

INNER CIRCLE

A NOVEL BY
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NEW YEAR

An early morning rain had come and gone, leaving behind a wet sheen that shimmered on the trees alongside the road. Weightless clouds chased the breeze across the bright blue sky. The sun made everything sparkle. There were crumpled, grease-stained fast food wrappers at my feet, and the stale smell of coffee clung to the car, but outside the world looked new. Clean. Hopeful. Even the sign welcoming students to campus had been freshened. Not replaced, of course, but the branches that used to obscure it had been trimmed back. The weeds and wildflowers tamed. It was a new year. A new start.

My father drove under the gates and started the long wind up the hill toward campus. I held my breath until the stone spire atop the Easton Academy chapel rose up from the trees. My pulse, already racing, started to sprint. I leaned forward, between the two front seats, to gauge my mother's reaction. She stared out the passenger-side window of our dusty, dented Subaru, slack jawed.

"The catalog does not do this place justice," she said.

"What did I tell you?" my father replied, with a hint of pride.

He, after all, had seen Easton before. My mother had not. She had always been in too much of a bitter, prescription-pill haze to join us on the long drive from Croton, Pennsylvania, to Easton, Connecticut. Or to even care that I was leaving. But that was all over now. Mom was sober. Had been since January. She'd gained weight. Had color in her face. Actually washed her hair now. Daily. I had only been home to see this behavior for two weeks, but seen it I had. With my own two eyes. Before that, I had spent most of the summer on Martha's Vineyard with Natasha and her family, waitressing at a waterside seafood restaurant and learning how to sail from Natasha and her dad. Once Natasha had left for Dartmouth, I had come home for a quick pit stop to find the house clean and freshly painted, the fridge fully stocked, my mother's bed actually made. Two weeks later, I was still adjusting to the new and improved Mom.

"Reed, it's beautiful," my mother said, turning to me with a smile. Actually focusing her eyes on me. No darting. No glazing over. Focused. On me. "I still can't believe you go here."

I sighed. "Neither can I."

Especially after everything that had happened last year. In my first few months at Easton, I had fallen in love for the first time, lost my virginity, made friends with the most powerful girls at school . . . and stood by totally naïve while one of them had brutally murdered my boyfriend. And that was only the beginning.

But no. I was not going to think about that. I sat back and clenched

my hands into fists, digging my fingernails into my palms. I was making a new start this year. Last year was over. Last year couldn't touch me. Those people were all gone. Transferred or committed or just gone. This year could be anything I wanted it to be.

My heart fluttered with nerves and excitement as my father pulled out of the trees and onto the circle in front of the underclassmen dorms. Kiki Rosen and Diana Waters stood next to a black town car as their oversized Coach and Louis Vuitton suitcases were unloaded for them. Kiki had chopped her blond hair into a pixie cut and had dyed her bangs pink, but she still had an iPod permanently attached to her person. Diana had grown her hair out so that it tumbled over her shoulders, and she seemed taller—older. They looked up as my car passed by and waved. I waved back and smiled. Familiar faces. Last year on this day I had known no one. Last year I had felt like I might never belong. Now there were people to welcome me. Everything really was going to be different.

My dad pulled the Subaru up in front of a sleek white Mercedes and killed the engine. I climbed out and stretched, looking up at the gleaming windows of Bradwell. I could tell from the walkway that the rooms had already been decorated and personalized. Curtains hung in several of the windows, and someone up there was listening to Avril at top volume. There had been a few changes at Easton this year. According to the information packet I'd received over the summer, there was a new headmaster, and he was already making his presence known. One of his changes was the arrival schedule. Freshmen and sophomores had already been on campus for twenty-four hours,

giving them time to settle in before the upperclassmen arrived, and making the circle less packed and chaotic for unloading. My mother got out and tipped her head back, shielding her eyes with her hand as she looked up at the gray stone facade.

"This was my first dorm," I told her. "Billings House is behind it, on the quad."

Just saying the word *Billings* brought on a rush of anxiety. I had almost died there. Someone who I'd thought was my friend had actually attempted to murder me on the roof. The very person who had killed the guy I loved. Or thought I loved. I wasn't sure if I'd ever know how I'd really felt about Thomas Pearson, now that he was gone.

My fingernails dug into my palms again. Billings wasn't that place anymore. Not anymore. Ariana was gone. This year—just like spring semester last—the house would be full of friends. A light breeze tossed my hair back from my face. I looked up at the sun and smiled.

It was a new year. I took a deep breath, letting hope crowd out the fear.

"Well, that's everything," my father said, slapping his hands on his jeans. "These other girls sure have a lot of stuff."

I looked up and down the line of cars. There were mountains of luggage and electronics and plastic boxes and linens. My two bags, new leather backpack, and bed-in-a-bag did look sorry in comparison. I reached into the car and pulled out my laptop case. It and the computer inside it had been gifts from Natasha at the end of the summer.

A girl who wins First Honors for two straight quarters cannot be seen

writing all her papers at a library computer, she'd told me. You are not a caveperson.

Yes, after two unstellar quarters at the beginning of the year (blame all the drama), I had come back in the spring with academic vengeance and taken Firsts in both March and June. Natasha, overachiever that she was, had been so proud. I smiled now, thinking of her. Of how much I'd miss rooming with her. My nerves sizzled with anticipation, wondering who my new roommate would be. I hoped it was someone good. Someone normal. Someone I could be friends with.

"Everything okay, kiddo?" my father asked, laying his warm hand on my shoulder.

"Everything's fine. This is going to be a good year," I told him with a confident smile. "Definitely better than last."

"Well, that shouldn't be too hard to accomplish," he joked.

My mother and I both laughed. My heart was suddenly so full, it threatened to swallow me whole. Look at us. Standing there together. We could almost be a normal family. Normal. There was a word I didn't get to use very often.

"Thanks so much, you guys," I said, hugging my father first.

"Work hard, kiddo," my dad said, kissing the top of my head.

I turned to my mother. Her eyes shone with tears. Something caught in my throat as I leaned in to hug her.

"I'm so proud of you, Reed," she said haltingly.

"Thanks, Mom," I replied.

Then they were back in the car. Starting the engine. Driving away. My mother pressed her fingertips to the window in a wave. I lifted

my arm in return. Waited there until the dented Pennsylvania license plate had dipped behind the hill. At that second I realized with a start that I was going to miss my mother. Actually going to miss her.

I picked up my things and headed for Billings filled with a whole new confidence. Suddenly, anything felt possible.

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