

# The Tenth Circle

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Extract

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# PROLOGUE

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This is how it feels when you realize your child is missing: The pit of your stomach freezes fast, while your legs go to jelly. There's one single, blue-bass thud of your heart. The shape of her name, sharp as metal filings, gets caught between your teeth even as you try to force it out in a shout. Fear breathes like a monster into your ear: *Where did I see her last? Would she have wandered away? Who could have taken her?* And then, finally, your throat seals shut, as you swallow the fact that you've made a mistake you will never be able to fix.

The first time it happened to Daniel Stone, a decade ago, he had been visiting Boston. His wife was at a colloquium at Harvard; that was a good enough reason to take a family vacation. While Laura sat on her panel, Daniel pushed Trixie's stroller the cobbled length of the Freedom Trail. They fed the ducks in the Public Garden; they watched the sloe-eyed sea turtles doing water ballet at the aquarium. After that, when Trixie announced that she was hungry, Daniel headed toward Faneuil Hall and its endless food court.

That particular April day was the first one warm enough for New

Englishers to unzip their jackets, to remember that there was any season other than winter. In addition to the centipedes of school groups and the shutter-happy tourists, it seemed that the whole of the financial district had bled out, men Daniel's age in suits and ties, who smelled of aftershave and envy. They sat with their gyros and chowder and corned beef on rye on the benches near the statue of Red Auerbach. They sneaked sideways glances at Daniel.

He was used to this—it was unusual for a father to be the primary caretaker of his four-year-old daughter. Women who saw him with Trixie assumed that his wife had died, or that he was newly divorced. Men who saw him quickly looked the other way, embarrassed on his behalf. And yet Daniel would not have traded his setup for the world. He enjoyed molding his job around Trixie's schedule. He liked her questions: Did dogs *know* they were naked? Is *adult supervision* a power grown-ups use to fight bad guys? He loved the fact that when Trixie was spacing out in her car seat and wanted attention, she always started with "Dad . . . ?" even if Laura happened to be driving the car.

"What do you want for lunch?" Daniel asked Trixie that day in Boston. "Pizza? Soup? A burger?"

She stared up at him from her stroller, a miniature of her mother with the same blue eyes and strawberry hair, and nodded yes to all three. Daniel had hefted the stroller up the steps to the central food court, the scent of the salted ocean air giving way to grease and onions and stir-fry. He would get Trixie a burger and fries, he decided, and for himself, he'd buy a fisherman's platter at another kiosk. He stood in line at the grill, the stroller jutting out like a stone that altered the flow of human traffic. "A cheeseburger," Daniel yelled out to a cook he hoped was listening. When he was handed the paper plate he juggled his wallet free so that he could pay and then decided that it wasn't worth a second tour of duty just to get himself lunch, too. He and Trixie could share.

Daniel maneuvered the stroller into the stream of people again,

waiting to be spit out into the cupola. After a few minutes, an elderly man sitting at a long table shuffled his trash together and left. Daniel set down the burger and turned the stroller so that he could feed Trixie—but the child inside was a dark-haired, dark-skinned infant who burst into tears when he saw the stranger in front of him.

Daniel's first thought: Why was this baby in Trixie's stroller? His second: *Was* this Trixie's stroller? Yes, it was yellow and blue with a tiny repeating bear print. Yes, there was a carrying basket underneath. But Graco must have sold millions of these, thousands alone in the Northeast. Now, at closer inspection, Daniel realized that this particular stroller had a plastic activity bar attached on the front. Trixie's ratty security blanket was not folded up in the bottom, just in case of crisis.

Such as now.

Daniel looked down at the baby again, the baby that was not his, and immediately grabbed the stroller and starting running to the grill. Standing there, with a cabbage-cheeked Boston cop, was a hysterical mother whose sights homed in on the stroller Daniel was using to part the crowd like the Red Sea. She ran the last ten feet and yanked her baby out of the safety restraint and into her arms while Daniel tried to explain, but all that came out of his mouth was, "Where is she?" He thought, hysterical, of the fact that this was an open-air market, that there was no way to seal the entrance or even make a general public announcement, that by now five minutes had passed and his daughter could be with the psychopath who stole her on the T heading to the farthest outskirts of the Boston suburbs.

