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Opening extract from

The Blood Guard

Written by

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This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, incidents and
dialogues are products of the author's imagination or are used
fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual people, living or
dead, events or locales are entirely coincidental.

Though J. Seward Johnson, Jr.'s sculpture called *The Awakening* is very
real, the author has taken liberty with its size, dimensions and even current
location. These days it can be found not at Hains Point in DC,
but at National Harbor in nearby Maryland.

PROLOGUE



PLAYING WITH FIRE

It wasn't *me* who burned down our house.

I wasn't even supposed to be there. I'd been sent home from school with a fever, and I'd taken a nap. Next thing I knew, flames were licking under my door and white smoke was filling the room. Pretty soon after that I was hugging the brownstone wall outside my third-floor bedroom window, wishing I'd put on some clothes first.

It was snowing. Hard. And the ledge I was standing on was slippery. Below me, the entire front of the house was ablaze, long tongues of fire stretching from every window.

So I went the other way. Up.

Scaling a burning building in a snowstorm in pyjamas

and bare feet? Not my idea of fun. But sometimes you don't really have a choice.

Eventually, I reached the edge of our roof and hoisted myself over. *Safe*, I thought. The tarred surface was nice and warm under the soles of my feet. I almost felt like I could lie down and go to sleep again.

And then I snapped wide awake. *It's warm*, I thought. *In a snowstorm*.

I took off running.

I'd barely leaped across to the neighbour's when our roof fell in. It made a plume of pretty sparks that shot up high into the air and then rained down on the neighbourhood, the ash mixing with the snow.

I stood and watched, wondering what I was going to tell my mom.

It all seemed unreal – not just because I was feverish, barefoot, covered in soot and wearing singed pyjamas. But because our house was the only one in the row to catch fire.

A professional job, the investigators called it later, but that was just a guess. They never found evidence of arson. And they couldn't figure out a motive for why my parents or I would want to destroy our own home. So after a while, they gave up and labelled

it a freak accident.

We moved to a new place in a new neighbourhood, in a totally new state. I went to a new school with new kids who didn't accuse me of being the boy who played with fire.

I figured I'd survived the worst moment of my life. Nothing else that happened to me could ever come close to being as awful as that one day.

But I was wrong. Boy was I ever.

CHAPTER ONE



TRUST NO ONE

Call me Ronan.

It's my middle name. My first is *Evelyn* and my last is *Truelove*, which is kind of a spectacular bummer on all fronts, because I'm a guy. My mom's uncle Evelyn was from Great Britain. Maybe that name doesn't sound weird for a boy there? He had a house on a huge wooded lake in northern Michigan. So because my mom liked paddling a canoe there when she was nine, she gave me a first name that sounds like a girl's.

I can't even begin to explain how wrong this is.

My name gets me a whole lot of attention. By the time I got to kindergarten, I was used to the teasing; it was the fights that were new. This enormous kid named Dennis

Gault decided he wanted my lunch box. "Give it here, *Evelyn*," he said. Dennis was only in second grade, but he looked like a giant, with fists as big as cantaloupes.

It wasn't much of a lunch box – just a cheap plastic *Dragon Ball Z* thing – but I wasn't about to hand it over. "Don't call me Evelyn," I replied.

I got home an hour later, lunch box gone, blood running from my nose. I don't know what I thought my mom would do. Call the principal and complain, maybe.

Instead, she enrolled me in judo. "It's time you learned how to fight," she said.

"I don't *want* to fight!" I said.

"Cut the whining. This will be good for you."

I was *five*.

I'm thirteen now, and because of my mom, I've taken everything from judo to aikido, Krav Maga to kendo. (Kendo is a Japanese martial art in which you beat up your opponent with a long stick. It looks like good times until someone starts whacking you back.) And Mom didn't just sign me up for self-defence. She's had me take classes in swing dance and horseback riding and wilderness survival training and – well, she makes sure that I am always busy.

Thanks to all the classes, these days I know how to

take care of myself in a fight. These days, no one bullies me. And no one calls me Evelyn.

Most of the time no one calls me anything at all.

I don't have all that many friends at my new school. When we moved to Connecticut after the fire, the kids already had their friendships locked down. It didn't help much that I'm always skipping off after school to take weird classes in fencing or metalworking or advanced gymnastics. I mean, imagine explaining to your new maybe-friend that you can't hang out and play PS3 because you have to pull on a leotard and perfect your dismount from the parallel bars. Pretty soon no one invites you to anything.

Gymnastics was where I was headed the afternoon when everything started. School had just let out for the day and the halls were buzzing. I stood at my locker and listened to the kids around me talk about an end-of-year pool party that a popular eighth-grader was throwing that weekend. Just about everyone had been invited.

Everyone but me.

I swapped my algebra textbook for social studies, then stuffed it into my backpack on top of my leotard.

