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Opening Extract from...

Brother / Sister

Written by Sean Olin

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BROTHER *Just give them a chance to explain* SISTER

SEAN OLIN



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UNCORRECTED BOUND PROOF

NOT FOR RESALE

WILL

How many times do I have to say it? Yes, I see the picture. You've been shoving it in my face for, like, the past forty-five minutes. And, yes, I understand what it is. It's a body, obviously. It's a dead body. I'm not blind, okay?

Sure.

It looks like it's been floating in the ocean for, oh, I don't know, a long time. Bloated, like it's going to split open that wetsuit it's been shoved into. And icy blue-white. I guess that's what happens when all the blood has leaked out. The skin, it looks like a worm that you've been fishing with for too long, like spongy and pale and just gross. And, it's a guy. It's male. Maybe fifteen years old, I guess. Blond. Is he blond? It's hard to tell. I mean, first, it looks like the fish have been nibbling at him, and then also, his head's been smashed in, like with

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a baseball bat, or a golf club. His forehead, his eyes, his nose. There's basically just a crater where his face used to be.

No, this isn't easy for me. It sickens me. It's horrifying. It's not like I like looking at dead people. But—did you show this to Asheley? Tell me you didn't show this photo to Asheley. It would . . . She just . . . She doesn't need to see this. It would just be cruel. It would be too much for her.

Do I recognize the wetsuit? I don't know. I recognize the *type* of wetsuit. With those aerodynamic lime-green swoops up the sides of the legs. Yeah, it's a Quicksilver. But that particular one, how should I know if I've seen that particular one before?

I've already told you, maybe I do know who it is. Or maybe I don't. That depends. Cause there's a lot of assumptions you're making, I'm sure, and they're wrong. It was nothing like what you think it was.

Yeah, I'd love to explain. I'm eager to. I'll tell you everything.

For one thing . . . no, first, I need to make one thing clear.

ASHELEY

You have to understand, I love my brother. I'm scared of him too, but . . .

That's why this is so hard. Regardless of what he has or hasn't done, I feel for him, you know?

Will's had a tough time. A whole lot tougher than I have. I was only four when our parents split up, and I can't really remember anything, but he was almost six. He understood what was going on and it was rough on him, totally disturbing. Mom actually sat him down after Dad left and said to him, "You're the man of the house now, Will. That's a lot of responsibility. If you can't handle it, who knows what might happen."

It must have terrified him. I know it did. To be six years old and told that if anything bad happens to your family, it'll be all your fault?

I don't know if she was drinking yet then. Probably. Maybe. Until this year, we never really talked about her drinking. It was just there. Crazy things would happen. She'd disappear from home for three days, and we'd get a call from the cops—excuse me, the police—way out in San Jose telling us to come pick her up. Or worse.

Will never figured out what to do with the emotions all this stirred up in him. By the time he was in middle school, he was getting in all kinds of stupid trouble—not criminal, not like he was turning into a delinquent, but he was volatile. Some kid would tease him about his new haircut, or like, pull the stupid yellow sweatband he always wore off his head, and he'd turn into a flurry of fists, spinning and flailing and not hitting anything, just himself, basically. It always made me sad. It was like something was exploding under his skin, like he was combusting. I remember once he brought a dead frog to school and kept it in his locker so long that you almost had to wear a gas mask to get past it. They had to evacuate the hallway and bring the fire department in to cart the thing away. It was like he was *trying* to repel everybody.

By the time he was a freshman in high school, he'd calmed down enough not to make a spectacle of himself all the time, but he still didn't have any friends. He'd sprouted up suddenly—he's six four—and he was crazy skinny because he hardly ever ate, just picked at whatever you put in front of him. He hung around in his bedroom, reading sports autobiographies and listening to, like, Interpol at full blast. The only time he ever left the house was to go out to the cliffs and drive golf balls as far as he could into the bay. In school he was like a ghost, hugging

the walls so nobody would see him, sitting in the back of every classroom drawing pictures of these, like, skeletal people, these like malnourished ghouls playing basketball or tennis or golf or whatever. I think that's sort of how he saw himself.

It's not like it sounds. He had a good heart. You should have seen him when he jumped into action, when he had to bark Mom down from some drunken ledge. He could suddenly be more mature and capable than anybody the world's ever seen. It was just later that he'd shake for hours on his bed, sobbing. I couldn't console him no matter how hard I tried.

And things had just started to turn around for him this year. It helped that Mom had been on a bit of an upswing. She'd given up drinking. She was four months sober and she was cooking dinner for us sometimes and everything.

He trusted me. He always trusted me. And I always did the best I could to help him. I dragged him to CVS and proved to him that the cashiers weren't going to laugh at him for buying acne cream.

He was getting so, so, so, so much better. I'd finally convinced him that it was okay to take the sweatbands off and stop wearing that same striped polo shirt, tucked into his shorts, every day. I mean, he didn't suddenly turn himself into, like, a fashion icon, but at least he looked normal, at least he didn't seem so autistic anymore. And he was eating. He looked healthy. I caught him laughing at *Family Guy* sometimes. The girls were starting to whisper about how cute he looked.

And now . . . I . . .

I mean . . .

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I just, I wish there was some way to make sure he came through this okay.

So, as long as you keep that in mind while we do this, I guess, yeah, I can try to explain what happened and how we ended up down here in Mexico.

WILL

We're from Morro Bay. That's in California, like the foothills of Big Sur. Middle of nowhere California. It's not L.A., it's not San Francisco, it's not really anywhere. It's sort of tucked in there along the shore and hard to get to, so it's got a kind of snooty, closed-off air to it. There's a lot of money—like people who've made a fortune somewhere else move there to get away from the riff-raff. I mean, that's not true of everybody, it's still California, there's still people who've sort of bottomed out there, but even them, they're not anonymous. They're part of this sort of totally insular community. That's where our mom is.

I want to know that Asheley will be allowed to go back there.

She, maybe, won't be completely safe or happy, but at least she'll be somewhere familiar. She'll be able to think straight.

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She'll, maybe, be able to figure out what comes next. I don't care what happens to me, really, I don't. But Asheley . . .

You have to believe me. She had nothing to do with any of this. It's not her fault. None of it.

Guarantee me that, and I'll tell you everything. Whatever you want to know.

Okay then.

The guy in the photo. I know exactly who he is.

And yes. I killed him . . .but I had to. I had no choice.

Why? That's complicated. That'll take a while.