Then he noticed the stroller—*his* stroller—kicked over onto its side, the safety belt undone. Trixie had gotten proficient at this just last week. It had gotten comical—they would be out walking and suddenly she was standing up in the fabric hammock, facing Daniel, grinning at her own clever expertise. Had she freed herself to come looking for him? Or had someone, seeing a golden opportunity for abduction, done it for her?

In the moments afterward, there were tracts of time that Daniel couldn't remember even to this day. For example, how long it took the swarm of police that converged on Faneuil Hall to do a search. Or the way other mothers pulled their own children close to their side as he passed, certain bad luck was contagious. The detective's hammered questions, a quiz of good parenting: *How tall is Trixie? What does she weigh? What was she wearing? Have you ever talked to her about strangers?* This last one, Daniel couldn't answer. *Had* he, or had he just been *planning* to? Would Trixie know to scream, to run away? Would she be loud enough, fast enough?

The police wanted him to sit down, so that they'd know where to find him if necessary. Daniel nodded and promised, and then was on his feet the moment their backs were turned. He searched behind each of the food kiosks in the central court. He looked under the tables in the cupola. He burst into the women's bathroom, crying Trixie's name. He checked beneath the ruffled skirts of the pushcarts that sold rhinestone earrings, moose socks, your name written on a grain of rice. Then he ran outside.

The courtyard was full of people who didn't know that just twenty feet away from them the world had been overturned. Oblivious, they shopped and milled and laughed as Daniel stumbled past them. The corporate lunch hour had ended, and many of the businessmen were gone. Pigeons pecked at the crumbs they'd left behind, caught between the cobblestones. And huddled beside the seated bronze of Red Auerbach, sucking her thumb, was Trixie.

Until Daniel saw her, he didn't truly realize how much of himself had been carved away by her absence. He felt—ironically—the same symptoms that had come the moment he knew she was missing: the shaking legs, the loss of speech, the utter immobility. "Trixie," he said finally, then she was in his arms, thirty pounds of sweet relief.

Now—ten years later—Daniel had again mistaken his daughter for someone she wasn't. Except this time, she was no longer a four-year-old in a stroller. This time, she had been gone much longer than

twenty-four minutes. And *she* had left *him*, instead of the other way around.

Forcing his mind back to the present, Daniel cut the throttle of the snow machine as he came to a fork in the path. Immediately the storm whipped into a funnel—he couldn't see two feet in front of himself, and when he took the time to look behind, his tracks had already been filled, a seamless stretch. The Yup'ik Eskimos had a word for this kind of snow, the kind that bit at the back of your eyes and landed like a hail of arrows on your bare skin: *pirrelvag*. The term rose in Daniel's throat, as startling as a second moon, proof that he had been here before, no matter how good a job he'd done of convincing himself otherwise.

He squinted—it was nine o'clock in the morning, but in December in Alaska, there wasn't much sunlight. His breath hung before him like lace. For a moment, through the curtain of snow, he thought he could see the bright flash of her hair—a fox's tail peeking from a snug woolen cap—but as quickly as he saw it, it was gone.

The Yupiit also had a word for the moments when it was so cold that a mug of water thrown into the air would harden like glass before it ever hit the frozen ground: *cikuaq'erluni*. *One wrong move*, Daniel thought, *and everything will go to pieces around me*. So he closed his eyes, gunned the machine, and let instinct take over. Almost immediately, the voices of elders he used to know came back to him—*spruce needles stick out sharper on the north side of trees; shallow sandbars make the ice buckle*—hints about how to find yourself, when the world changed around you.

