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NORA ROBERTS

BLOOD BROTHERS

Book One of the Sign of Seven Trilogy

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BROTHERS



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*To my boys,
who roamed the woods,
even when they weren't supposed to.*

Where God hath a temple,
the Devil will have a chapel.

— ROBERT BURTON

The childhood shows the man
As morning shows the day.

— JOHN MILTON

Prologue



Hawkins Hollow
Maryland Province
1652

IT CRAWLED ALONG THE AIR THAT HUNG HEAVY as wet wool over the glade. Through the snakes of fog that slid silent over the ground, its hate crept. It came for him through the heat-smothered night.

It wanted his death.

So he waited as it pushed its way through the woods, its torch raised toward the empty sky, as it waded across the streams, around the thickets where small animals huddled in fear of the scent it bore with it.

Hellsmoke.

He had sent Ann and the lives she carried in her womb away, to safety. She had not wept, he thought now as he sprinkled the herbs he'd selected over water. Not his Ann. But he had seen the grief on her face, in the deep, dark eyes he had loved through this lifetime, and all the others before.

The three would be born from her, raised by her, and taught by her. And from them, when the time came, there would be three more.

What power he had would be theirs, these sons, who

would loose their first cries long, long after this night's work was done. To leave them what tools they would need, the weapons they would wield, he risked all he had, all he was.

His legacy to them was in blood, in heart, in vision.

In this last hour he would do all he could to provide them with what was needed to carry the burden, to remain true, to see their destiny.

His voice was strong and clear as he called to wind and water, to earth and fire. In the hearth the flames snapped. In the bowl the water trembled.

He laid the bloodstone on the cloth. Its deep green was generously spotted with red. He had treasured this stone, as had those who'd come before him. He had honored it. And now he poured power into it as one would pour water into a cup.

So his body shook and sweat and weakened as light hovered in a halo around the stone.

"For you now," he murmured, "sons of sons. Three parts of one. In faith, in hope, in truth. One light, united, to strike back dark. And here, my vow. I will not rest until destiny is met."

With the athame, he scored his palm so his blood fell onto the stone, into the water, and into the flame.

"Blood of my blood. Here I will hold until you come for me, until you loose what must be loosed again on the world. May the gods keep you."

For a moment there was grief. Even through his purpose, there was grief. Not for his life, as the sands of it were dripping down the glass. He had no fear of death. No fear of what he would soon embrace that was not death. But he grieved that he would never lay his lips on Ann's again in this life. He would not see his children born, nor the children of his children. He grieved that he would not be able to stop the suffering to come, as he had been unable to stop the suffering that had come before, in so many other lifetimes.

He understood that he was not the instrument, but only the vessel to be filled and emptied at the needs of the gods.

So, weary from the work, saddened by the loss, he stood outside the little hut, beside the great stone, to meet his fate.

It came in the body of a man, but that was a shell. As his own body was a shell. It called itself Lazarus Twisse, an elder of "the godly." He and those who followed had settled in the wilderness of this province when they broke with the Puritans of New England.

He studied them now in their torchlight, these men and the one who was not a man. These, he thought, who had come to the New World for religious freedom, and then persecuted and destroyed any who did not follow their single, narrow path.

"You are Giles Dent."

"I am," he said, "in this time and this place."

Lazarus Twisse stepped forward. He wore the unrelieved formal black of an elder. His high-crowned, wide-brimmed hat shadowed his face. But Giles could see his eyes, and in his eyes, he saw the demon.

"Giles Dent, you and the female known as Ann Hawkins have been accused and found guilty of witchcraft and demonic practices."

"Who accuses?"

"Bring the girl forward!" Lazarus ordered.

They pulled her, a man on each arm. She was a slight girl, barely six and ten by Giles's calculation. Her face was wax white with fear, her eyes drenched with it. Her hair had been shorn.

"Hester Deale, is this the witch who seduced you?"

"He and the one he calls wife laid hands on me." She spoke as if in a trance. "They performed ungodly acts upon my body. They came to my window as ravens, flew into my room in the night. They stilled my throat so I could not speak or call for help."

"Child," Giles said gently, "what has been done to you?"

