

Inner Circle: A Private Novel

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Extract

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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 even to 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 ears. 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. Not anymore. Ariana was gone. This year—just like spring semester last year—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.

peace

"Against my better judgment, the dean of academics granted you both your electives. The Modern Novel on top of junior English shouldn't be too challenging. But taking Advanced Placement Chemistry as well as the required Advanced Placement Biology in one year is a bit ambitious, even for you."

Mrs. Naylor's jowls had grown. They hung so low over her collar, she could have easily tucked them in. Her eyes swam in their sockets as she looked across her desk at me with a disapproving expression I had long since grown accustomed to. Behind her the wooden bookcases were jammed with dusty tomes, overflowing into haphazard piles on the floor. The rancid onion smell that always permeated her office now had a more sour tinge to it. Like something had crawled in here, eaten the rancid onions, then died.

"Well, I'm sure the dean wouldn't have allowed me to take them

if he didn't think I was up to it," I replied sweetly, slipping my new schedule into my bag.

"On the contrary. Students who earn First Honors are always given their choice of courses, no matter what those of us who know better might think," she said, the jowls flapping around.

I had to press my lips together to keep from laughing. Last year she had intimidated me. This year she and her badly drawn eyeliner were just ridiculous.

"Is there anything else?" I asked.

She narrowed her eyes. Folded her craggy fingers on her desk. "No. You may go. But I trust I'll be seeing you and your drop slip very soon."

I stood up, sliding the wooden chair back with a loud scrape. "I wouldn't count on that."

I turned my back on her irritated face, feeling very Noelle Lange, and smiled to myself. Very rarely, I managed to say exactly what I wanted to say at the moment I wanted to say it, and at those moments I always thought of Noelle. As I stepped out into the sun, I wondered where she was right then. Whether she was thinking of Easton. Whether she was wishing she were here. Last year I had heard that her father's lawyers had exhibited their Olympic-level plea bargaining skills to get her kidnap charges reduced, then landed her the relatively cushy punishment of probation and community service. But I had no firsthand knowledge. I hadn't heard one word from Noelle since Christmas Day, when she'd called to convince me to come back to Easton. Not an e-mail, not a text, not a phone call. Sometimes my

world felt empty without her in it. Sometimes I felt beyond lucky to be free of her.

But I knew one thing for sure: Without Noelle, I wouldn't be here. I wouldn't be alive, for one. But I wouldn't be here at Easton if she hadn't made me promise to come back. I wouldn't have all those amazing memories from last spring. Wouldn't have this hope fluttering in my chest as I strolled away from Hull Hall. If not for her, I'd be back in Croton, watching Tommy Colón make obscene hand gestures every time Principal Weiss turned his bad eye on the auditorium. High comedy, that.

"Pass it! Pass it!"

About a dozen members of the boy's varsity soccer team were scrimmaging in the center of the quad, the sleeves of their dress shirts rolled up, their shoes discarded on the sidelines in favor of cleats and sneakers. I paused. Something about this felt familiar. A *déjà vu* moment. I heard my name on the breeze, and my heart all but stopped.

Thomas.

I looked at the ground. This was almost the exact spot where I'd nearly tripped over him last year. Where we'd first met. First flirted. First started whatever it was we had. My scalp tightened. My fingertips tingled. He'd been here. He'd been right here. . . .

"Reed!"

I turned around and barely had time to catch my breath before Josh Hollis barreled into me at full speed. He grabbed me up in his arms, lifting me right off my feet.

"Hi!" I breathed.

I clung to him. Buried my face in that warm spot between his neck and his shoulder. He smelled exactly the same. Like evergreens and fresh paint. God, this felt good. This relief. Like coming home. Josh was my home. Not Martha's Vineyard. Not Croton, Pennsylvania. Not Easton itself. But Josh. I hadn't seen him since the last day of school in June, and while the summer had seemed to drag and drag without him, suddenly it felt as if no time had passed at all.

"God, I missed you!" he said, pulling back to plant a firm kiss on my lips.

"Me, too!" I giggled. Giggled. Reed Brennan didn't giggle. Not often, anyway.

Josh tried to put me down again, but our feet tangled up and we went over. Laughing. His face hovered over mine. His green eyes danced with happiness. His dark blond curls had been cropped close to his head in a neat, preppy cut, but one stray curl still stuck out behind his right ear, unwilling to conform.

"Hmmm." Josh looked down at me, stretched out right there in the middle of the quad. "This could be something."

My heart skipped a beat. "Could be."

He glanced around quickly, checking for authority figures. Then, coast clear, he leaned in to kiss me, really kiss me, while his teammates hooted and hollered and shouted lewd things behind us. When Josh pulled back again, he ran the tip of his finger from my temple to my chin. He was breathless.

