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Young Adult Contemporary  
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# A Brother's Oath

A Novel

By

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*A brother's promise should mean something.*

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## **Chapter One**

### **It All Started with the Socks**

“GET OFF ME, YOU STUPID PRICK!” I yelled.

Inside my head, not out loud. I'm not a complete idiot.

Instead, I simply sputtered, “I just...wanted...my socks back,” twisting my face away from the nauseating stench of Doritos, Mountain Dew, and un-brushed teeth invading my personal space. Cole's mammoth fists locked onto my skinny wrists, his enormous knee pressing so hard into my chest I could feel my lungs deflating like one of his precious basketballs that had sprung a slow leak.

He'd pinned me down again, this time on his bedroom floor, but I'd learned fighting back wouldn't help. Neither would calling for Mom. No, over the last fifteen years, I'd learned my older brother had his own agenda, and the rest of us were just the backstage crew for his one-man show: Cole Truman, Total Asshole.

To say I had sibling issues would be the understatement of the year, but I figured it couldn't get any worse –which was saying something since the fibers of Cole's sweat-scented carpet were embedding themselves up my nose as his palm pushed down harder on my cheek.

“Dylan? Are you up? Your bus will be here in fifteen minutes!” Mom yelled, completely oblivious to the wrestling match going on above her.

“Yeah, Dylan, get up! Your bus will be here in fifteen minutes,” Cole echoed in his crappy Mom imitation and ground my face further into the carpet before releasing me. “And stay the hell out of my room, dickhead!”

Gasping for air, I peeled myself up off Cole's floor, successfully dodging multiple landmines of dirty laundry but stumbling over his massive Air Jordans as I scrambled out of his room, Cole's substantial frame shadowing me until I escaped his door. Thankful to have gotten

away with my life, I leaned against my locked bedroom door with the familiar sound of Cole's laughter bouncing down the hall after me. I vowed then and there, that there would have to be a lot more on the line than a drawer full of stretched-out cotton footwear for me to Mission-Impossible it back in there ever again.

Still in my boxers and a t-shirt, I scavenged through the clothes on my closet floor. Grabbing two mismatched socks, and the best shirt-pants combination available, then, sniffing for possible B.O., I raced to the bathroom—the bathroom that I shared with my brother.

If I didn't hurry, I was going to be late on the most important day of my 15-year life. Yet, I still stopped in my tracks when I pushed open the door.

Cole had beaten me to the bathroom again.

I'm not a germaphobe. I don't fear water fountains at school. I'm not afraid of touching doorknobs in strange places. Pink eye doesn't even make me squirm, but sometimes I feared our bathroom. Between cleanings, that place was truly disgusting. Cole didn't spit in the sink, preferring to spray the mirror or countertop. His aim wasn't the greatest; sometimes he didn't even lift up the seat. And, usually Cole didn't flush.

Mom gave up trying to keep our bathroom clean about a year ago, saying it was our job now. Since Cole didn't think any household chores were his responsibility, and Mom steered clear of that stink-box as much as humanly possible, for the sake of my own survival, I kept the bathroom as clean as I could myself.

But, that morning, there was no time for Clorox. I would have to power through with sheer will.

I dropped my shorts, yanked off my shirt, took a deep breath, and tiptoed into the science experiment we called our shower. I tried not to notice the scum oozing from between the tiles and, instead, focused on the Zen-like balance required to stay atop the slimy mat on our tub floor.

I soaped up and rinsed in record time, and made it downstairs with six minutes to spare. Cole hunched over his bowl of Captain Crunch, slurping crudely. A rap beat pulsed through the ear buds he wore— mine— and his stocking-capped head bobbed left to right robotically. Just a wisp of dark blond hair escaped out of his lime green cap, covering his left eye. Under the table, one knee bounced rhythmically while his other lanky leg stretched straight out leaving me little room to sit. And, in classic Cole form, he ignored me completely, as if, only moments before, he hadn't just defended his theft of my socks by bolting me to the floor and nearly crushing me to death.

"Morning," I sidled up beside Mom at the kitchen counter and surveyed the bagel selection.

"Hey, sweetie," she said as she sopped up the steady flow of brown liquid seeping from the coffee maker. She never could get that thing to work right.

"Mom, I need you to pick me up at five o'clock today. I have that thing after school, remember?" I snagged a cinnamon raisin bagel and popped it into the toaster, while scanning the room for my backpack. I didn't want to miss the bus.

"Oh, right... that *thing*..." Though she tried to hide her confusion with a smile, it was obvious Mom had forgotten all about my audition.

"You don't remember what 'that thing' is, do you?" Staring at her, I silently counted *one, two, three, four* until her discomfort level grew high enough she made eye contact again. I had told her about this audition three times already. If this had been one of Cole's basketball games, Mom would have remembered. She had his sports schedules burned onto her brain.

"Of course, I remember!" she insisted, as another soppy wad of paper towel browned in her hand. "You have a *thing* after school today."

She blotted the spilled coffee as if cleaning up that mess would help with this one.

"It's my *audition*, Mom, and it's a big one. Come on!"

"Right, yes, your big audition. Sorry, I completely forgot." She raised her hands in surrender. "It's just that I can't get this coffee maker—," she chuckled to herself as she flipped the switch on Mr. Coffee once more. "Anyway, don't worry, Dylan. I'll be there at five o'clock on the dot."

"Thank you." With angry strokes, I smeared cream cheese onto my bagel and glanced over at Cole. He still slurped his cereal, completely oblivious.

"No problem," Mom said, cradling another handful of coffee-drenched paper towels and hustling them toward the trashcan. "But this," she raised up the soggy wad, "this may be a problem. I waste more paper towels this way."