He suddenly thought back to the way, at Faneuil Hall, Trixie had melted against him when they were reunited. Her chin had notched just behind his shoulder, her body went boneless with faith. In spite of what he'd done, she'd still trusted him to keep her safe, to bring her home. In hindsight, Daniel could see that the real mistake he'd made that day hadn't been turning his back momentarily. It had been believing that you could lose someone you loved in

an instant, when in reality it was a process that took months, years, her lifetime.

It was the kind of cold that made your eyelashes freeze the minute you walked outside and the insides of your nostrils feel like shattered glass. It was the kind of cold that went through you as if you were no more than a mesh screen. Trixie Stone shivered on the frozen riverbank beneath the school building that was checkpoint headquarters in Tuluksak, sixty miles from the spot where her father's borrowed snow machine was carving a signature across the tundra, and tried to think up reasons to stay right where she was.

Unfortunately, there were more reasons—*better* reasons—to leave. First and foremost, it was a mistake to stay in one place too long. Second, sooner or later, people were going to figure out that she wasn't who they thought she was, especially if she kept screwing up every task they gave her. But then again, how was she supposed to know that all the mushers were entitled to complimentary straw for their sled dogs at several points during the K300 racecourse, including here in Tuluksak? Or that you could take a musher to the spot where food and water was stored . . . but you weren't allowed to help feed the dogs? After those two fiascos, Trixie was demoted to babysitting the dogs that were dropped from a team, until the bush pilots arrived to transport them back to Bethel.

So far the only dropped dog was a husky named Juno. Frostbite—that was the official reason given by the musher. The dog had one brown eye and one blue eye, and he stared at Trixie with an expression that spoke of being misunderstood.

In the past hour, Trixie had managed to sneak Juno an extra handful of kibble and a couple of biscuits, stolen from the vet's supply. She wondered if she could buy Juno from the musher with some of the money left over in the stolen wallet. She thought maybe it would be easier to keep running if she had someone else to confide in, someone who couldn't possibly tell on her.

She wondered what Zephyr and Moss and anyone else back home in the other Bethel—Bethel, Maine—would say if they saw her sitting in a snowbank and eating salmon jerky and listening for the crazy fugue of barking that preceded the arrival of a dog team. Probably, they would think she had lost her mind. They'd say, *Who are you, and what have you done with Trixie Stone?* The thing is, she wanted to ask the same question.

She wanted to crawl into her favorite flannel pajamas, the ones that had been washed so often they were as soft as the skin of a rose. She wanted to open up the refrigerator and not be able to find anything on its stocked shelves worth eating. She wanted to get sick of a song on the radio and smell her father's shampoo and trip over the curly edge of the rug in the hallway. She wanted to go back—not just to Maine, but to early September.

Trixie could feel tears rising in her throat like the watermarks on the Portland dock, and she was afraid someone would notice. So she lay down on the matted straw, her nose nearly touching Juno's. "You know," she whispered, "I got left behind once, too."

Her father didn't think she remembered what had happened that day in Faneuil Hall, but she did—bits and pieces cropped up at the strangest times. Like when they went to the beach in the summer and she smelled the ocean: It suddenly got harder to breathe. Or how at hockey games and movie theaters and other places where she got mixed up in a crowd, she sometimes felt sick to her stomach. Trixie remembered, too, that they had abandoned the stroller at Faneuil Hall—her father simply carried her back in his arms. Even after they returned from vacation and bought a new stroller, Trixie had refused to ride in it.

Here's what she *didn't* remember about that day: the getting-lost part. Trixie could not recall unbuckling the safety harness or pushing through the shifting sea of legs to the doors that led outside. Then, she saw the man who looked like he might be her father but who actually turned out to be a statue sitting down. Trixie had



walked to the bench and climbed up beside him only to realize that his metal skin was warm, because the sun had been beating down on it all day. She'd curled up against the statue, wishing with every shaky breath that she would be found.

This time around, that's what scared her most.

# 1

Laura Stone knew exactly how to go to hell.

