

The Truth About Forever by Sarah Dessen

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 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 math 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 program 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 practiced 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 sophomore year. 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 anymore.

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.

Lucky 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 backseat and put on my seatbelt, Mrs. Talbot turned around 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 good-bye 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 around Jason, breathing in his smell—sport stick deodorant and acne cleanser—deeply, so I'd get enough to last me awhile.

"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 around 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 good-bye 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 toward me, I knew. And behind her there was this plump nurse holding a chart, and she saw me standing there in my track pants 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 shoe. Beside me, my sister Caroline sobbed: through the service, as we walked down the aisle, in the limo, at the cemetery, at the reception afterward. 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 track pants 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 neighborhood, 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 center, 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 that 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 dialed 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 eons. 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 three 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 shriveling 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 of 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 fit beds we'd long ago given away. In the kitchen, anything that didn't have a match—the lone jelly jar 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 six 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 tear, 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 artifacts 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 checkbook."

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 toward 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 canceled 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 anytime my dad was out of my sight, that I was often inconsolable if anyone but he made my favorite 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.

CHAPTER TWO

My mother had called me once ("Macy, honey, people are starting to arrive") and then twice ("Macy? Honey?") but still I was in front of the mirror, parting and reparting my hair. No matter how many times I swiped at it with my comb, it still didn't look right.

Once, I didn't care so much about appearances. I knew the basics: that I was somewhat short for my age, with a round face, brown eyes, and faint freckles across my nose that had been prominent, but now you had to lean in close to see. I had blonde hair that got lighter in the summer time, slightly green if I swam too much, which didn't bother me since I was a total track rat, the kind of girl to whom the word *hairstyle* was defined as always having a ponytail elastic on her wrist. I'd never cared about how my body or I looked—what mattered was what it could do and how fast it could go. But part of my new perfect act was my appearance. If I wanted people to see me as calm and collected, together, I had to look the part.

It took work. Now, my hair had to be just right, lying flat in all the right places. If my skin was not cooperating, I bargained with it, applying concealer and a slight layer of foundation, smoothing out all the red marks and dark circles. I could spend a full half hour getting the shadowing just right on my eyes, curling and recurling my eyelashes, making sure each was lifted and separated as the mascara wand moved over them, darkening, thickening. I moisturized. I flossed. I stood up straight. I was fine.

"Macy?" My mother's voice, firm and cheery, floated up the stairs. I pulled the comb through my hair, then stepped back from the mirror, letting it fall into the part again. Finally: perfect. And just in time.

When I came downstairs, my mother was standing by the door, greeting a couple who was just coming in with her selling smile: confident but not off-putting, welcoming but not kiss-ass. Like me, my mother put great stock in her appearance. In real estate, as in high school, it could make or break you.

"There you are," she said, turning around as I came down the stairs. "I was getting worried."

"Hair issues," I told her, as another couple came up the front walk. "What can I do?"

She glanced into the living room, where a group of people were peering at a design of the new townhouses that was tacked up on the wall. My mother always had these cocktail parties when she needed to sell, believing the best way to assure people she could build their dream house was to show off her own. It was a good gimmick, even if it did mean having strangers traipsing through our downstairs.

"If you make sure the caterers have what they need," she said to me now, "that would be great. And if it looks like we're running low on brochures, go out and get another box from the garage." She paused to smile at a couple as they crossed the foyer. "Oh," she said, "and if anyone looks like they're looking for a bathroom—"

"Point them toward it graciously and with the utmost subtlety," I finished. Bathroom detail/directions were, in fact, my specialty.

"Good girl," she said, as a woman in a pantsuit came up the walk. "Welcome!" my mother called out, pushing the door open wider. "I'm Deborah Queen. Please come in. I'm so glad you could make it!"

My mother didn't know this person, of course. But part of selling was treating everyone like a familiar face.

"Well, I just love the neighborhood," the woman said as she stepped over the threshold. "I noticed you were putting up some new townhouses, so I thought I'd . . ."

