

## One

I'm on my way to go kill some very bad people. I've never killed anyone before, so I'm kind of nervous. But the way the last few days have gone, I'm ready for anything. I'm dressed like something out of a *Matrix* movie, driving down Michigan Avenue in a stolen BMW with a ten-gauge across my lap and a bullet in my abdomen. Why am I doing this? Well, I've always believed in the saying that blood is thicker than water. Family's supposed to be more important than friends. But sometimes you have to make exceptions.

There was this girl, Johnny Sturlacky, I knew growing-up. She was my best friend. We lived next door to each other in a low-income housing project outside of Detroit. The type of neighborhood most educated people stayed away from. There we learned how to take things that weren't ours and keep them for ourselves, bear false witness, covet, and basically violate all the other Ten Commandments. We also learned how to love and fight and had the audacity to call it life.

Johnny was the type of girl who didn't put on make-up or wear girly clothes. She liked to wear high-tops, jeans, and a t-shirt and fight like a boy. She was tough, conniving, and pretty all at the same time.

We met when I was four years old. I remember sitting in the middle of my living room rolling a big ole Tonka truck back and forth across the carpet. I got it that Christmas from Santa Claus. Sounds

of engine revs and climbing over tough rocks bubbled from my lips. When suddenly, I stopped, looked up, and felt the sting of a tiny fist knock the slobber right out of my mouth. It was then that our roles in life were defined: she was the leader and I was the follower. We were best friends from that day on. Until my mother and her fiancé dragged me away to Orlando, Florida and I had to leave Johnny alone to grow up in a world where you really needed a best friend to help you cope with life on the streets.

I hadn't seen or heard from Johnny in twenty years until a few nights ago when I received a letter slipped under my front door. A letter that reminded me of a promise I once made to her.

One night in December 1984, two weeks after my twelfth birthday, Johnny and I became more than water. We made a blood pact with each other to be best friends forever, no matter how far away we were, or how mad at each other we could be. The pact signified that whenever one of us needed something, the other would always be there throughout our entire lifetime, like family. I cared deeply about my friendship with Johnny. She was my best friend and always would be, no matter what. I loved when we were together and when we weren't, I felt empty. She was a part of my soul. I'd do anything for her, but sometimes I was afraid because she was a bit too fearless for me. I worried about the outcome of things as she fed off of my fears. Maybe that's why we're still so close—because I was afraid of everything and she didn't blink when it came to taking action. If it weren't for her, I would have never known what it was like to have a backbone. I vividly remember the night we made the ultimate bond.

*Detroit, MI. 1984*

“Ouch!” I jerked my finger away from the candlelight and shoved the tip of it into my dry mouth.

“Mark Mathews!” Johnny loved saying my full name when she

was irritated with me. “You’re such a baby!” She raised her finger up to the light of the candle that was supported by melted wax on top of an old McDonald’s kid’s plate, which bore the scene of the Hamburglar carrying a sack full of hamburgers.

Placing the point of a sewing needle against her fingertip, Johnny punctured her skin, without flinching, allowing a small drop of blood to bubble at the edge of her fingernail. I scrunched my eyes low when I saw the blood. We were sitting Indian style in the middle of my bedroom floor. My mother’s annual Christmas Eve party was raging downstairs.

“Now come on, we have to touch blood,” Johnny insisted, grabbing my wrist and pulling it toward her.

“Ouch!” I cried once more. “Do you have to be so bossy?”

“Yeah, I’m a girl. That’s what we do.” She arrogantly smiled.

I knew that smile all too well. It was the smile that said *I’m in control*. It also said *I’m freaking nuts and if you cross my path, there will be hell to pay*. I did as she insisted, as always. I stretched out my innocent finger. She grabbed it and squeezed my small digit until another drop of blood surfaced. Pressing her bloody fingertip against mine, she said, “From this day forward we are no longer best friends. We are more than that, we are blood-brothers.”

“Don’t you mean blood-brother and sister?” I asked.

Johnny’s eyes glazed over with impatience. “Fine,” she whispered.

When the ritual was over she rose to her knees, and leaning over the candle, gently kissed me on the mouth. Looking into my eyes, she whispered, “We’ll be together forever.”

It wasn’t the first time we had kissed; however, it would be the last.

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Before the letter, my life was pretty normal. I cleaned and pulled teeth for a living. I ate lunch everyday at noon. I went home and drank. Not too much, only one small glass of Dewar's on the rocks. I like the flavor of Scottish whiskey, and its quick buzz helps me deal with my wife. I'm married to a woman who really doesn't like me that much and I eventually caught her cheating. I'll get more into that when the time comes. Until then, I'll start with me and Johnny and why I'm on my way to go splatter someone's head across a car factory floor.