been the nicest of parents, have they?"

A shrug was her response.

Once the car was no longer in view, a weight lifted from my shoulders. I wouldn't have to deal with arguments, fights, or the smell of alcohol for the next few days. Though I had always pictured us returning to Dorthcester as a family, at the moment, I was willing to accept whatever life would give.

CHAPTER THREE

THREE

◆ ◆ ◆

"What are you most excited about?" Ava asked the moment I grabbed our bags from the carrousel. In her hand was the pink astronaut jacket she had brought on the plane.

"Right now?" I frowned. "I'm excited to get out of this crowded airport." "I mean, what are you most excited about for this trip?" She pursed her lips.

"The certainty our parents won't be going at it on Christmas." I smirked.

She clearly expected a different answer. Her gaze turned to a group of people wheeling their bags in front of us. She squeezed her teddy bear and took in a deep breath.

"Hey, sorry." She looked at me. "I'm excited we'll get to spend some time together—away from the screaming and yelling. That's what I meant to say."

"Me too," she whispered, putting on her jacket.

I despised carrying anything on a plane besides my backpack. And even though I was aware my sweatshirt wasn't enough to shield me from the cold, I decided to brave the frigid temperature.

"I hope they're here already," I muttered.

The freezing Massachusetts air greeted me and my sweatshirt. I didn't remember it ever being this cold.

"Holy..." My breath was smoke. There was no way I could've missed them. My cheeks burned at the sight of them outside their car, holding a bright green sign that read, We live to embarrass our grandkids. Ava ran toward them with arms spread out. I cringed, keeping my head down. A battle waged in me. I was happy to see them again after four years, but they had become little more than a memory.

"Grandma!" She threw her arms around her.

"Ava, you're so big!" Grandma squealed.

"Enzo." Grandpa gave me a hug. "It's been too long."

"Hey, Gramps." I patted him on the back. His salt and pepper hair was combed back, beard perfectly trimmed. He wore a red button-down under his black coat, and dark jeans that matched the black frame of his glasses.

"You look good." He smiled. "You're almost as tall as I am."

"Well, it's been a while." I frowned. "You look good too. And don't take this the wrong way, but do you guys ever age? Happy to see we have good genes, but..."

"You're too kind, sweetheart." Grandma's eyes glistened. Her outfits made her the center of attention wherever she went. Today was no different. To celebrate our arrival, she had on a bright yellow blouse, orange lipstick, silver pants, blue boots, and a white faux fur coat.

"My turn." Ava pushed me aside and hugged Grandpa.

"Look at you." Grandma cupped my face with her hands. "So handsome."

"Thanks." I forced a smiled. "I like the glasses."

"Oh, these?" The pink frames emphasized her hazel eyes. "They didn't have anything brighter, so I had to settle."

Grandpa tossed our bags in the trunk of the car. "Alright, we're ready to go. We have to hurry since we aren't exactly allowed to park here."

"We're supposed to get a pretty big storm tonight," Grandma said as we drove away to the sound of some random radio news program. "Glad your flight arrived before the madness."

"So, Enzo," Grandpa started, his brown eyes reflecting in the rearview mirror. "Still drawing and writing?"

"Not really." Ava turned her head toward me, eyes wide. "Time to focus on other things."

"You gave up art forever?" Ava asked, disappointed. "I thought you threw away your notebook because you were angry, not because you were giving up." "Time to grow up, sis," I said, my mom's words echoing in my head.

Grandpa took a sip from his massive coffee cup with great determination.

"Where's this coming from?" Grandma asked in disapproval. "You're sixteen. You have plenty of time to explore all of your avenues before making a decision like that."

"Exactly," I said. "I'm sixteen. And there comes a time when one has to stop pretending. I better start early."

"How are your friends doing?" Grandpa tapped on the steering wheel.

"They're probably doing something with the other popular kids." I scratched the side of my head. "At the moment, Enzo here is a loner."

"Whatever happens, don't change yourself to please other people." Grandpa scowled, probably noticing my vacant stare. "Change yourself for you."

Heat flushed through my body. "Are you guys going to start lecturing me this early on the trip?" I let out a long breath. "At least save something for the next couple of days."

"No, of course not." Grandma laced fingers with Grandpa as the car slowed down due to a traffic jam.

"Looks like we're going to be stuck here a while. How about some Christmas music?" Grandpa changed stations until finding one playing

Sinatra's rendition of "I'll Be Home for Christmas."

"Love this song." Ava squeezed her teddy bear.

"This one is for you, Enzo!" Grandpa swayed his head to the melody.

I wanted to tell him about the memories this song sparked in me. Listening to it was like watching a live video of the day he dressed up as Santa and gave me my first sketchbook. But I chose silence. Sharing those memories would be the same as watering a dead seed. A wide selection of Christmas classics played on the radio as the four of us remained quiet. Grandpa kept glancing in the rearview mirror, but I avoided his gaze every time. I felt a strange mixture of happiness and anger. I was happy to be back where so many of my good memories were made, but angry that they were acting like it hadn't been four years since we last saw each other.