"Let me show you a floor plan. Did you see that all the units come with two-car garages? You know, a lot of people don't even realize how much difference a heated garage can make."

And with that, my mother was off and running. Hard to believe that once schmoozing was as painful to

her as multiple root canals. But when you had to do something, you had to do it. And eventually, if you were lucky, you did it well.

Queen Homes, which my dad had started right out of college as a one-man trim carpenter operation, already had a good business reputation when he met my mother. Actually, he hired her. She was fresh out of college with an accounting degree, and his finances were a shambles. She'd come in, waded through his paperwork and receipts (many of which were on bar napkins and matchbooks), handled a close call with the IRS (he'd "forgotten" about his taxes a few years earlier), and gotten him into the black again. Somewhere in the midst of all of it, they fell in love. They were the perfect business team: he was all charm and fun and everyone's favorite guy to buy a beer. My mother was happy busying herself with file folders and The Bigger Picture. Together, they were unstoppable.

Wildflower Ridge, our neighborhood, had been my mother's vision. They'd done small subdivisions and spec houses, but this would be an entire neighborhood, with houses and townhouses and apartments, a little business district, everything all enclosed and fitted around a common green space. A return to communities, my mother had said. The wave of the future.

My dad wasn't sold at first. But he was getting older, and his body was tired. This way he could move into a supervisory position and let someone else swing the hammers. So he agreed. Two months later, they were breaking ground on the first house: ours.

They worked in tandem, my parents, meeting potential clients at the model home. My dad would run through the basic spiel, tweaking it depending on what sort of people they were: he played up his Southern charm for Northerners, talked NASCAR and barbeque with locals. He was knowledgeable, trustworthy. Of course you wanted him to build your house. Hell, you wanted him to be your best friend. Then, the hard selling done, my mom would move in with the technical stuff like covenants, specifications, and prices. The houses sold like crazy. It was everything my mother said it would be. Until it wasn't.

I knew she blamed herself for his death, thought that maybe it was the added stress of Wildflower Ridge that taxed my dad's heart, and if she hadn't pushed him to expand so much everything would have been different. This was our common ground, the secret we shared but never spoke aloud. I should have been with him; she should have left him alone. Shoulda, coulda, woulda. It's so easy in the past tense.

But here in the present, my mother and I had no choice but to move ahead. We worked hard, me at school, her at outselling all the other builders. We parted our hair cleanly and stood up straight, greeting company—and the world—with the smiles we practiced in the quiet of our now-too-big dream house full of mirrors that showed the smiles back. But under it all, our grief remained. Sometimes she took more of it, sometimes I did. But always, it was there.

I'd just finished directing an irate woman with a red-wine stain on her shirt to the powder room—one of the catering staff had apparently bumped into her, splashing her cabernet across her outfit—when I noticed the stack of fliers on the foyer table was looking a bit low. Grateful for any excuse to escape, I slipped outside.

I went down the front walk, cutting around the caterer's van in the driveway. The sun had just gone down, the sky pink and orange behind the line of trees that separated us from the apartments one phase over. Summer was just starting. Once that had meant early track practice and long afternoons at the pool perfecting my backflip. This summer, though, I was working.

Jason had been at the library information desk since he was fifteen, long enough to secure a reputation as the Guy Who Knew Everything. Patrons of the Lakeview Branch had gotten accustomed to him doing everything from finding that obscure book on Catherine the Great to fixing the library computers when they crashed. They loved him for the same reason I did: he had all the answers. He also had a cult following, particularly among his co-workers, who were both girls and both brilliant. They'd never taken kindly to me as Jason's girlfriend, seeing as how, in their eyes, I wasn't even close to their intellectual level, much less his. I'd had a feeling that their acceptance of me as a sudden co-worker wouldn't be much warmer, and I was right.

