

CHAPTER 1

THE NIGHT WATCH

Morton stared up at the emotionless faces of the Zombie Twins. Their eyes were almost invisible in the deep shadows cast by their heavy hoods. It was difficult to imagine that those same eyes had once glowed red like fiercely hot coals and that their bleached bone faces had made his heart pound in uncontrolled terror. It was nearly impossible to believe that just a few short days ago these same molded foam toys had been as real and alive as he was. The normal routine had resumed so quickly that everything that had happened was already starting to feel like a half-forgotten dream. Reality had simply taken root again, just as James had said it would, and the Zombie Twin toys stood lifeless on his shelf, exactly where he had placed them. There was no doubt that at long last Morton's trouble with magic was all over.

So why was he still awake?

Every night had been the same. He'd lie there, his eyes wide open, his senses on full alert, his nerves tingling with repressed dread, and yet nothing had happened. That is, not until now. This time, as Morton lay awake, he heard a noise that sent a quiver of fear running down his spine. He heard what sounded like the sagging screen door to the kitchen

creaking open with a rusty moan. Of course the noise itself was not particularly scary, but for Morton that sound, coming as it did in the middle of the night, reminded him of one thing and one thing alone:

James.

That's how it had all begun. When Morton's brother first started his horrifying transformation into a Wargle Snarf, he'd developed a habit of creeping out at night to go scavenging for rotting food. And things quickly got worse from there. Soon he began to grow spines along his back and arms, and his eyes turned a sickly shade of purple and he started belching out great clouds of acrid yellow smoke and . . .

Morton took several deep breaths. He was getting carried away again. It was all over, he reminded himself. James was back to his old, reliable self. He wasn't out prowling the shadowy streets of Dimvale eating maggoty meat. He didn't need to chew coal to settle the brimstone in his stomach, and he wasn't about to change into a nine-foot-long centipede-like creature with multiple rows of razor-sharp teeth.

Morton was probably just imagining the noise anyway. It could have been a creaking branch on one of the many trees that surrounded the house, or the aging Victorian plumbing. Whatever it was, he told himself it was nothing to worry about. He told himself he should just roll over and go to sleep.

But of course he didn't. He slipped quietly out of bed, pulled on his tartan robe, and peered down the empty hallway toward James's room. His door was open a crack but no light spilled out. In fact, it was almost the opposite. A dense blackness seemed to reach from within and soak up what little light was in the hallway like a dark sponge.

Fortunately Morton wasn't afraid of the dark, and he continued down the hall to James's room, treading extra softly as he passed by Melissa's bedroom door.

Morton knew he was being irrational, but now that the idea of James creeping out into the night had lodged itself in his brain, there would be no getting rid of it until he was sure his brother was still safely sleeping in his bed. When he arrived at James's door he pushed it open and was instantly relieved to see James sprawled flat on his back amid a tangle of bedding, breathing in a haphazard rhythm that was completely typical for him. Until a few months before, when they'd moved to Dimvale, Morton had always shared a room with James, and one thing he knew was that James never slept calmly. He rolled and fidgeted and mumbled and sometimes got so knotted up in his bedsheets that by morning he looked like a disheveled Harry Houdini about to perform an impossible escape. In fact, Morton remembered one time when Mum had had to cut him loose from his bedding with a pair of scissors.

"Wimble dump bother!" James mumbled, flopping over onto his side like a giant sleeping fish.

Morton smiled and pulled the door closed. Nothing could be more normal, he thought, and headed back to bed.

Unfortunately he didn't even make it three steps before he heard another noise, and this time there was no doubt about it. There was someone moving around downstairs, and by the sound of it they'd just tripped over the ash bucket by the fireplace. Morton stepped back toward James's room and pushed himself into what he hoped was the darkest corner of the hallway. He strained his ears and listened, focusing all

his concentration on the sound below. The slow, intermittent shuffling of feet resumed, as if someone were taking a step, feeling their way around in the dark, then taking another step. Morton pushed his back even harder against the wall. He couldn't begin to imagine who could be down there. Dad was working at the observatory as usual and wouldn't be home until sunrise. And anyway, it didn't sound at all like Dad. Whoever — or whatever — was moving downstairs seemed to be fumbling slowly about, almost like a blind person. . . .

Morton tried to block the image from his mind before it could form, but of course it was too late. He knew only too well that this house had once belonged to the legendary John King, an eccentric and possibly insane comic book author and illustrator who went blind shortly before he died.