"Next summer," he said quietly, "let's not do this apart thing."

tradition, honour, intimidation

I smiled, utterly and completely at peace. "Yes, Let's not."

"Reed!"

Constance Talbot threw her arms around me before I could even stand up from my pew in the chapel. Our heads bonked together, and she winced as she dropped her butt down onto the hard seat.

"Ow. Sorry. Got a little overexcited there," she said, rubbing furiously at her forehead. She was sun-kissed pink under all those freckles, and somehow over the summer she had tamed her somewhat frizz-prone red hair into a sleek, straight picture of perfection. She wore a white T-shirt and a big gray cable-knit cardigan over a plaid mini. Shafts of colorful light from the stained glass windows danced across her face.

"It's okay. You look amazing," I told her.

"I know. I found this new hair straightener that is a gift from the gods," she told me, swinging her long mane over her shoulder. "But you are, like, a surf babe! I would kill to be able to tan like that!"

"It comes from my mom's side. She's half Native American," I said.

"How cool! I never knew that!" Constance blurted. Then her brow creased. "Actually, I know nothing about your family."

"I don't usually talk about them," I agreed. But that, like many other things, had changed. "So, how was your summer?"

We had e-mailed all summer long, so I knew exactly how her months off had been, but still felt the need to ask. Her family had vacationed with Walt Whittaker's family up at the Cape. She and Whit had spent most nights stealing away to the beach or making out on the widow's walk at his family's compound while the waves crashed into the shore. Constance could be very poetic via e-mail.

"It was good!" she said brightly. "Except . . . I guess I didn't get an invitation to Billings."

I blinked as the chatter in the chapel grew to an almost deafening level. The place was starting to fill up. "That's right. I forgot about that."

Every spring the girls in Billings selected new members to replace the outgoing seniors. Last year the Billings alumnae had sent a letter—a directive, really—informing us that it would be inappropriate to hold a vote and issue invitations that year, considering all that had happened. That meant there were still six empty spots in the house. And I had no idea how anyone intended to fill them.

"Yeah, well, I guess I'm not worthy," she said wryly. "So who got in? You can tell me. I can take it."

"Actually, as far as I know, no one has gotten in. We haven't had a

vote or anything. I guess I'll find out what's going on later. Maybe you still have a chance," I told her.

"You think?" Constance's eyes widened with hope, and I instantly regretted saying anything. Now she was going to be crushed all over again if she didn't get in.

"But don't freak out until I find out what's up," I warned her. "Honestly, after last year, I'm surprised anyone actually wants to get into Billings anymore," I added.

Not only was it partially true, but it would also give her something to rationalize on later if she didn't make the cut.

"Oh, please. That? Not even a murder could tarnish the mystique of Billings House," she blurted. Then slapped her hand over her mouth. "I'm sorry."

"No. It's okay," I said, forcing a smile. I wondered if she was right. If Thomas's death and Ariana's guilt—and my own near-death experience—had really left no lasting effect on anything. The idea made my insides squirm.

"No, really. I can't believe I said that," Constance continued. "You must think I'm totally—"

The sound of the heavy chapel doors closing cut her off, and the crowd fell silent. I was saved from having to comfort Constance any further for her verbal vomit. Diana reached over Constance's legs to nudge me and wave hello. As I leaned in, a tall, slim girl with light brown skin and long black hair slid into the last seat at the far end of the pew. She looked around uncertainly, then hugged her sheer turquoise wrap to her. With her gold braided thongs, skimpy dress, and

dewy skin, she looked as if she'd just stepped off a plane from some exotic Caribbean locale and walked right into the chapel. She had to be new. Anyone who'd ever been in the Easton chapel before knew that even on the hottest days it was frigid in here. We'd all come prepared with fall sweaters. This girl must have been covered in goose bumps.

"Check out Miss Island Nation," Missy Thurber sneered behind me. Missy, of course, was wearing the tightest T-shirt possible, all the better to show off her massive chest, and her blond hair was done in a perfect French braid. Not perfect enough to distract from her tunnel-like nostrils, of course.

"Is she wearing *shells* for earrings?" Lorna Gross—Missy's ever-present worshipper—whispered back. Lorna was not down with originality. Every day, she donned almost the exact same outfit Missy had worn the day before. Like, in case you ever missed one of Missy's "ripped from *Teen Vogue*" fashion choices, you had a second chance to check it out on Lorna the following morning. Apparently yesterday Missy had worn a black jersey dress and diamond earrings, because that was what Lorna had on today.

I rolled my eyes and shot the new girl what I hoped was a welcoming smile. Unfortunately, she didn't see me. Her eyes were transfixed on two freshman boys lighting the lanterns at the front of the chapel. The new-year ritual had begun.