During my training, they snickered as he taught me the intricate ins and outs of the library search system, rolled their eyes in tandem when I asked a question about the card catalog. Jason had hardly noticed, and when I pointed it out to him, he got impatient, as if I was wasting his time. That's not what you should be worrying about, he said. Not knowing how to reference the tri-county library database quickly in the event of a system crash: now *that* would be a problem.

He was right, of course. He was always right. But I still wasn't looking forward to it.

Once I got to the garage, I went to the shelves where my mom kept her work stuff, moving a stack of FOR SALE and MODEL OPEN signs aside to pull out another box of fliers. The front door of the house was open, and I could hear voices drifting over, party sounds, laughing, and glasses clinking. I hoisted up the box and cut off the overhead light. Then I headed back to the party and bathroom duty.

I was passing the garbage cans when someone jumped out at me from the bushes.

"Gotcha!"

I shrieked and dropped the box, which hit the ground with a thunk, spilling fliers sideways down the driveway. Say what you will, but you're never prepared for the surprise attack. It defines the very meaning of taking your breath away: I was gasping.

For a second, it was very quiet. A car drove by.

"Bert?" A voice came from down the driveway, by the catering van. "What are you doing?"

Beside me, a bush rustled. "I'm . . ." a voice said hesitantly—and much more quietly—from somewhere within it. "I'm scaring *you*. Aren't I?"

I heard footsteps, and a second later could make out a guy in a white shirt and black pants walking toward me up the driveway. He had a serving platter tucked under his arm. As he got closer he squinted, making me out in the semi-dark.

"Nope. Not me," he said. Now that he was right in front of me, I could see that he was tall and had brown hair that was a little bit too long. He was also strikingly handsome, with the sort of sculpted cheekbones and angular features that you couldn't help but notice, even if you did have a boyfriend. To me he said, "You okay?"

I nodded. My heart was still racing, but I was recovering.

He stood there, studying the bush, then stuck his hand right into its center. A second later, he pulled another guy, this one shorter and chunkier but dressed identically, out through the foliage. He had the same dark eyes and hair, but looked younger. His face was bright red.

"Bert," the older guy said, sighing, as he let his hand drop. "Honestly."

"You have to understand," this Bert said to me, solemnly, "I'm down in a big way."

"Just apologize," the older guy said.

"I'm very sorry," Bert said. He reached up and picked a pine needle out of his hair. "I, um, thought you were someone else."

"It's okay," I told him.

The older guy nudged him, then nodded toward the fliers. "Oh, right," Bert said, dropping down to his knees. He started to pick them up, his fingers scratching the pavement, as the other guy walked a bit down the driveway, picking up the ones that had slid there.

"That was a good one, too," Bert was muttering as I squatted down beside him to help. "Almost had him. Almost."

The light outside the kitchen door popped on, and suddenly it was very bright. A second later the door swung open.

"What in the world is going on out here?" I turned to see a woman in a red apron, with black curly hair piled on top of her head, standing at the top of the stairs. She was pregnant, and was squinting out into the dark with a curious, although somewhat impatient, expression. "Where is that platter I asked for?"

"Right here," the older guy called out as he came back up the driveway, a bunch of my fliers now stacked neatly upon the platter. He handed them to me.

"Thanks," I said.

"No problem." Then he took the stairs two at a time, handing the platter to the woman, as Bert crawled under the deck for the last few fliers that had landed there.

"Marvelous," she said. "Now, Wes, get back to the bar, will you? The more they drink, the less they'll notice how long the food is taking."

"Sure thing," the guy said, ducking through the doorway and disappearing into the kitchen.

The woman ran her hand over her belly, distracted, then looked back out into the dark. "Bert?" she called out loudly. "Where—"

"Right here," Bert said, from under the deck.

She turned around, then stuck her head over the side of the rail. "Are you on the ground?"

"Yes."

"What are you *doing*?"

"Nothing," Bert mumbled.

"Well," the woman said, "when you're done with that, I've got crab cakes cooling with your name on them. So get your butt in here, please, okay?"

"Okay," he said. "I'm coming."