"Why don't you just get another coffee maker if that one sucks so bad?"

"Because there's nothing wrong with this one. It's my fault—operator error—but I'm not giving up. I'll figure it out eventually."

I spotted my backpack then, nestled under the kitchen table, the top edge of my sheet music sticking out from the front zipper.

"Okay," I shrugged, thinking I'd never understand grownups, and redirected my focus back to my audition. Since I was a freshman, I didn't know what to expect. It was easy to land a part in my middle school plays, especially since I was one of the only boys who tried out. I never really felt nervous at all. But, this was high school; there'd be tons of other guys just as good as me, maybe better, so this time I was definitely nervous.

"You okay, sweetie?" Mom asked, sipping from her Basketball Mom mug.

"Yeah, I'm fine," I lied, hoisting my backpack onto my shoulders. I caught a glimpse of the microwave clock. *Crap.*

It was no use trying to explain to her how I really felt. Not only did she forget my big audition was today, she had no clue how much it stressed me out. But, that's because she didn't understand theatre at all. Neither did Dad or Cole. My entire family only spoke one language: Sports.

And, my native tongue didn't translate.

I grabbed my jacket and bagel and bolted out the door. Cole never even looked up.

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I only slowed up when I rounded the corner onto Brookside Avenue. I was lucky my bus stop wasn't far from my house, especially today. My best friend Tyler was already there shoveling Pop Tarts into his mouth, waving at me to hurry with his free hand. Only a few of the sticky bits escaped his attack, crumbling to the ground or adhering themselves permanently to his fingers. It was as bad as watching Cole eat his cereal, minus the slurping.

"Hey," he mumbled, wiping stray Pop Tart crumbs down the front of his jeans.

"Hey," I huffed, catching my breath.

"You're late again."

"Yep. I know." I bit hard into my bagel and chewed deliberately.

Tyler nodded in understanding. He needed no explanation. We'd been friends a long time.

Justin Delaney, brainiac, shuffled across the street with an open book in his hand. Behind him was a girl I'd never seen before. I know, because I would've noticed that girl.

Her hair was the color of the sun right before sunset, blonde with little bursts of red. It was pulled back in a messy ponytail, a few strays hanging loose around her face. She tilted her head, sweeping some strands out of her eyes and tucking them back behind her ear as she moved closer. Her pace quickened as she glanced down at her phone, her mouth formed a slight pout, and her eyes glared intensely, like an H&M model late for a photo shoot. Her light blue hoodie

gaped open, revealing a well-worn concert t-shirt of a band I'd never heard of, and peeking out between the ankles of her skinny jeans and black Converse sneakers were neon pink socks.

Suddenly, I wasn't hungry anymore. I tossed the rest of my bagel over my shoulder onto Mr. Pedicone's front yard. With all those un-raked leaves, he'd never see it anyway.

"Who's that?" Tyler gawked.

"No idea," I muttered before she was within earshot.

Justin arrived at the bus stop first. He dropped his overstuffed backpack on the ground and sat squarely on top of it like he did every morning, never taking his eyes off his book. The mystery girl reached our corner and half-smiled at us. I think I smiled back at her, but I'm not completely sure since before I could think straight, the bus brakes screeched, the yellow tube lumbered to a stop, and the giant door swung open.

It was Bill. Perpetually in need of a shave and a haircut, and reeking of cigarettes and cat pee, our bus driver always looked like he was one day away from death.

Mystery Girl fell in line behind us as we boarded the bus.

"Morning, Bill," I mumbled, holding my breath to avoid getting a whiff of his noxious fumes.

"Morning," he grumbled, slurping from his grimy, plastic travel mug.

Ours was the first stop so the bus was vacant. Tyler and I trudged to our usual seats—the last two in back—while Justin slipped into his favorite spot behind Bill.

Mystery Girl stopped about halfway down the aisle and threw her book bag onto a seat. Before sitting, she tried to open the window, but it was stuck. As the bus pulled away from our stop, she struggled with the window clips, her mouth pursed with concentration. I wanted to help her, but before I could get enough guts, the window clips released and the pane sailed down into the metal frame with a crash. Startled by the sudden noise, Justin spun his head around and Bill

glanced up into his giant mirror. Mystery girl just shrugged and giggled to herself, as she slid onto her seat.

“So seriously, who is that?” Tyler whisper-yelled across the aisle.

“I have no idea,” I mouthed back shrugging my shoulders.

“Well, I'd like to find out.”

“Keep dreaming.” We both knew she was out of our league. Guys in musical theatre never attract girls that hot. We're lucky if we attract girls at all.

“Yeah, yeah...true.” He pondered the reality of this for a moment. “So are you nervous about today?” Thankfully, Tyler changed the subject. I didn't want to spend our entire bus ride staring at an unattainable goddess. It was too depressing. I had to focus on the day ahead and my audition.

“Yeah, a little,” I admitted.

“Well, I don't think you have anything to worry about. I'm sure you'll be bloody brilliant,” he said in his worst British accent, and chucked the last of his Pop Tart at my head. That's how I knew Tyler meant what he said. He sacrificed the last bite of his brown sugar breakfast tart to bean me.

“Yeah, well, I hope so,” I mumbled as I sank down in my seat, imagining the competition I was up against and hoping I wouldn't make a complete ass out of myself at my first high school audition. Tyler chattered on beside me while I mentally sang through my audition song all the way to school.

If I was honest with myself, my motivations had less to self-preservation and more to do with acceptance. Maybe, just maybe, if I landed a good part in my first high school show, I would be the one my parents noticed for once, instead of Cole.