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Opening extract from

The Truth About Forever

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Chapter ONE

Jason was going to Brain Camp. It had another name, a real name, but that's what everyone called it.

'Okay,' he said, wedging a final pair of socks along the edge of his suitcase. 'The list. One more time.'

I picked up the piece of paper beside me. 'Pens,' I said. 'Notebooks. Phone card. Camera battery. Vitamins.'

His fingers moved across the contents of the bag, finding and identifying each item. Check and double-check. With Jason, it was always about being sure.

'Calculator.' I continued, 'Laptop . . .'

'Stop,' he said, putting up his hand. He walked over to his desk, unzipping the slim black bag there, then nodded at me. 'Skip down to list number two.'

I scanned down the page, found the words LAPTOP (CASE) and cleared my throat. 'Blank CDs,' I said. 'Surge protector. Headphones . . .'

By the time we'd covered that, then finished the main list – stopping to cover two other sub-headings, TOILETRIES and MISCELLANEOUS – Jason seemed pretty much convinced he had everything. Which did not, however, stop him from

continuing to circle the room, mumbling to himself. It took a lot of work to be perfect. If you didn't want to break into a sweat, there was no point in even bothering.

Jason knew perfect. Unlike most people, for him it wasn't some distant horizon. For Jason, perfect was just over the next hill, close enough to make out the landscape. And it wasn't a place he would just visit. He was going to live there.

He was the all-state maths champ, head of the debate team, holder of the highest GPA in the history of our high school (he'd been taking AP classes since seventh grade, college sections since tenth), student council president two years running, responsible for an innovative school recycling programme now implemented in districts around the country, fluent in Spanish and French. But it wasn't just about academics. Jason was also a vegan and had spent the past summer building houses for Habitat for Humanity. He practised yoga, visited his grandmother in her rest home every other Sunday and had a pen pal from Nigeria he'd been corresponding with since he was eight years old. Anything he did, he did well.

A lot of people might find this annoying, even loathsome. But not me. He was just what I needed.

I had known this from the first day we met, in English class, second year of high school. We'd been put into groups to do an assignment on *Macbeth*, me and Jason and a girl named Amy Richmond who, after we pulled our desks together, promptly announced she was 'no good at this Shakespeare crap' and put her head down on her backpack. A second later, she was sound asleep.

Jason just looked at her. 'Well,' he said, opening his textbook, 'I guess we should get started.'

This was right after everything happened, and I was in a silent phase. Words weren't coming to me well; in fact I had trouble even recognizing them sometimes, entire sentences seeming like they were another language, or backwards, as my eyes moved across them. Just printing my own name on the top of a page a few days previously, I'd second-guessed the letters and their order, not even sure of that any more.

So of course *Macbeth* had totally mystified me. I'd spent the entire weekend struggling with the antiquated language and weird names of the characters, unable to even figure out the most basic aspects of the story. I opened my book, staring down at the lines of dialogue: *Had I but died an hour before this chance/I had liv'd a blessed time; for, from this instant,/ There's nothing serious in mortality,/All is but toys.*

Nope, I thought. *Nothing.*

Luckily for me, Jason, who was not about to leave his grade in someone else's hands, was used to taking control of group work. So he opened his notebook to a clean page, pulled out a pen and uncapped it. 'First,' he said to me, 'let's just get down the basic themes of the play. Then we can figure out what to write about.'

I nodded. All around us I could hear our classmates chattering, the tired voice of our English teacher, Mr Sonnenberg, telling us again to please settle down.

Jason skipped down a few lines on his page. *Murder*, I watched him write. His handwriting was clean, block-style, and he moved across the page quickly. *Power. Marriage. Revenge.*

Prophecy. Politics. It seemed like he could go on forever, but then he stopped and looked at me. 'What else?' he asked.

I glanced back down at my book, as if somehow the words there would suddenly form together into something coherent. I could feel Jason looking at me, not unkindly, just waiting for me to contribute.

'I don't . . .' I said finally, then stopped, the words sticking. I swallowed, then started over. 'I don't understand it. Actually.'

I was sure, hearing this, he'd shoot me the same look he'd given Amy Richmond. But Jason surprised me, putting down his pen. 'Which part?'