The woman went back inside, and a second later I heard her yelling something about mini-biscuits. Bert came out from under the deck, organizing the fliers he was holding into a stack, then handed them to me.

"I'm really sorry," he said. "It's just this stupid thing."

"It's fine," I told him, as he picked another leaf out of his hair. "It was an accident."

He looked at me, his expression serious. "There are," he said, "no accidents."

For a second I just stared at him. He had a chubby face and a wide nose, and his hair was thick and too short, like it had been cut at home. He was watching me so intently, as if he wanted to be sure I understood, that it took me a second to look away.

"Bert!" the woman yelled from inside. "Crab cakes!"

"Right," he said, snapping out of it. Then he backed up to the stairs and started up them quickly. When he got to the top, he glanced back down at me. "But I am sorry," he said, saying the words that I'd heard so much in the last year and a half that they hardly carried meaning anymore. Although I had a feeling he meant it. Weird. "I'm sorry," he said again. And then he was gone.

When I got inside, my mother was deep in some conversation about zoning with a couple of contractors. I refreshed the fliers, then directed a man who was a bit stumbly and holding a glass of wine he probably didn't need to the bathroom. I was scanning the living room for stray empty glasses when there was a loud crash from the kitchen.

Everything in the front of the house stopped. Conversation. Motion. The very air. Or so it felt.

"It's fine!" a voice called out, upbeat and cheerful, from the other side of the door. "Carry on as you were!"

There was a slight surprised murmur from the assembled crowd, some laughter, and then slowly the conversation built again. My mother smiled her way across the room, then put a hand on the small of my back, easing me toward the foyer.

"That's a spill on a client, not enough appetizers, and a crash," she said, her voice level. "I'm not happy. Could you go and convey that, please?"

"Right," I said. "I'm on it."

When I came through the kitchen door, the first thing I did was step on something that mushed, in a wet sort of way, under my foot. Then I noticed that the floor was littered with small round objects, some at a standstill, some rolling slowly to the four corners of the room. A little girl in pigtails, who looked to be about two or three, was standing by the sink, fingers in her mouth and wide eyed as several of the marblelike objects moved past her.

"Well." I looked over to see the pregnant woman standing by the stove, an empty cookie sheet in her

hands. She sighed. "I guess that's it for the meatballs."

I picked up my foot to examine it, stepping aside just in time to keep from getting hit by the door as it swung open. Bert, now leafless and looking somewhat composed, breezed in carrying a tray filled with wadded-up napkins and empty glasses. "Delia," he said to the woman, "we need more crab cakes."

"And I need a sedative," she replied in a tired voice, stretching her back, "but you can't have everything. Take the cheese puffs and tell them we're traying the crab cakes up right now."

"Are we?" Bert asked, passing the toddler, who smiled widely, reaching out for him with her spitty fingers. He sidestepped her, heading for the counter, and, unhappy, she plopped down into a sitting position and promptly started wailing.

"Not exactly at this moment, no," Delia said, crossing the room. "I'm speaking futuristically."

"Is that a word?" Bert asked her.

"Just take the cheese puffs," she said as she picked up the little girl. "Oh, Lucy, please God okay, just hold back the hysterics for another hour, I'm begging you." She looked down at her shoe. "Oh no, I just stepped in a meatball. Where's Monica?"

"Here," a girl's voice said from the other side of the side door.

Delia made an exasperated face. "Put out that cigarette and get in here, *now*. Find a broom and get up these meatballs . . . and we need to get some more of these cheese puffs in, and Bert needs . . . what else did you need?"

"Crab cakes," Bert said. "Futuristically speaking. And Wes needs ice."

"In the oven, ready any second," she said, shooting him a look as she walked over to the broom closet, toddler on her hip, and rummaged around for a second before pulling out a dustpan. "The crab cakes, not the ice. Lucy, please, don't slobber on Mommy. . . . And the ice is . . . oh, shit, I don't know where the ice is. Where did we put the bags we bought?"