She could map out its geography on napkins at departmental cocktail parties; she was able to recite all of the passageways and rivers and folds by heart; she was on a first-name basis with its sinners. As one of the top Dante scholars in the country, she taught a course in this very subject and had done so every year since being tenured at Monroe College. English 364 was also listed in the course handbook as *Burn Baby Burn* (or: *What the Devil is the Inferno?*), and it was one of the most popular courses on campus in the second trimester even though Dante's epic poem the *Divine Comedy* wasn't funny at all. Like her husband Daniel's artwork, which was neither *comic* nor a *book*, the *Inferno* covered every genre of pop culture: romance, horror, mystery, crime. And like all of the best stories, it had at its center an ordinary, everyday hero who simply didn't know how he'd ever become one.

She stared at the students packing the rows in the utterly silent lecture hall. "Don't move," she instructed. "Not even a twitch." Beside her, on the podium, an egg timer ticked away one full minute. She hid a smile as she watched the undergrads, all of whom suddenly had gotten the urge to sneeze or scratch their heads or wriggle.

Of the three parts of Dante's masterpiece, the *Inferno* was Laura's favorite to teach—who better to think about the nature of actions and their consequences than teenagers? The story was simple: Over the course of three days—Good Friday to Easter Sunday—Dante trekked through the nine levels of hell, each filled with sinners worse than the next, until finally he came through the other side. The poem was full of ranting and weeping and demons, of fighting lovers and traitors eating the brains of their victims—in other words, graphic enough to hold the interest of today's college students . . . and to provide a distraction from her real life.

The egg timer buzzed, and the entire class exhaled in unison. “Well?” Laura asked. “How did that feel?”

“Endless,” a student called out.

“Anyone want to guess how long I timed you for?”

There was speculation: Two minutes. Five.

“Try sixty seconds,” Laura said. “Now imagine being frozen from the waist down in a lake of ice for eternity. Imagine that the slightest movement would freeze the tears on your face and the water surrounding you. God, according to Dante, was all about motion and energy, so the ultimate punishment for Lucifer is to not be able to move at all. At the very bottom of hell, there's no fire, no brimstone, just the utter inability to take action.” She cast her gaze across the sea of faces. “Is Dante right? After all, this is the very bottom of the barrel of hell, and the devil's the worst of the lot. Is taking away your ability to do whatever you want, *whenever* you want, the very worst punishment you can imagine?”

And that, in a nutshell, was why Laura loved Dante's *Inferno*. Sure, it could be seen as a study of religion or politics. Certainly it was a narrative of redemption. But when you stripped it down, it was also the story of a guy in the throes of a midlife crisis, a guy who was reevaluating the choices he'd made along the way.

Not unlike Laura herself.

. . .

As Daniel Stone waited in the long queue of cars pulling up to the high school, he glanced at the stranger in the seat beside him and tried to remember when she used to be his daughter.

“Traffic’s bad today,” he said to Trixie, just to fill up the space between them.

Trixie didn’t respond. She fiddled with the radio, running through a symphony of static and song bites before punching it off entirely. Her red hair fell like a gash over her shoulder; her hands were burrowed in the sleeves of her North Face jacket. She turned to stare out the window, lost in a thousand thoughts, not a single one of which Daniel could guess.

These days it seemed like the words between them were there only to outline the silences. Daniel understood better than anyone else that, in the blink of an eye, you might reinvent yourself. He understood that the person you were yesterday might not be the person you are tomorrow. But this time, he was the one who wanted to hold on to what he had, instead of letting go.

“Dad,” she said, and she flicked her eyes ahead, where the car in front of them was moving forward.

It was a complete cliché, but Daniel had assumed that the traditional distance that came between teenagers and their parents would pass by him and Trixie. They had a different relationship, after all, closer than most daughters and their fathers, simply because he was the one she came home to every day. He had done his due diligence in her bathroom medicine cabinet and her desk drawers and underneath her mattress—there were no drugs, no accordion-pleated condoms. Trixie was just growing away from him, and somehow that was even worse.