'Any of it,' I said, and when he didn't roll his eyes as I'd been expecting, I added, 'I mean, I know there's a murder plot and I know there's an invasion but the rest . . . I don't know. It's totally confusing.'

'Look,' he said, picking up his pen again. 'It's not as complicated as you think. The key to really understanding is to start with the prophecy about what's going to happen . . . see, here . . .' He started flipping pages in his book, still talking, and pointed out a passage to me. Then he read it aloud, and as his finger moved across the words it was like he changed them, magic, and suddenly they made sense.

And I felt comfort. Finally. All I'd wanted for so long was for someone to explain everything that had happened to me in this same way. To label it neatly on a page: this leads to this leads to this. I knew, deep down, it was more complicated than that, but, watching Jason, I was hopeful. He took the mess that was *Macbeth* and fixed it, and I had to wonder if he might, in some small way, be able to do the

same for me. So I moved myself closer to him, and I'd been there ever since.

Now, he zipped up his laptop case and put it on the bed with the rest of his stuff. 'Okay,' he said, taking one last glance around the room. 'Let's go.'

His mom and dad were already in their Volvo when we came outside. Mr Talbot got out, opened the trunk and he and Jason took a few minutes getting everything situated. As I got in the back seat and put on my seat belt, Mrs Talbot turned round and smiled at me. She was a botanist, her husband a chemist, both of them professors. They were so scholarly that every time I saw either of them without a book in their hands they looked weird to me, as if they were missing their noses, or their elbows.

I tried not to think about this as she said, 'So, Macy. What are you going to do until August without Jason?'

'I don't know,' I said. I was working at the library, taking over Jason's job at the information desk, but other than that, the next eight weeks were just looming ahead, empty. While I had a few friends from student council, most had gone away for the summer themselves, to Europe or camp. To be honest, Jason's and my relationship was pretty time consuming: between yoga classes and student government stuff, not to mention all the causes we dealt with, there just hadn't been much time for anyone else. Besides, Jason got easily frustrated with people, so I'd been hesitant to invite new people out with us. If they were slow, or lazy in any way, he lost patience fast, and it was just easier to hang out with him, or with his friends, who could keep up with him. I'd never

really thought about this as a bad thing, actually. It was just how we were.

On the way to the airport, Jason and his dad discussed some elections that had just happened in Europe, his mom fretted about construction traffic and I sat there, looking at the inch between Jason's knee and mine and wondering why I didn't try to move closer to him. This wasn't new. He hadn't even kissed me until our third date, and now, after a year and a half, we still hadn't discussed going all the way. At the time we met, someone just hugging me still felt like too much to bear. I didn't want anyone to get too close. So this had been all I wanted, a boy who understood how I felt. Now, though, I sometimes wished for more.

At the airport, we said goodbye at the gate. His parents hugged him, then discreetly walked across the waiting room to stand at the window there, looking out at the runway and the big stretch of blue sky that hung over it. I put my arms round Jason, breathing in his smell – sport stick deodorant and acne cleanser – deeply, so I'd get enough to last me a while.

'I'm going to miss you,' I told him. 'So much.'

'It's only eight weeks,' he said.

He kissed me on the forehead. Then, quickly, so quickly I didn't even have time to react, on the lips. He leaned back and looked at me, tightening his arms round my waist.

'I'll email you,' he said, and kissed me on the forehead again. As they called his flight and he disappeared down the hallway to the plane, I stood with the Talbots and watched him go, feeling a tug in my chest. It was going to be a long summer.

I'd wanted a real kiss, something to remember, but I'd long ago learned not to be picky in farewells. They weren't guaranteed or promised. You were lucky, more than blessed, if you got a goodbye at all.

My dad died. And I was there.

This was how people knew me. Not as Macy Queen, daughter of Deborah, who built pretty houses in brand new cul-de-sacs. Or as sister of Caroline, who'd had just about the most beautiful wedding anyone had ever seen at the Lakeview Inn the previous summer. Not even as the one-time holder of the record for the fifty-yard dash, middle-school division. Nope. I was Macy Queen, who'd woken up the day after Christmas and gone outside to see her father splayed out at the end of the road, a stranger pumping away at his broad chest. I saw my dad die. That was who I was now.