Those fear-swamped eyes stared through him. "They called to Satan as their god, and cut the throat of a cock in

sacrifice. And drank its blood. They forced its blood on me. I could not stop them."

"Hester Deale, do you renounce Satan?"

"I do renounce him."

"Hester Deale, do you renounce Giles Dent and the woman Ann Hawkins as witches and heretics?"

"I do." Tears spilled down her cheeks. "I do renounce them, and pray to God to save me. Pray to God to forgive me."

"He will," Giles whispered. "You are not to blame."

"Where is the woman Ann Hawkins?" Lazarus demanded, and Giles turned his clear gray eyes to him.

"You will not find her."

"Stand aside. I will enter this house of the devil."

"You will not find her," Giles repeated. For a moment he looked beyond Lazarus to the men and the handful of women who stood in his glade.

He saw death in their eyes, and more, the hunger for it. This was the demon's power, and his work.

Only in Hester's did Giles see fear or sorrow. So he used what he had to give, pushed his mind toward hers. *Run!*

He saw her jolt, stumble back, then he turned to Lazarus.

"We know each other, you and I. Dispatch them, release them, and it will be between us alone."

For an instant he saw the gleam of red in Lazarus's eyes. "You are done. Burn the witch!" he shouted. "Burn the devil house and all within it!"

They came with torches, and with clubs. Giles felt the blows rain on him, and the fury of the hate that was the demon's sharpest weapon.

They drove him to his knees, and the wood of the hut began to flame and smoke. Screams rang in his head, the madness of them.

With the last of his power he reached out toward the demon inside the man, with red rimming its dark eyes as it fed on the hate, the fear, the violence. He felt it gloat, he felt it *rising*, so sure of its victory, and the feast to follow.

And he ripped it to him, through the smoking air. He heard it scream in fury and pain as the flames bit into flesh. And he held it to him, close as a lover as the fire consumed them.

And with that union the fire burst, spread, destroyed every living thing in the glade.

It burned for a day and a night, like the belly of hell.

One



Hawkins Hollow
Maryland
July 6, 1987

INSIDE THE PRETTY KITCHEN OF THE PRETTY house on Pleasant Avenue, Caleb Hawkins struggled not to squirm as his mother packed her version of campout provisions.

In his mother's world, ten-year-old boys required fresh fruit, homemade oatmeal cookies (they weren't so bad), half a dozen hard-boiled eggs, a bag of Ritz crackers made into sandwiches with Jif peanut butter for filling, some celery and carrot sticks (yuck!), and hearty ham-and-cheese sandwiches.

Then there was the thermos of lemonade, the stack of paper napkins, and the two boxes of Pop-Tarts she wedged into the basket for breakfast.

"Mom, we're not going to *starve* to death," he complained as she stood deliberating in front of an open cupboard. "We're going to be right in Fox's backyard."

Which was a lie, and kinda hurt his tongue. But she'd never let him go if he told her the truth. And, sheesh, he was ten. Or would be the very next day.

Frannie Hawkins put her hands on her hips. She was a pert, attractive blonde with summer blue eyes and a stylish curly perm. She was the mother of three, and Cal was her baby and only boy. "Now, let me check that backpack."

"Mom!"

"Honey, I just want to be sure you didn't forget anything." Ruthless in her own sunny way, Frannie unzipped Cal's navy blue pack. "Change of underwear, clean shirt, socks, good, good, shorts, toothbrush. Cal, where are the Band-Aids I told you to put in, and the Bactine, the bug repellent."

"Sheesh, we're not going to Africa."

"All the same," Frannie said, and did her signature finger wave to send him along to gather up the supplies. While he did, she slipped a card out of her pocket and tucked it into the pack.

He'd been born—after eight hours and twelve minutes of vicious labor—at one minute past midnight. Every year she stepped up to his bed at twelve, watched him sleep for that minute, then kissed him on the cheek.

Now he'd be ten, and she wouldn't be able to perform the ritual. Because it made her eyes sting, she turned away to wipe at her spotless counter as she heard his tromping footsteps.

"I got it all, okay?"