For years she had floated into the house on the wings of her own stories: how the butterfly they were hatching in class had one of its antennae torn off by a boy who wasn’t gentle; how the school lunch that day had been pizza when the notice *said* it was going to be chicken chow mein and how if she’d *known* that, she would have

bought instead of bringing her own; how the letter *I* in cursive is nothing like you'd think. There had been so many easy words between them that Daniel was guilty of nodding every now and then and tuning out the excess. He hadn't known, at the time, that he should have been hoarding these, like bits of sea glass hidden in the pocket of his winter coat to remind him that once it had been summer.

This September—and here was another cliché—Trixie had gotten a boyfriend. Daniel had had his share of fantasies: how he'd be casually cleaning a pistol when she was picked up for her first date; how he'd buy a chastity belt on the Internet. In none of those scenarios, though, had he ever really considered how the sight of a boy with his proprietary hand around his daughter's waist might make him want to run until his lungs burst. And in none of these scenarios had he seen Trixie's face fill with light when the boy came to the door, the same way she'd once looked at Daniel. Overnight, the little girl who vamped for his home videos now moved like a vixen when she wasn't even trying. Overnight, his daughter's actions and habits stopped being cute and started being something terrifying.

His wife reminded him that the tighter he kept Trixie on a leash, the more she'd fight the choke hold. After all, Laura pointed out, rebelling against the system was what made her start dating Daniel. So when Trixie and Jason went out to a movie, Daniel forced himself to wish her a good time. When she escaped to her room to talk to her boyfriend privately on the phone, he did not hover at the door. He gave her breathing space, and somehow, that had become an immeasurable distance.

"*Hello?!*" Trixie said, snapping Daniel out of his reverie. The cars in front of them had pulled away, and the crossing guard was furiously miming to get Daniel to drive up.

"Well," he said. "Finally."

Trixie pulled at the door handle. "Can you let me out?"

Daniel fumbled with the power locks. "I'll see you at three."

"I don't need to be picked up."

Daniel tried to paste a wide smile on his face. "Jason driving you home?"

Trixie gathered together her backpack and jacket. "Yeah," she said. "Jason." She slammed the truck door and blended into the mass of teenagers funneling toward the front door of the high school.

"Trixie!" Daniel called out the window, so loud that several other kids turned around with her. Trixie's hand was clenched into a fist against her chest, as if she were holding tight to a secret. She looked at him, waiting.

There was a game they had played when Trixie was little, and would pore over the comic book collections he kept in his studio for research when he was drawing. *Best transportation?* she'd challenge, and Daniel would say the Batmobile. *No way*, Trixie had said. *Wonder Woman's invisible plane.*

*Best costume?*

*Wolverine*, Daniel said, but Trixie voted for the Dark Phoenix.

Now he leaned toward her. "Best superpower?" he asked.

It had been the only answer they agreed upon: *flight*. But this time, Trixie looked at him as if he were crazy to be bringing up a stupid game from a thousand years ago. "I'm going to be late," she said and started to walk away.

Cars honked, but Daniel didn't put the truck into gear. He closed his eyes, trying to remember what he had been like at her age. At fourteen, Daniel had been living in a different world and doing everything he could to fight, lie, cheat, steal, and brawl his way out of it. At fourteen, he had been someone Trixie had never seen her father be. Daniel had made sure of it.

"Daddy."

Daniel turned to find Trixie standing beside his truck. She curled her hands around the lip of the open window, the glitter in her pink nail polish catching the sun. "Invisibility," she said, and then she melted into the crowd behind her.