When people first heard this, or saw me and remembered it, they always made that face. The one with the sad look, accompanied by the cock of the head to the side and the softening of the chin – *oh my goodness, you poor thing.* While it was usually well intentioned, to me it was just a reaction of muscles and tendons that meant nothing. Nothing at all. I hated that face. I saw it everywhere.

The first time was at the hospital. I was sitting in a plastic chair by the drink machine when my mother walked out of the small waiting room, the one off the main one. I already knew this was where they took people to tell them the really bad news: that their wait was over, their person was dead. In fact, I'd just watched another family make this progression, the ten

or so steps and the turn of a corner, crossing over from hopeful to hopeless. As my mother – now the latter – came towards me, I knew. And behind her there was this plump nurse holding a chart, and she saw me standing there in my sweatpants and baggy sweatshirt, my old smelly running shoes, and she made the face. *Oh, poor dear.* Then, though, I had no idea how it would follow me.

I saw The Face at the funeral, everywhere. It was the common mask on the people clumped on the steps, sitting quietly murmuring in the pews, shooting me sideways looks that I could feel, even as I kept my head down, my eyes on the solid black of my tights, the scuffs on my shoes. Beside me, my sister, Caroline, sobbed: through the service, as we walked down the aisle, in the limo, at the cemetery, at the reception afterwards. She cried so much it seemed wrong for me to, even if I could have. For anyone else to join in was just overkill.

I hated that I was in this situation, I hated that my dad was gone, I hated that I'd been lazy and sleepy and had waved him off when he'd come into my room that morning, wearing his smelly Waccamaw 5K shirt, leaning down to my ear to whisper, *Macy, wake up. I'll give you a head start. Come on, you know the first few steps are the hardest part.* I hated that it had been not two or three but five minutes later that I changed my mind, getting up to dig out my sweatpants and lace my shoes. I hated that I wasn't faster on those three-tenths of a mile, that by the time I got to him he was already gone, unable to hear my voice, see my face, so that I could say all the things I wanted to. I might have been the girl whose dad died, the girl who was there,

and everyone might have known it. Like so much else, I could not control that. But the fact that I was angry and scared, that was my secret to keep. They didn't get to have that too. It was all mine.

When I got home from the Talbots', there was a box on the porch. As soon as I leaned over and saw the return address, I knew what it was.

'Mom?' My voice bounced down the empty front hall as I came inside, bumping the door shut behind me. In the dining room, I could see fliers stacked around several floral arrangements, everything all set for the cocktail reception my mother was hosting that night. The newest phase of her neighbourhood, luxury townhouses, was just starting construction, and she had sales to make. Which meant she was in full-out schmooze mode, a fact made clear by the sign over the mantel featuring her smiling face and her slogan: *Queen Homes – Let Us Build Your Castle.*

I put the box on the kitchen island, right in the centre, then walked to the fridge and poured myself a glass of orange juice. I drank all of it down, rinsed the cup and put it in the dishwasher. But it didn't matter how I busied myself. The entire time, I was aware of the box perched there waiting for me. There was nothing to do but just get it over with.

I pulled a pair of scissors out of the island drawer, then drew them across the top of the box, splitting the line of tight brown packing tape. The return address, like all the others, was Waterville, Maine.

Dear Mr Queen,

As one of our most valued EZ Products customers, please find enclosed our latest innovation for your perusal. We feel assured that you'll find it will become as important and time-saving a part of your daily life as the many other products you've purchased from us over the years. If, however, for some reason you're not completely satisfied, return it within thirty days and your account will not be charged.

Thank you again for your patronage. If you have any questions, please feel free to contact our friendly customer service staff at the number below. It's for people like you that we work to make daily life better, more productive and, most of all, easy. It's not just a name: it's a promise.

Most cordially,

Walter F. Tempest
President, EZ Products

I scooped out Styrofoam peanuts, piling them neatly next to the box, until I found the package inside. It had two pictures on the front. In the first one, a woman was standing at a kitchen counter with about twenty rolls of tinfoil and waxed paper stacked up in front of her. She had a frustrated expression on her face, like she was about two breaths away from some sort of breakdown. In the picture beside it, the woman was at the same counter. Gone were the boxes, replaced instead by a plastic console, which was attached to

the wall. From it, she was pulling some plastic wrap, now sporting the beatific look usually associated with madonnas or people on heavy medication.