Smiling brightly, she turned back. "Okay." She stepped over to rub a hand over his short, soft hair. He'd been her towheaded baby boy, she mused, but his hair was darkening, and she suspected it would be a light brown eventually.

Just as hers would be without the aid of Born Blonde.

In a habitual gesture, Frannie tapped his dark-framed glasses back up his nose. "You make sure you thank Miss Barry and Mr. O'Dell when you get there."

"I will."

"And when you leave to come home tomorrow."

"Yes, ma'am."

She took his face in her hands, looked through the thick lenses into eyes the same color as his father's calm gray

ones. "Behave," she said and kissed his cheek. "Have fun." Then the other. "Happy birthday, my baby."

Usually it mortified him to be called her *baby*, but for some reason, just then, it made him feel sort of gooey and good.

"Thanks, Mom."

He shrugged on the backpack, then hefted the loaded picnic basket. How the hell was he going to ride all the way out to Hawkins Wood with half the darn grocery store on his bike?

The guys were going to razz him something fierce.

Since he was stuck, he carted it into the garage where his bike hung tidily—by Mom decree—on a rack on the wall. Thinking it through, he borrowed two of his father's bungee cords and secured the picnic basket to the wire basket of his bike.

Then he hopped on his bike and pedaled down the short drive.

FOX FINISHED WEEDING HIS SECTION OF THE vegetable garden before hefting the spray his mother mixed up weekly to discourage the deer and rabbits from invading for an all-you-can-eat buffet. The garlic, raw egg, and cayenne pepper combination stank so bad he held his breath as he squirted it on the rows of snap beans and limas, the potato greens, the carrot and radish tops.

He stepped back, took a clear breath, and studied his work. His mother was pretty damn strict about the gardening. It was all about respecting the earth, harmonizing with Nature, and that stuff.

It was also, Fox knew, about eating, and making enough food and money to feed a family of six—and whoever dropped by. Which was why his dad and his older sister, Sage, were down at their stand selling fresh eggs, goat's milk, honey, and his mother's homemade jams.

He glanced over to where his younger brother, Ridge,

was stretched out between the rows playing with the weeds instead of yanking them. And because his mother was inside putting their baby sister, Sparrow, down for her nap, he was on Ridge duty.

"Come on, Ridge, pull the stupid things. I wanna go."

Ridge lifted his face, turned his I'm-dreaming eyes on his brother. "Why can't I go with you?"

"Because you're eight and you can't even weed the dumb tomatoes." Annoyed, Fox stepped over the rows to Ridge's section and, crouching, began to yank.

"Can, too."

As Fox hoped, the insult had Ridge weeding with a vengeance. Fox straightened, rubbed his hands on his jeans. He was a tall boy with a skinny build, a mass of bark brown hair worn in a waving tangle around a sharp-boned face. His eyes were tawny and reflected his satisfaction now as he trooped over for the sprayer.

He dumped it beside Ridge. "Don't forget to spray this shit."

He crossed the yard, circling what was left—three short walls and part of a chimney—of the old stone hut on the edge of the vegetable garden. It was buried, as his mother liked it best, in honeysuckle and wild morning glory.

He skirted past the chicken coop and the cluckers that were pecking around, by the goat yard where the two nannies stood slack-hipped and bored, edged around his mother's herb garden. He headed toward the kitchen door of the house his parents had mostly built. The kitchen was big, and the counters loaded with projects—canning jars, lids, tubs of candle wax, bowls of wicks.

He knew most of the people in and around the Hollow thought of his family as the weird hippies. It didn't bother him. For the most part they got along, and people were happy to buy their eggs and produce, his mother's needlework and handmade candles and crafts, or hire his dad to build stuff.

Fox washed up at the sink before rooting through the

cupboards, poking in the big pantry searching for *something* that wasn't health food.

Fat chance.

He'd bike over to the market—the one right outside of town just in case—and use some of his savings to buy Little Debbies and Nutter Butters.

His mother came in, tossing her long brown braid off the shoulder bared by her cotton sundress. "Finished?"

"I am. Ridge is almost."

Joanne walked to the window, her hand automatically lifting to brush down Fox's hair, staying to rest on his neck as she studied her young son.