"You going to hit Cassie's swim thing on Saturday?" Nathan Romaneck was in my honours classes. He was a

little bit of a dweeb – his crew cut and old T-shirt made him look like an eight-year-old – but he was one of the few kids who was sort of kind of like a friend.

"Lost my invite," I said.

"I wasn't invited either," he said, shrugging. "But I'm going anyway. The crowd there will be big enough that we'll be invisible."

"I'd love to go," I started to say, "but I've—"

"Got trapeze class or whatever until eight. And then fencing Sunday morning," he said. "I know. Your mom calls the shots and you have to do as she tells you. Want to get into a good college, blah blah blah."

"It's not like that, Nate," I said, but we both knew he was right. My mom kept me aggressively overscheduled. I wasn't always crazy about it, but I also didn't mind. You don't care as much about being an outsider if you're always busy.

I closed my locker and was fighting my way through the flood of kids in front of the building when I heard someone call my name.

"Evelyn Ronan Truelove!"

Only one person calls me that.

My mom.

She was leaning against her yellow VW bug, parked

in clear violation of the TEACHERS ONLY sign. She wore a blue men's dress shirt with the sleeves rolled to her elbows and paint-spattered blue jeans, and her long black hair was tied back in a messy ponytail. My mom stands out in a crowd, mostly because of the burning intensity of her eyes: when she is looking at you, it's like the sun shines on you alone. No one and nothing else exists.

"Are you here to drive me to gymnastics?" I asked as I walked over. It was strange to see her here – she works full-time as a museum curator and isn't usually done early enough to pick me up from school. I swung my backpack into the VW and climbed in. "Because I'm good with walking there, honest."

"Special treat," she said, glancing quickly to either side. I looked too, but there was nothing much to see, just the usual end-of-the-school-day business: hundreds of kids pouring out in a noisy flood, a line of yellow buses idling in the far lot. "Buckle up, sweet child of mine," Mom said. "We are in a massive hurry."

As I pulled the door shut, she threw the bug into gear and gunned out of the lot. A few sharp turns, and we were shooting around the back of the school and into the valley towards downtown.

"Gymnastics is the other way. And aren't you driving kind of fast?"

"Thanks for the directions, Christopher Columbus. But you're not going to class." Mom's eyes kept darting to the rear-view mirror as she swerved past slower cars.

"Excellent!" I couldn't hide my joy; I hated wearing spandex. "I mean, I'm not?"

"Nope." There was something new in her face that showed in the crease of her brow and the grim flat line of her lips: fear.

"What's wrong?"

Without explaining, she said, "Hold tight," stood on the brakes, and cranked the wheel hard left. The tyres shrieked and skidded, and the world outside the window whirled as the car spun around 180 degrees. I thought I was going to throw up.

Now we were facing the other direction. On a one-way street.

"That move," she explained, accelerating straight into oncoming traffic, "is called a bootlegger. One day I'll show you how to do it."

"Mom!" I shouted. "What are you doing?"

"Trying to lose our tail," she said, biting her lower lip and leaning forward. She jockeyed the gearshift and

swung the car around a honking dump truck. Directly behind it were two dark red SUVs barrelling down on us, one in each lane.

"And this," Mom said, stomping on the gas and driving straight at them, "is called chicken."

At the last minute, the two SUVs swerved up on the pavement and thundered past on either side. I looked out of the back window and saw them both turn around.

"Why are they chasing you?" I asked.

"Us," she said, squeezing my arm. "They're after *us*. And they're chasing us because they want to capture and probably kill us, honey. But I'm not going to let them."

"Come on, Mom." I laughed like this was a bad joke. "They want to *kill* us?" When she gave me a quick look, I saw she was serious.

She blew through a red light – more honking, more squealing of brakes – and made a hard left into the entrance of Brickman Nature Preserve, where she'd enrolled me in a competitive tree-climbing class last fall. She zoomed along the scenic drive that wound uphill through the shadowy groves, leaning forward over the wheel.

"This street dead-ends at the top," I reminded her.

Behind us I caught a flash of sunlight off a windscreen – one of the red SUVs coming after us.

Once we reached the tiny parking area at the summit, Mom pulled up to the kerb and threw the VW into neutral. She left the engine idling. Below us stretched the rolling green hillside, and far off in the hazy distance, the cluster of buildings that was downtown Stanhope, Connecticut, the city we've called home since Brooklyn.

The park was crowded with bikers and people walking dogs and little kids playing. A long flight of cement steps went straight down the middle of the grassy hill to another car park and a little lake, the water a silvery glint barely visible past the trees.

Through the VW's open windows we could hear engines gunning up the hill behind us – the SUVs. Whoever they were, they were still on our tail. There was only one exit: the road we'd taken here.

We were trapped.

"Will you tell me now what's going on?" I asked, reaching for the door handle.

"We're taking the stairs. You're going to want to hold on, honey." She stomped on the gas.