"Cooler," a tall girl said as she came inside, letting the door slam behind her. She had long honey-blond hair and was slouching as she ambled over to the oven. She pulled it open, a couple of inches at a time, then glanced inside before shutting it again and making her way over to the island, still moving at a snail's pace. "Done," she announced.

"Then please *take* them out and *put* them on a tray, Monica," Delia snapped, shifting the toddler to her other hip. She started scooping up the meatballs into the dustpan as Monica made her way back to the oven, pausing entirely too long to pick up a pot holder on her way.

"I'll just wait for the crab cakes," Bert said. "It's only—"

Delia stood up and glared at him. It was quiet for a second, but something told me this was not my opening. I stayed put, scraping meatball off my shoe.

"Right," he said quickly. "Cheese puffs. Here I go. We need more servers, by the way. People are grabbing at me like you wouldn't believe."

"Monica, get back out there," Delia said as the tall girl ambled back over, a tray of sizzling crab cakes in her hand. Putting down the dustpan, Delia moved to the island, grabbing a spatula, and began, with one hand, to load crab cakes onto the plate at lightning speed. "Now."

"But—"

"I know what I said," Delia shot back, slapping a stack of napkins onto the edge of the tray, "but this is an emergency situation, and I have to put you back in, even if it is against my better judgment. Just walk slowly and *look* where you're going, and be careful with liquids, please God I'm begging you, okay?"

This last part, I was already beginning to recognize, was a mantra of sorts for her, as if by stringing all these words together, one of them might stick.

"Okay," Monica said, tucking her hair behind her ear. She picked up the tray, adjusted it on her hand, and headed off around the corner, taking her time. Delia watched her go, shaking her head, then turned her attention back to the meatballs, scooping the few remaining into the dustpan and chucking them into the garbage can. Her daughter was still sniffing, and she was talking to her, softly, as she walked to a metal cart by the side door, pulling out a tray covered with Saran Wrap. As she crossed the room she

balanced it precariously on her free hand, her walk becoming a slight waddle. I had never seen anyone so in need of help in my life.

"What else, what else," she said as she reached the island, sliding the tray there. "What else did we need?" She pressed a hand to her forehead, closing her eyes.

"Ice," I said, and she turned around and looked at me.

"Ice," she repeated. Then she smiled. "Thanks. Who are you?"

"Macy. This is my mom's house."

Her expression changed, but only slightly. I had a feeling she knew what was coming.

I took a breath. "She wanted me to come and check that everything's all right. And to convey that she's—"

"Incredibly pissed," she finished for me, nodding.

"Well, not *pissed*."

Just then, there was a splashing crash from the next room, followed by another short silence. Delia glanced over at the door, just as the toddler started wailing again.

"Now?" she said to me.

"Well . . . yes," I said. Actually, I was betting this was an understatement. "Now, she's probably pissed."

"Oh, dear." She put a hand on her face, shaking her head. "This is a disaster."

I wasn't sure what to say. I felt nervous enough just watching all this: I couldn't imagine being responsible for it.

"Well," she said, after a second, "in a way, it's good. We know where we stand. Now things can only get better. Right?"

I didn't say anything, which probably didn't inspire much confidence. Just then, the oven timer went off with a cheerful *bing!* noise. "Okay," she said suddenly, as if this had signaled a call to action. "Macy. Can you answer a question?"

"Sure," I said.

"How are you with a spatula?"

This hadn't been what I was expecting. "Pretty good," I said finally.

"Wonderful," she said. "Come here."

Fifteen minutes later, I'd figured out the rhythm. It was like baking cookies, but accelerated: lay out cheese puffs/crab cakes on cookie sheet in neat rows, put in oven, remove other pan from oven, pile onto tray, send out. And repeat.

"Perfect," Delia said, watching me as she laid out mini-toasts at twice my speed and more neatly. "You could have a bright future in catering, my dear, if such a thing even exists."