• • •

Trixie Stone had been a ghost for fourteen days, seven hours, and thirty-six minutes now, not that she was officially counting. This meant that she walked around school and smiled when she was supposed to; she pretended to listen when the algebra teacher talked about commutative properties; she even sat in the cafeteria with the other ninth-graders. But while they laughed at the lunch ladies' hairstyles (or lack thereof), Trixie studied her hands and wondered whether anyone else noticed that if the sun hit your palm a certain way, you could see right through the skin, to the busy tunnels with blood moving around inside. Corpuscles. She slipped the word into her mouth and tucked it high against her cheek like a sucking candy, so that if anyone happened to ask her a question she could just shake her head, unable to speak.

Kids who knew (and who didn't? the news had traveled like a forest fire) were waiting to see her lose her careful balance. Trixie had even overheard one girl making a *bet* about when she might fall apart in a public situation. High school students were cannibals; they fed off your broken heart while you watched and then shrugged and offered you a bloody, apologetic smile.

Visine helped. So did Preparation H under the eyes, as disgusting as it was to imagine. Trixie would get up at five-thirty in the morning, carefully select a double layer of long-sleeved T-shirts and a pair of flannel pants, and gather her hair into a messy ponytail. It took an hour to make herself look like she'd just rolled out of bed, like she'd been losing no sleep at all over what had happened. These days, her entire life was about making people believe she was someone she wasn't anymore.

Trixie crested the hallway on a sea of noise—lockers gnashing like teeth, guys yelling out afternoon plans over the heads of underclassmen, change being dug out of pockets for vending machines. She turned into a doorway and steeled herself to endure the next forty-eight minutes. Psychology was the only class she had with

Jason, who was a junior. It was an elective. Which was a fancy way of saying: *You asked for this.*

He was already there; she knew by the way the air had taken a charge around her body, an electric field. He was wearing the faded denim shirt she'd borrowed once when he spilled Coke on her while they were studying, and his black hair was a mess. *You need a part,* she used to tell him, and he'd laugh. *I've got better ones,* he'd say.

She could smell him—shampoo and peppermint gum and, believe it or not, the cool white mist of utter ice. It was the same smell on the T-shirt she'd hidden in the bottom of her pajama drawer, the one he didn't know she had, the one she wrapped around her pillow each night before she went to sleep. It kept the details in her dreams: a callus on the edge of Jason's wrist, rubbed raw by his hockey glove. The flannel-covered sound of his voice when she called him on the phone and woke him. The way he twirled a pencil around the fingers of one hand when he was nervous or thinking too hard.

He'd been doing that when he broke up with her.

She took a deep breath and headed past the seat where Jason slouched, his eyes focused on the four-letter words students had worn into the desktop through years of boredom. She could feel his face heat up with the effort he was making to avoid looking at her. It felt unnatural to walk past, to not have him tug on the straps of her backpack until she gave him her full attention. "You're coming to practice," he'd say, "right?" As if there had ever been any question.

Mr. Torkelson had assigned seating, and Trixie had been placed in the first row—something she had hated for the first three months of the school year and now was supremely grateful for, because it meant she could stare at the board and not have to see Jason or anyone else out of the corner of her eye. She slipped into the chair and opened her binder, her eyes avoiding the big Wite-Out centipede that used to be Jason's name.

When she felt a hand on her shoulder—a warm, broad, guy's hand—all the breath left her body. Jason was going to apologize;



he'd realized that he'd made a mistake; he wanted to ask her if she'd ever forgive him. She turned around, the word *yes* playing over her lips like the call of a flute, but instead found herself staring at Moss Minton, Jason's best friend.

"Hey." He glanced back over his shoulder to where Jason was still hunched over his own desk. "You okay?"

Trixie smoothed the edges of her homework. "Why wouldn't I be?"

"I just want you to know we all think he's an idiot."

*We.* We could be the state champion hockey team, of which Moss and Jason were cocaptains. It could be the whole of the junior class. It could be anyone who wasn't her. That part of it was almost as hard as the not having Jason: trying to negotiate through the minefield of the friends they'd shared, to learn who still belonged to her.

"I think she's just something he needs to get out of his system," Moss said, his words a handful of stones dropped from a cliff.