Are you tired of dealing with the mess of so many kinds of foil and wrap? Sick of fumbling through messy drawers or cabinets? Get the Neat Wrap and you'll have what you need within easy reach. With convenient slots for sandwich and freezer bags, tinfoil and waxed paper, you'll never have to dig through a drawer again. It's all there, right at your fingertips!

I put the box down, running my finger over the edge. It's funny what it takes to miss someone. A packed funeral, endless sympathy cards, a reception full of murmuring voices, I could handle. But every time a box came from Maine, it broke my heart.

My dad loved this stuff: he was a sucker for anything that claimed to make life simpler. This, mixed with a tendency to insomnia, was a lethal combination. He'd be downstairs, going over contracts or firing off emails late into the night, with the TV on in the background, and then an infomercial would come on. He'd be sucked in immediately, first by the happy, forced banter between the host and the gadget designer, then by the demonstration, followed by the bonus gifts, just for ordering Right Now, by which point he was already digging out his credit card with one hand as he dialled with the other.

'I'm telling you,' he'd say to me, all jazzed up with that prepurchase enthusiasm, 'that's what I call an *innovation*!'

And to him, it was: the Jumbo Holiday Greeting Card Pack he bought for my mother (which covered every holiday from

Kwanzaa to Solstice, with not a single Christmas card), and the plastic contraption that looked like a small bear trap and promised the perfect French twist, which we later had to cut out of my hair. Never mind that the rest of us had long ago soured on EZ Products: my father was not dissuaded by our cynicism. He loved the *potential*, the possibility that there, in his eager hands, was the answer to one of life's questions. Not 'Why are we here?' or 'Is there a God?' These were queries people had been circling for aeons. But if the question was, 'Does there exist a toothbrush that also functions as a mouthwash dispenser?' the answer was clear: yes. Oh, yes.

'Come look at this!' he'd say, with an enthusiasm that, while not exactly contagious, was totally endearing. That was the thing about my dad. He could make anything seem like a good time. 'See,' he'd explain, putting the coasters cut from sponges/talking pocket memo recorder/coffeemaker with remote-control on-off switch in front of you, 'this is a great idea. I mean, most people wouldn't even think you could come up with something like this!'

Out of necessity, if nothing else, I'd perfected my reaction – a wow-look-at-that face, paired with an enthusiastic nod – at a young age. My sister, the drama queen, could not even work up a good fake smile, instead just shaking her head and saying, 'Oh, Dad, why do you buy all that crap, anyway?' As for my mother, she tried to be a good sport, putting away her top-end coffeemaker for the new remote-controlled one, at least until we realized – after waking up to the smell of coffee at 3 a.m. – that it was getting interference from the baby monitor next door and brewing spontaneously. She even tolerated the tissue

dispenser he installed on the visor of her BMW (*Never risk an accident reaching for a Kleenex again!*), even when it dislodged while she was on the highway, bonking her on the forehead and almost hurling her into oncoming traffic.

When my dad died, we all reacted in different ways. My sister seemed to take on our cumulative emotional reaction: she cried so much she seemed to be shrivelling right in front of our eyes. I sat quiet, silent, angry, refusing to grieve, because it seemed like to do so would be giving everyone what they wanted. My mother began to organize.

Two days after the funeral, she was moving through the house with a buzzing intensity, the energy coming off her palpable enough to set your teeth chattering. I stood in my bedroom door, watching as she ripped through our linen closet, tossing out all the nubby washcloths and old twin sheets that fitted beds we'd long ago given away. In the kitchen, anything that didn't have a match – the lone jelly glass, one freebie plate commemorating Christmas at Cracker Barrel – was tossed, clanking and breaking its way into the trash bag she dragged behind her from room to room, until it was too full to budge. Nothing was safe. I came home from school one day to find that my closet had been organized, rifled through, clothes I hadn't worn in a while just gone. It was becoming clear to me that I shouldn't bother to get too attached to anything. Turn your back and you lose it. Just like that.

The EZ stuff was among the last to go. On a Saturday morning, about a week after the funeral, she was up at 6 a.m., piling things in the driveway for Goodwill. By nine, she'd

emptied out most of the garage: the old treadmill, lawn chairs and boxes of never-used Christmas ornaments. As much as I'd been worried about her as she went on this rampage, I was even more concerned about what would happen when she was all done, and the only mess left was us.