I smiled at this as Monica, the slothlike girl, eased through the door, carrying a tray laden with napkins. After her second spill she'd been restricted to carrying only solids, a status further amended to just trash and empty glasses once she'd bumped into the banister and sent half a tray of cheese puffs down the front of some man's shirt. You'd think moving slowly would make someone less accident prone. Clearly, Monica was bucking this logic.

"How's it going out there?" Delia asked her, glancing over at her daughter, Lucy, who was now asleep in her car seat on the kitchen table. Frankly, Delia had astounded me. After acknowledging the hopelessness of her situation, she had immediately righted it, putting in two more trays of canapés, getting the ice from the cooler, and soothing her daughter to sleep, all in about three minutes. Like her mantra of Oh-please-God-I'm-begging-you-okay; she just did all she could, and eventually something just worked. It was impressive.

"Fine," Monica reported flatly, shuffling over to the garbage can, where, after pausing for a second, she began to clear off her tray, one item at a time.

Delia rolled her eyes as I slid another tray into the oven. "We're not always like this," she told me,

opening another package of cheese puffs. "I swear. We are usually the model of professionalism and efficiency."

Monica, hearing this, snorted. Delia shot her a look.

"But," she continued, "my babysitter flaked on me tonight, and then one of my servers had other plans, and then, well, then the world just turned on me. You know that feeling?"

I nodded. You have no idea, I thought. Out loud I said, "Yeah. I do."

"Macy! There you are!" I looked up to see my mother standing by the kitchen doorway. "Is everything okay back here?"

This question, while posed to me, was really for Delia, and I could tell she knew it: she busied herself laying out cheese puffs, now at triple speed. Behind her, Monica had finally cleared her tray and was dragging herself across the room, the tray bumping against her knee.

"Yes," I said. "I was just asking Delia about how to make crab cakes."

As she came toward us, my mother was running a hand through her hair, which meant she was preparing herself for some sort of confrontation. Delia must have sensed this, too, as she picked up a dish towel, wiping her hands, and turned to face my mother, a calm expression on her face.

"The food is getting rave reviews," my mother began in a voice that made it clear a *but* was to follow, "but—"

"Mrs. Queen." Delia took a deep breath, which she then let out, placing her hand on her chest. "Please. You don't have to say anything more."

I opened up another tray of crab cakes, keeping my head down.

"I am so deeply sorry for our disorganized beginning tonight," Delia continued. "I found out I was understaffed at the last minute, but that's no excuse. I'd like to forgo your remaining balance in the hopes that you might consider us again for another one of your events."

The meaningful silence that followed this speech held for a full five seconds, until it was broken by Bert bursting back through the door. "Need more biscuits!" he said. "They're going like hotcakes!"

"Bert," Delia said, forcing a smile for my mother's sake, "you don't have to bellow. We're right here."

"Sorry," Bert said.

"Here." I handed him the tray I'd just finished and took his empty one. "There should be crab cakes in the next few minutes, too."

"Thanks," he said. Then he recognized me. "Hey," he said. "You work here now?"

"Um, no." I put the empty tray down in front of me. "Not really."

I glanced over at my mother. Between Delia's heartfelt "sorry" and my exchange with Bert, I could see she was struggling to keep up. "Well," she said finally, turning her attention back to Delia, "I appreciate your apology, and that seems like fair compensation. The food *is* wonderful."

"Thank you so much," Delia said. "I really appreciate it."

Just then there was a burst of laughter from the living room, happy party noise, and my mother glanced toward it, as if reassured. "Well," she said, "I suppose I should get back to my guests." She started out of the room, then paused by the fridge. "Macy?" she said.

"Yes?"

"When you're done in here, I could use you. Okay?"

"Sure," I said, grabbing a pot holder and heading over to the oven to check on the crab cakes. "I'll be there in a sec."

"She's been wonderful, by the way," Delia told her. "I told her if she needs work, I'll hire her in a second."

"That's so nice of you," my mother said. "Macy's actually working at the library this summer."