After leaving Boston, trees and hills replaced the concrete buildings and cars. An orange and purple sunset painted the horizon. Social media was flooded by photos of people from school going away on vacation with their families.

A text notification from my father appeared on the screen.

Dad: Did you arrive okay?

Me: All good here.

Dad: Your sister?

Me: Beside me.

Dad: Have a good time. Tell them I said hello.

Me: Will do.

What I wanted to write instead was: No, Dad. I'll tell them how drunk you were last week. I'll tell them how you spent an entire day wandering around town then came home and threw Mom on the /f_l oor, reeking of alcohol.

Ava's eyes were glued to her tablet, watching the same cartoon series from the plane.

I put the phone in my pocket. The landscape outside had become familiar. There was the abandoned church that always captured my

attention. It was surrounded by trees, its walls covered in cracks, and its gray roof full of holes. I used to imagine creatures crawling out of its eerie structure, infiltrating the town, and searching for kids to devour.

"Welcome, welcome," Grandma said, the sign Welcome to Dorthcester in view.

Quaint houses emerged, encircled by pine and oak trees. Christmas lights, Santa inflatables, and Rudolphs were everywhere. The town looked like something out of a Hallmark movie.

"I absolutely love the Santa inflatables this year." Grandma pointed at one dressed in beach clothes. "I think they accurately depict him. Especially the gut."

"I think these Santas are awfully lonely. Maybe we need to have Mrs. Claus inflatables made as well," Grandpa said. "Maybe she could wear something that doesn't make her look like a bag of M&Ms?"

"At least she'd look delicious." Grandma puckered her lips.

He laughed before continuing, "But why call the guy Santa? He has the most amazing name on the planet."

"Are you saying that because your name is Nicholas?" Ava asked, Mr. Wombington in her arms. "Of course. I'd much rather be called Saint Nicholas than Santa."

"What a strange conversation." I facepalmed as they shared a laugh. "I wish Santa was real." Ava squeezed Mr. Wombington

"I wish many things were real." I stared out at the crowds as we drove by the local market. The parking lot was overrun by people with shopping carts filled to the brim with groceries, cases of water, and bags of salt. "See how they get us to spend our money every time there's a storm?" Grandpa wagged his head. "They exaggerate on their predictions so we buy things we don't need."

"At least we'll have a white Christmas tomorrow," Grandma said. "Mr. Wombington, wait until you see the house!" Ava held the teddy bear close to her cheek, her tablet beside her. "It's so beautiful in there." A rush of

adrenaline jolted through my body as we drove up the hill, the yellow house now in view, surrounded by towering trees. The first thing I spotted was the pine wrapped in Christmas lights with a neon sign that read A Very Griffin Christmas. The words were shaped like an arch, the first and last letters larger than the rest. Under the pine tree were four deer sculptures illuminated by two light strobes. From the gable hung falling icicles glimmering in white and gold. The columns and railings of the porch were wrapped in golden tinsel and lights that shifted from gold to red then silver. I fought away a brief smile, my heart tightening as the ghosts of my past appeared around the house. I could see my dad and I playing in the snow, my mom telling us to go inside so we wouldn't catch a cold, Ava making snow angels. My thoughts were disturbed by my phone vibrating. Billy sent me a photo. It was him holding a bottle of beer, sunglasses on his face. On the picture, he wrote: Am I your dad yet?

The message was like a punch to the stomach. The phone became a blur as tears welled in my eyes. I took in a deep breath as we parked in the driveway.

"Be careful, Ava! There might be black ice," Grandma shouted as soon as Ava hopped out of the car. Mr. Wombington's long legs dragged on the brick pathway as she ran toward the house, jumping up the steps leading to the front door.

Grandpa popped the trunk as Grandma followed Ava.

I put the hood of my sweatshirt over my head and stepped out, backpack in hand. I shuddered as a cold breeze greeted my cheeks. The trees around me swayed in the wind, spreading the smell of pine in the air.

"I could really use your help here," Grandpa said, holding up the door of the trunk.

"Sorry, got distracted." I rushed to his side.

"You alright, buddy?" He grabbed one of the bags.

"I'm okay." I picked up the other, my breath steam.

"Are you sure?"

"Yes, Grandpa." I rolled my eyes. "Thought I had spotted a squirrel or something. But I'm fine."

"Are you sure you didn't perhaps see a gnome running through the woods?" he asked as we wheeled the bags to the house. "Or maybe there was a dragon somewhere? How about—"

"I appreciate the effort." I stopped walking, brows pulling together. "But you can't talk to me like I'm still a child. You've been gone a long time. Aside from a few calls and random texts, you've been pretty much a memory for the past four years."

He stared as if gazing at a corpse. The corners of his lips dropped down; his mouth now pressed into a line. I waited for him to say something, but he remained quiet, rooted to his spot.

I continued on toward the house.