There was a loud rap on the chapel doors. A tall man with white hair and a full square face stood up from behind the lectern, his chin raised imperiously. Everything about him was stiff and pressed, from

the collar of his white shirt to the perfectly straight cuffs on his gray suit pants. There was an American flag lapel pin tacked to his red power tie. He reminded me of some distinguished family patriarch from the low-rent soap opera Natasha's little sister had been addicted to all summer. The type of person who always knew what was going on around him, and approved of none of it. Whispers filled the room.

"Guess that's the new headmaster," I whispered to Constance.

"Headmaster Cromwell," she confirmed. "I heard he actually went here, like, a zillion years ago."

An Easton man. Interesting. My eyes were riveted on the headmaster as he strode down the aisle, his hands straight down at his sides like one of the Queen's guard. He didn't look left or right. Felt no need to check out his new charges. He stopped at the door and spoke.

"Who requests entrance to this sacred place?" he asked.

"Eager minds in search of knowledge," came the reply.

"Then you are welcome," he said.

The doors opened, and in walked Cheyenne Martin and Lance Reagan, the sunlight pouring in behind them. This was the first I had seen of my housemate Cheyenne, and I was stunned by how beautiful she looked. Her blond hair had been cut into a pin-straight chin-length bob, and her skin was pale, smooth, and flawless. She wore just a hint of makeup—pink cheeks, pink lips, curled lashes—and looked every bit the preppy trust fund princess in her full-skirted dress and cropped cardigan. She and Lance kept their eyes trained on the lecturer as they carried the traditional tomes up the aisle. As Cheyenne

walked by the senior boys, I noticed Trey Prescott, handsome as ever in a crisp white shirt that set off his dark skin, staring straight ahead. Not so much as a glance in Cheyenne's direction. I could practically feel the chill coming off him. Guess that relationship hadn't survived the summer.

Cheyenne and Lance placed their books down on the lectern.

"Tradition, honor, excellence," they said in unison.

"Tradition, honor, excellence," we intoned, our voices filling the chapel.

The doors were closed again, and Headmaster Cromwell walked down the aisle and took his place at the lectern. He took a long moment to survey the rows and rows of pews, the expectantly upturned faces. From the slight sneer on his lips, he didn't seem all that impressed.

"Welcome, students, to a new year at Easton Academy. I am Headmaster Cromwell," he said, his voice low and commanding. "I am honored to have been chosen by the Easton Academy board of directors to take the helm and help usher you all into a new era. As of today, we put the past behind us. As of today, we are no longer a community torn by scandal and tragedy. We have all had our time to heal, and it is now that we must look to the future. A future that is bright with hope, with integrity, with knowledge, and with respect."

Constance and I shared an impressed glance.

"With this in mind, you should know that I will not accept anything other than the absolute best from the students of this academy. I will not brook insolence from my students. I will not tolerate indiscretion

or immaturity. I will not allow any behavior whatsoever that could reflect negatively on this school. Hear me now, people, and hear me well. Things are going to change."

He said these last few words slowly, deliberately, as if hammering them into each and every adolescent brain one by one. So much for impressed. Now I was a tad freaked. From the looks on the faces around me, everyone felt the same.

"From this moment on, I expect each and every one of you to work toward a new Easton Academy," he said, his voice rising like a dictator's. "This school will hereafter be known as an institution that breeds character. That breeds decorum. And that turns out the very finest young men and women this country has to offer."

Suddenly, a loud, long farting noise filled the chapel. All the senior guys cracked up and shifted in their seats. I heard a cackle that could only belong to one person: Gage Coolidge.

The entire room tensed. My heart pounded as Headmaster Cromwell glowered toward the back of the chapel. He glanced right and nodded at a dark, shadowy figure in the corner behind him.

"Mr. White, if you please?" the headmaster asked.

A slim yet powerful-looking man with the sunken cheeks of a vampire and white-blond hair slipped down the side aisle and walked right over to Gage's pew. He leaned in and crooked a finger at Gage. It was all very grim reaper.

No one moved. Gage ducked his head and wagged it, like there was no way he was going anywhere. All the man did was lean even farther over the guy at the end of the pew and crook his finger again. Gage

was beet red by this point. He shoved himself up and followed the creature out.

"Who. The hell. Is that?" Missy hissed behind me.

"The new Easton Academy henchman?" I suggested under my breath.

The chapel door slammed. I wasn't the only one who jumped.

"Now. Where were we?" Headmaster Cromwell asked. He seemed more chipper now, somehow. "Ah. Yes. This year we will be instituting a mentoring program. Several returning Easton students have been selected to mentor transfer students and the members of the incoming freshman class. When you are excused from here, kindly check your mailboxes to see if you have been so honored."

Missy and Lorna grumbled as many of my fellow students exchanged overwhelmed looks. This new headmaster was not messing around. The welcoming program lasted another thirty minutes, and for those thirty minutes, not a soul had the courage to move.