Trixie's handwriting started to swim on the page before her. *Please leave*, she thought, praying fiercely for the telekinetic power to cause a distraction, and for once in her life something went right. Mr. Torkelson walked in, slammed the door, and came to the front of the classroom. "Ladies and gentlemen," he announced, "why do we dream?"

A stoner in the back row answered. "Because Angelina Jolie doesn't go to Bethel High."

The teacher laughed. "Well, that's one reason. Sigmund Freud might even agree with you. He called dreams a 'royal road' into the unconscious, made up of all the forbidden wishes you had and wished you didn't."

Dreams, Trixie thought, were like soap bubbles. You could look at them from a distance, and they were lovely. It's when you stuck your face too close that your eyes wound up stinging. She wondered if Jason had the same dreams she did, the kind where you wake up with all your breath gone and your heart as flat as a dime.

“Ms. Stone?” the teacher repeated.

Trixie blushed. She had no idea what Torkelson had asked. She could feel Jason’s gaze rising like a welt on the back of her neck.

“I’ve got one, Mr. T,” Moss called out from somewhere behind her. “I’m skating out at the regionals, and a pass comes my way, but all of a sudden my stick is like a piece of spaghetti—”

“As blatantly Freudian as that is, Moss, I’d really like to hear from Trixie.”

Like one of her father’s superheroes, Trixie’s senses narrowed. She could hear the girl in the back of the class scratching out a secret note to her friend across the aisle, Torkelson clasping his hands together, and worst of all, that broken connection as Jason closed his eyes. She scribbled on her thumbnail with her pen. “I don’t remember any dreams.”

“You spend a sixth of your life dreaming, Ms. Stone. Which in your case amounts to about two and a half years. Certainly you haven’t blocked out two and a half years of your life?”

She shook her head, looked up at the teacher, and opened her mouth. “I . . . I’m going to be sick,” Trixie managed, and with the classroom wheeling around her, she grabbed her books and fled.

In the bathroom, she flung her backpack under the row of square white sinks that looked like a giant’s dentures and crouched in front of one of the toilets. She vomited, although she would have wagered that there was nothing inside of her. Then she sat on the floor and pressed her hot cheek against the metal wall of the stall.

It was not that Jason had broken up with her on their three-month anniversary. It was not that Trixie—a freshman who’d seemed to have hit the jackpot, a nobody elevated to the level of queen by association—had lost her Cinderella status. It was that she truly believed you could be fourteen when you learned how love could change the speed your blood ran through you, how it made you dream in kaleidoscope color. It was that Trixie knew she couldn’t have loved Jason this hard if he hadn’t loved her that way too.

Trixie came out of the stall and turned the water on in the sink. She splashed her face, wiped it with a brown paper towel. She didn't want to go back to class, not ever, so she took out her eyeliner and mascara, her lip gloss and her compact mirror. She had her mother's rich copper hair, her father's dark complexion. Her ears were too pointed and her chin was too round. Her lips were okay, she guessed. Once, in art class, a teacher had said they were classic and made the rest of the students draw them. It was her eyes, though, that scared her. Although they used to be a dark mossy color, nowadays they were a frosted green so pale it was barely a color at all. Trixie wondered if you could cry away the pigment.

She snapped shut her compact and then, on second thought, opened it and set it on the floor. It took three stomps before the mirror inside shattered. Trixie threw out the plastic disc and all but one shard of glass. It was shaped like a tear, rounded on one end and sharp as a dagger on the other.

She slid down along the tiled wall of the bathroom until she was sitting underneath the sink. Then she dragged the makeshift knife over the white canvas of her inner arm. As soon as she did it, she wished she could take it back. Crazy girls did this, girls who walked like zombies through YA novels.

But.

Trixie felt the sting of the skin as it split, the sweet welling rise of blood.

It hurt, though not as much as everything else.

"You have to do something pretty awful to wind up in the bottom level of hell," Laura said rhetorically, surveying her class. "And Lucifer used to be God's right-hand man. So what went wrong?"