I hollered as we caught air off the top landing. The engine revved hard as the wheels left the tarmac, and

I felt myself rise off the seat against the shoulder belt, saw a V of birds beat their wings against the bright blue sky—

And then the car crashed down on to the steps.

The doors caught on the banisters and the side-view mirrors popped off. The air bags blew out and slammed me back against the seat.

Somehow my mom kept driving.

The car was a tight fit between the railings, but not so tight that we got stuck. Reaching around the air bag, Mom kept working the gearshift and the gas, and the bug bolted forward, bouncing and rattling and banging as it hit every one of the steps.

At the landing halfway down, we slowed. The air bags had deflated a bit, but now everything in the car – including me and my mom – was covered with a powdery grey dust that stank like new rubber. "Are you crazy?" I asked, coughing. "Can we just stop and talk—"

But we were off again. With an enormous scrape, we began jouncing down the second long flight.

All this time, my mom was jabbing at the horn – as though anyone could miss the car screeching its way down the steps. Through the windscreen I watched people dive over the banisters, screaming as they ran.

At last, with a teeth-snapping bang, we reached the foot of the stairs and Mom brought the car to a stop. "Are you OK, honey?" she asked, reaching over and patting my shoulder and face. "Talk to me, Ronan."

"I'm fine," I said. I wiped my face clean with my hoodie, then leaned out of the window. The sides of the bug were crumpled, and steam was billowing out from beneath the hood. The engine made little ticking sounds as a puddle of liquid slowly spread out from under the engine. "Mom, what are you doing?" I asked. "We could have just *died*."

But her head was turned away. She was staring in the other direction, back the way we'd come.

At the top of the hill, stark against the bright sky, one of the red SUVs had tried the same stunt we'd just pulled but had been pinned by the railings. The other SUV was parked alongside, its grill flush against the railing. Five men and a woman, all wearing dark blue suits, stood watching from above.

"Who are those people?" I asked.

"Bad guys," my mom said. "It's complicated." Her voice sounded remarkably calm, but when she put the car back into gear, her hand shook. "Someone trashed the house – looking for something – and now your dad has . . . gone missing."

That was the final straw, the thing that finally convinced me my mom was delusional. She announces we're being pursued by people who want to kill us. *Sure*. She risks our lives and trashes the VW. *OK*. But the news that my father – nerdy, quiet, absent Dad, who is the comptroller (whatever that means) for a multinational conglomerate (whatever that is) has been kidnapped? *No way*.

"Why would anyone want to kidnap Dad?" I asked. "He's like a fancy accountant."

She didn't reply. In silence we tooled along the broad cement walkway that ran by the lake, following its gentle curves towards the car park on the far side.

"Maybe it was *him*," I insisted. "Maybe he was looking for something, and he was just sloppy. Did you think of that?"

"*Yes*, I thought of that, Ronan," Mom snapped, using her discussion-is-over voice. "There are a couple of things you should know," she said, honking at a redhead woman pushing a stroller. The woman steered it off the path in a hurry. "First, the truth about me. I'm part of a group called the Blood Guard. We protect people from bad guys." She exhaled sharply. "That's the important thing. I'm one of the good guys, Ronan. And so are you."

"Blood Guard?" I repeated. "Does Dad know about this?"

I was thrown hard against my seat belt as Mom punched the brakes. The car squealed to a stop. "Maybe," she said with a sigh. "Maybe he knows."

We'd reached a little parking area. It was empty – except for the police car parked sideways across the exit, the lights on its roof spinning blue and red. Crouched down outside the car, behind the front end, were a man and a woman.

They had their pistols drawn. Aimed straight at us.

Mom reached behind me and rooted around. When she came forward again, she was holding something long, curved and dark – a sword in a fancy leather scabbard.

"What's that?" I asked, even though I knew; I'd been taking fencing classes since fourth grade. In the back seat was a large open duffel bag full of swords and other dangerous-looking things. And a blue suitcase. *My* blue suitcase.

"Cutlass," she said, closing her eyes and whispering a few words under her breath.

"Mom, those are *cops*. They have *guns*."

My mom rested her hand on my arm. "Those aren't real police officers, Ronan."

They looked real enough to me. It *was* a little strange that they weren't wearing uniforms. Or caps. I couldn't see them too well behind the car, but the woman had inky black hair, and the guy was bald.

"The second thing," Mom said, her teeth gritted in anger, "is that people are often not who they pretend to be. They lie. Those two out there?" She nodded towards the police car, pushed her door open and slid the cutlass from its scabbard. It came loose with a pretty metallic chime. "They're killers. If you're going to survive, Ronan, you'll have to heed my warning: *trust no one*."

"Sure thing," I said, thinking maybe I shouldn't trust *her.*

"Stay in the car and keep down, honey. There may be ricochets."

And just like that Mom was galloping across the car park, swinging the cutlass.