Morton had seen impossible things, like creatures conjured from other dimensions and a closet that went on forever, and unlikely though it seemed, for all he knew it was entirely possible that the ghost of the sightless John King was taking a midnight prow through the house where he had spent so much of his life. The house where he had died.

The shuffling stopped momentarily as the thing fumbled its way to the staircase. Morton heard the first step creak and then the next, as something plodded toward him. He held his breath, determined not to make a sound, until a softly lit, pale blue figure slowly emerged on the stairs. Morton bit his tongue and forced himself not to look away. If he'd learned one thing in recent weeks, it was that you never take your eyes from potential foes. The figure drifted on up until it reached the landing. Morton could barely see anything in the

intense darkness, only a vague, shimmering, silky blue form, but as his eyes adjusted, he could make out a person with a long gown of some kind, its pale ghostly hands stretched out in front of it and its slender fingers tipped with bright pink nail polish and . . . small fuzzy blue slippers on its feet?

“Melissa!” Morton hissed, stepping suddenly out of the shadows, waves of relief and confusion washing over him at the same time. “What are you doing?”

Melissa didn’t respond at all the way he expected. She whipped her head around, took one look at Morton, and screamed so loud that the lamp shades on the sconces began to rattle. At that same moment James’s door burst open with a snap and James sprang out, a baseball bat clutched in his hands and his hair wobbling wildly above his head. Unfortunately for James, one of his bedsheets was still tangled around his left ankle and no sooner had he emerged from his room than he tripped and landed flat on his face. The baseball bat flew out of his hands and bounced off the banister, heading directly for Melissa’s head. Melissa ducked just in time, and the bat hit the wall and then rebounded down the stairs, making a horrific clatter as it went.

The three siblings looked at one another in shocked silence for a moment before erupting into a tirade of accusations.

“What are you doing out of bed?” Melissa demanded.

“Me?” Morton said. “You’re the one groping through the house like Helen Keller.”

“Was not!” Melissa snapped.

“Well, what were you doing out here?”

“I—I . . .” Melissa stopped and looked confused for a moment. “I was hungry. Thought I’d get a snack.”

This didn't sound right at all. "Don't try to tell me you had a craving for one of Dad's pickled eggs," Morton said, making it very clear from his tone that he didn't for one minute believe her.

"Okay, fine, I was checking the yard to make sure there were no, you know, monsters," Melissa confessed.

"Monsters!" Morton exclaimed. "Why were you looking for monsters?"

"I don't know! Why were you prowling on the landing?" Melissa shot back in a defensive tone.

James, who had by now pulled himself back to his feet and disentangled himself from his bedsheet, started waving his hands in a calming gesture. "Look, it's obvious what's going on here," he croaked loudly, "and there's no point getting upset at each other. We're all too wound up. We still don't believe it, that it's over, but it really is. We need to relax and start to live our normal lives again."

"You can talk, sleeping with a baseball bat beside your bed," Melissa mumbled while biting on her nails.

"I said *we*, didn't I?" James replied. "I'm guilty too. Every night I check under my bed, make sure the windows are bolted, and, I'll admit, I even sneak into Dad's office to make sure the hatch to King's secret attic is still closed. But it's time to move on, and we can only do it if we stick together."

"So we're all just supposed to think happy thoughts?" Melissa quipped.

"We could try!" James exclaimed.

Melissa fell silent and looked guiltily at her fuzzy blue slippers.

“We’re sorry,” Morton said. “I should have stayed in bed, but I thought I heard a noise and I just wanted to be sure that you weren’t —” Morton stopped himself, but it was too late. A look of hurt disappointment clouded James’s face.

“Oh. I see. Wanted to make sure I wasn’t wandering the streets eating small children,” he said.

“No, it’s not like that!” Morton protested.

“What do I have to do to convince you guys that I’m human?” James exclaimed. “Here, you can inspect my arms for spines if it makes you feel any better.”

“That won’t be necessary,” Melissa said, staring harshly at Morton. “We’re all going back to bed now.”

Morton suddenly felt as if an old sock were lodged in his throat, and even though he wanted to say sorry, he was unable to make any sounds, so instead he shuffled back to his room in silence.

James and Melissa also retreated to their rooms, and a few minutes later Morton found himself lying exactly as he had before, staring up at the Zombie Twin toys on his shelf, only now feeling a lot worse. He decided that James was absolutely right. They really did have to try harder to settle down to a normal life, and so Morton forced himself to stop thinking nervous thoughts and eventually he managed to drift into a shallow, restless sleep full of sharp teeth and savage claws. . . .