"Wow," Delia said. "That's great."

"It's just at the information desk," I told her, opening the oven door. "Answering questions and stuff."

"Ah," Delia said. "A girl with all the answers."

"That's Macy." My mother smiled. "She's a very bright girl."

I didn't know what to say to this—what could you say to this?—so I just reached in for the crab cakes, focusing on that. When my mother left the kitchen, Delia came over, pot holder in hand, and took the tray as I slid it out of the oven. "You've been a great help," she said, "really. But you'd better go out there with your mom."

"No, it's fine," I said. "She won't even notice I'm not there."

Delia smiled. "Maybe not. But you should go anyway."

I stepped back, out of the way, as she carried the tray over to the island. In her car seat, Lucy shifted slightly, mumbling to herself, then fell quiet again.

"So the library, huh?" she said, picking up her spatula. "That's cool."

"It's just for the summer," I told her. "I'm filling in for someone."

She started lifting crab cakes off the cookie sheet, arranging them on a tray. "Well, if it doesn't work out, I'm in the book. I could always use someone who can take directions and walk in a straight line."

As if to punctuate this, Monica slunk back in, blowing her bangs out of her face.

"Catering is an insane job, though," Delia said. "I don't know why you'd want to do it, when you have a peaceful, normal job. But if for some reason you're craving chaos, call me. Okay?"

Bert came back in, breezing between us, his tray now empty. "Crab cakes!" he bellowed. "Keep 'em coming!"

"Bert," Delia said, wincing, "I'm *right here*."

I walked back to the door, stepping aside as Monica ambled past me, yawning widely. Bert stood by impatiently, waiting for his tray, while Delia asked Monica to God, please, try and pick up the pace a little, I'm begging you. They'd forgotten about me already, it seemed. But for some reason, I wanted to answer her anyway. "Yeah," I said, out loud, hoping she could hear me. "Okay."

The last person at the party, a slightly tipsy, very loud man in a golf sweater, left around nine-thirty. My mother locked the door behind him, took off her shoes, and, after kissing my forehead and thanking me, headed off to her office to assemble packets for people who had signed the YES! I WANT MORE INFO sheet she'd had on the front hall table. Contacts were everything, I'd learned. You had to get to people fast, or they'd slip away.

Thinking this, I went up to my room and checked my email. Jason had written me, as promised, but it was mostly about things that he wanted to remind me of concerning the info desk (make sure to keep track of all copier keys, they are *very expensive* to replace) or other things I was handling for him while he was away (remember, on Saturday, to send out the email to the Foreign Culture group about the featured speaker who is coming in to give that talk in August). At the very end, he said he was too tired to write more and he'd be in touch in a couple of days. Then just his name, no "love." Not that I'd been expecting it. Jason wasn't the type for displays of affection, either verbal or not. He was disgusted by couples that made out in the hallways between classes, and got annoyed at even the slightest sappy moments in movies. But I knew that he cared about me: he just conveyed it more subtly, as concise with expressing this emotion as he was with everything else. It was in the way he'd put his hand on the small of my back, for instance, or how he'd smile at me when I said something that surprised him. Once I might have wanted more, but I'd come around to his way of thinking in the time we'd been together. And we were together, all the time. So he didn't have to do anything to prove how he felt about me. Like so much else, I should just know.

But this *was* the first time we were going to be apart for more than a weekend since we'd gotten together, and I was beginning to realize that the small reassurances I got in person would not transfer over to email. But he loved me, and I knew that. I'd just have to remember it now.

After I logged off, I opened my window and crawled out onto the roof, sitting against one of the shutters with my knees pulled up to my chest. I'd been out there for a little while, looking at the stars, when I heard voices coming up from the driveway. A car door shut, then another. Peering over the edge, I saw a few people moving around the Wish Catering van as they packed up the last of their things.

". . . this *other* planet, that's moving within the same trajectory as Earth. It's only a matter of time before it hits us. I mean, they don't talk about these things on the news. But that doesn't mean it's not *happening*."