I walked across the grass to the driveway, sidestepping a stack of unopened paint cans. 'All of this is going?' I asked as she bent down over a box of stuffed animals.

'Yes,' she said. 'If you want to claim anything, better do it now.'

I looked across these various artefacts of my childhood. A pink bike with a white seat, a broken plastic sled, some life jackets from the boat we'd sold years ago. None of it meant anything, and all of it was important. I had no idea what to take.

Then I saw the EZ box. At the top, balled up and stuffed in the corner, was the self-heating hand towel my dad had considered a Miracle of Science only a few weeks earlier. I picked it up carefully, squeezing the thin fabric between my fingers.

'Oh, Macy.' My mother, the stuffed-animal box in her arms, frowned at me. A giraffe I vaguely remembered as belonging to my sister was poking out the top. 'You don't want that stuff, honey. It's junk.'

'I know,' I said, looking down at the towel.

The Goodwill guys showed up then, beeping the horn as they pulled into the driveway. My mother waved them in, then walked over to point out the various piles. As they conferred, I wondered how many times a day they went to people's houses

to take things away – if it was different when it was after a death, or if junk was junk, and they couldn't even tell.

'Make sure you get it all,' my mother called over her shoulder as she started across the grass. The two guys went over to the treadmill, each of them picking up an end. 'I have a donation . . . just let me get my chequebook.'

As she went inside I stood there for a second, the guys loading up things from all around me. They were making a last trip for the Christmas tree when one of them, a shorter guy with red hair, nodded towards the box at my feet.

'That too?' he asked.

I was about to tell him yes. Then I looked down at the towel and the box with all the other crap in it, and remembered how excited my dad was when each of them arrived, how I could always hear him coming down the hallway, pausing by the dining room, the den, the kitchen, just looking for someone to share his new discovery with. I was always so happy when it was me.

'No,' I said as I leaned over and picked up the box. 'This one's mine.'

I took it up to my room, then dragged the desk chair over to my closet and climbed up. There was a panel above the top shelf that opened up into the attic, and I slid it open and pushed the box into the darkness.

With my dad gone, we had assumed our relationship with EZ Products was over. But then, about a month after the funeral, another package showed up, a combination pen/pocket stapler. We figured he'd ordered it right before the heart attack, his final purchase – until the next month, when a

decorative rock/sprinkler arrived. When my mother called to complain, the customer service person apologized profusely. Because of my father's high buying volume, she explained, he had been bumped up to Gold Circle level, which meant that he received a new product every month to peruse, no obligation to buy. They'd take him off the list, absolutely, no problem.

But still the stuff kept coming, every month, just like clockwork, even after we cancelled the credit card they had on file. I had my own theory on this, one I shared, like so much else, with no one. My dad had died the day after Christmas, when all the gifts had already been put into use or away. He'd given my mom a diamond bracelet, my sister a mountain bike, but when it was my turn, he'd given me a sweater, a couple of CDs and an I.O.U. written on gold paper in his messy scrawl. *More to come*, it had said, and he'd nodded as I read the words, reassuring me. *Soon*. 'It's late, but it's special,' he'd said to me. 'You'll love it.'

I knew this was true. I would love it, because my dad just *knew* me, knew what made me happy. My mother claimed that when I was little I cried any time my dad was out of my sight, that I was often inconsolable if anyone but he made my favourite meal, the bright orange macaroni-and-cheese mix they sold at the grocery store three for a dollar. But it was more than just emotional stuff. Sometimes, I swear, it was like we were on the same wavelength. Even that last day, when he'd given up trying to rouse me from bed, I'd sat up those five minutes later as if something had summoned me. Maybe, by then, his chest was already hurting. I'd never know.

In those first few days after he was gone, I kept thinking

back to that I.O.U., wondering what it was he'd picked out for me. And even though I was pretty sure it wasn't an EZ Product, it felt strangely soothing when the things from Waterville, Maine, kept arriving, as though some part of him was still reaching out to me, keeping his promise.

So each time my mother tossed the boxes, I'd fish them out and bring them upstairs to add to my collection. I never used any of the products, choosing instead to just believe the breathless claims on the boxes. There were a lot of ways to remember my dad. But I thought he would have especially liked that.