"There's some carob brownies and some veggie dogs, if you want to take any."

"Ah." Barf. "No, thanks. I'm good."

He knew that she knew he'd be chowing down on meat products and refined sugar. And he knew she knew he knew. But she wouldn't rag him about it. Choices were big with Mom.

"Have a good time."

"I will."

"Fox?" She stood where she was, by the sink with the light coming in the window and haloing her hair. "Happy birthday."

"Thanks, Mom." And with Little Debbies on his mind, he bolted out to grab his bike and start the adventure.

THE OLD MAN WAS STILL SLEEPING WHEN GAGE shoved some supplies into his pack. Gage could hear the snoring through the thin, crappy walls of the cramped, crappy apartment over the Bowl-a-Rama. The old man worked there cleaning the floors, the johns, and whatever else Cal's father found for him to do.

He might've been a day shy of his tenth birthday, but Gage knew why Mr. Hawkins kept the old man on, why they had the apartment rent-free with the old man supposedly be-

ing the maintenance guy for the building. Mr. Hawkins felt sorry for them—and mostly sorry for Gage because he was stuck as the motherless son of a mean drunk.

Other people felt sorry for him, too, and that put Gage's back up. Not Mr. Hawkins though. He never let the pity show. And whenever Gage did any chores for the bowling alley, Mr. Hawkins paid him in cash, on the side. And with a conspirator's wink.

He knew, hell, everybody knew, that Bill Turner knocked his kid around from time to time. But Mr. Hawkins was the *only* one who'd ever sat down with Gage and asked *him* what he wanted. Did he want the cops, Social Services, did he want to come stay with him and his family for a while?

He hadn't wanted the cops or the do-gooders. They only made it worse. And though he'd have given anything to live in that nice house with people who lived decent lives, he'd only asked if Mr. Hawkins would please, please, not fire his old man.

He got knocked around less whenever Mr. Hawkins kept his father busy and employed. Unless, of course, good old Bill went on a toot and decided to whale in.

If Mr. Hawkins knew how bad it could get during those times, he would call the cops.

So he didn't tell, and he learned to be very good at hiding beatings like the one he'd taken the night before.

Gage moved carefully as he snagged three cold ones out of his father's beer supply. The welts on his back and butt were still raw and angry and they stung like fire. He'd expected the beating. He always got one around his birthday. He always got another one around the date of his mother's death.

Those were the big, traditional two. Other times, the whippings came as a surprise. But mostly, when the old man was working steady, the hits were just a careless cuff or shove.

He didn't bother to be quiet when he turned toward his

father's bedroom. Nothing short of a raid by the A-Team would wake Bill Turner when he was in a drunken sleep.

The room stank of beer sweat and stale smoke, causing Gage to wrinkle his handsome face. He took the half pack of Marlboros off the dresser. The old man wouldn't remember if he'd had any, so no problem there.

Without a qualm, he opened his father's wallet and helped himself to three singles and a five.

He looked at his father as he stuffed the bills in his pocket. Bill sprawled on the bed, stripped down to his boxers, his mouth open as the snores pumped out.

The belt he'd used on his son the night before lay on the floor along with dirty shirts, socks, jeans.

For a moment, just a moment, it rippled through Gage with a kind of mad glee—the image of himself picking up that belt, swinging it high, laying it snapping hard over his father's bare, sagging belly.

See how you like it.

But there on the table with its overflowing ashtray, the empty bottle, was the picture of Gage's mother, smiling out.

People said he looked like her—the dark hair, the hazy green eyes, the strong mouth. It had embarrassed him once, being compared to a woman. But lately, since everything but that one photograph was so faded in his head, when he couldn't hear her voice in his head or remember how she'd smelled, it steadied him.

He looked like his mother.

Sometimes he imagined the man who drank himself into a stupor most nights wasn't his father.

His father was smart and brave and sort of reckless.

And then he'd look at the old man and know that was all bullshit.

He shot the old bastard the finger as he left the room. He had to carry his backpack. No way he could put it on with the welts riding his back.

He took the outside steps down, went around the back where he chained up his thirdhand bike.