It was Bert talking. I recognized his voice, a bit high-pitched and anxious, before I made him out, standing by the back of the van. He was talking to someone who was sitting on the bumper smoking a cigarette, the tip of which was bright and red in the murky dark.

"Ummm-hmmm," the person said slowly. Had to be Monica. "Really."

"Bert, give it a rest," another voice said, and Wes, the older guy, walked up, sliding something into the back of the van. I'd hardly seen him that night, as he'd worked the bar in the den.

"I'm just trying to help her be informed!" Bert said indignantly. "This is serious stuff, Wes. Just because *you* prefer to stay in the dark—"

"Are we ready to go?" Delia came down the driveway, her voice uneven, Lucy on her hip. She had the car seat dangling from one hand, and Wes walked up and took it from her. From where I was sitting, I could make out clearly the top of his head, the white of his shirt. Then, as if sensing this, he leaned his head back, glancing up. I slid back against the wall.

"Did we get paid?" Bert asked.

"Had to comp half," she said. "The price of chaos. Probably should bother me, but frankly, I'm too pregnant and exhausted to care. Who has the keys?"

"I do," Bert said. "I'll drive."

The silence that followed was long enough to make me want to peer over the edge of the roof again, but I stopped myself.

"I don't think so," Delia said finally.

"Don't even," Monica added.

"What?" Bert said. "Come on! I've had my permit for a year! I'm taking the test in a week! And I have to have some more practice before I get the Bertmobile."

"You have," Wes said, his voice low, "to stop calling it that."

"Bert," Delia said, sighing, "normally, I would love for you to drive. But it's been a long night and right now I just want to get home, okay? Next time, it's all you. But for now, just let your brother drive. Okay?"

Another silence. Someone coughed.

"Fine," Bert said. "Just fine."

I heard a car door slam, then another. I leaned back over to see Wes and Bert still standing at the back of the van. Bert was kicking at the ground, clearly sulking, while Wes stood by impassively.

"It's not a big deal," he said to Bert after a minute, pulling a hand through his hair. Now I knew for sure that they were brothers. They looked even more alike to me, although the similarities—skin tone, dark hair, dark eyes—were distributed on starkly different builds.

"I never get to drive," Bert told him. "Never. Even lazy Monotone got to last week, but never me. Never."

"You will," Wes said. "Next week you'll have your own car, and you can drive whenever you want. But don't push this issue now, man. It's late."

Bert stuffed his hands in his pockets. "Whatever," he said, and started around the van, shuffling his feet. Wes followed him, clapping a hand on his back. "You know that girl who was in the kitchen tonight, helping Delia?" Bert asked.

I froze.

"Yeah," Wes answered. "The one you leaped out at?"

"Anyway," Bert said loudly, "don't you know who she is?"

"No."

Bert pulled open the back door. "Yeah, you do. Her dad—"

I waited. I knew what was coming, but still, I had to hear the words that would follow. The ones that defined me, set me apart.

“—was the coach when we used to run in that kids’ league, back in elementary school,” Bert finished. “The Lakeview Zips. Remember?”

Wes opened the back door for Bert. “Oh yeah,” he said. “Coach Joe, right?”
Right, I thought, and felt a pang in my chest.

“Coach Joe,” Bert repeated, as he shut his door. “He was a nice guy.”

I watched Wes walk to the driver’s door and pull it open. He stood there for a second, taking a final look around, before climbing in and shutting the door behind him. I had to admit, I was surprised. I’d gotten so used to being known as the girl whose dad died, I sometimes forgot that I’d had a life before that.

I moved back into the shadows by my window as the engine started up and the van bumped down the driveway, brake lights flashing as it turned out onto the street. There was a big wishbone painted on the side, thick black paint strokes, and from a distance it looked like a Chinese character, striking even if you didn’t know, really, what it meant. I kept my eye on it, following it down through the neighborhood, over the hill, down to the stop sign, until it was gone.

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