It had been a simple disagreement, Laura thought. Like almost every other rift between people, that's how it started. "One day God turned to his buddy Lucifer and said that he was thinking of giving those cool little toys he created—namely, people—the right to

choose how they acted. Free will. Lucifer thought that power should belong only to angels. He staged a coup, and he lost big-time.”

Laura started walking through the aisles—one downside of free Internet access at the college was that kids used lecture hours to shop online and download porn, if the professor wasn't vigilant. “What makes the *Inferno* so brilliant are the *contrapassi*—the punishments that fit the crime. In Dante's mind, sinners pay in a way that reflects what they did wrong on earth. Lucifer didn't want man to have choices, so he winds up literally paralyzed in ice. Fortune-tellers walk around with their heads on backward. Adulterers end up joined together for eternity, without getting any satisfaction from it.” Laura shook off the image that rose in her mind. “Apparently,” she joked, “the clinical trials for Viagra were done in hell.”

Her class laughed as she headed toward her podium. “In the 1300s—before Italians could tune in to *The Revenge of the Sith* or *Lord of the Rings*—this poem was the ultimate battle of good versus evil,” she said. “I like the word *evil*. Scramble it a little, and you get *vile* and *live*. *Good*, on the other hand, is just a command to *go do*.”

The four graduate students who led the class sections for this course were all sitting in the front row with their computers balanced on their knees. Well, three of them were. There was Alpha, the self-christened retrofeminist, which as far as Laura could tell meant that she gave a lot of speeches about how modern women had been driven so far from the home they no longer felt comfortable inside it. Beside her, Aine scrawled on the inside of one alabaster arm—most likely her own poetry. Naryan, who could type faster than Laura could breathe, looked up over his laptop at her, a crow poised for a crumb. Only Seth sprawled in his chair, his eyes closed, his long hair spilling over his face. Was he *snoring*?

She felt a flush rise up the back of her neck. Turning her back on Seth Dummerston, she glanced up at the clock in the back of the lecture hall. “That's it for today. Read through the fifth canto,” Laura in-

structed. "Next Wednesday, we'll be talking about poetic justice versus divine retribution. And have a nice weekend, folks."

The students gathered their backpacks and laptops, chattering about the bands that were playing later on, and the BØII party that had brought in a truckload of real sand for Caribbean Night. They wound scarves around their necks like bright bandages and filed out of the lecture hall, already dismissing Laura's class from their minds.

Laura didn't need to prepare for her next lecture; she was living it. *Be careful what you wish for*, she thought. *You just might get it.*

Six months ago, she had been so sure that what she was doing was right, a liaison so natural that stopping it was more criminal than letting it flourish. When his hands roamed over her, she transformed: no longer the cerebral Professor Stone but a woman for whom feeling came before thought. Now, though, when Laura realized what she had done, she wanted to blame a tumor, temporary insanity, anything but her own selfishness. Now all she wanted was damage control: to break it off, to slip back into the seam of her family before they had a chance to realize how long she'd been missing.

When the lecture hall was empty, Laura turned off the overhead lights. She dug in her pocket for her office keys. Damn, had she left them in her computer bag?

*"Veil."*

Laura turned around, already recognizing the soft Southern curves of Seth Dummerston's voice. He stood up and stretched, unfolding his long body after that nap. "It's another anagram for *evil*," he said. "The things we hide."

She stared at him coolly. "You fell asleep during my lecture."

"I had a late night."

"Whose fault is that?" Laura asked.

Seth stared at her the way she used to stare at him, then bent forward until his mouth brushed over hers. "You tell me," he whispered.

• • •

Trixie turned the corner and saw them: Jessica Ridgeley, with her long sweep of blond hair and her dermatologist's-daughter skin, was leaning against the door of the AV room kissing Jason.

Trixie became a rock, the sea of students parting around her. She watched Jason's hands slip into the back pockets of Jessica's jeans. She could see the dimple on the left side of his mouth, the one that appeared only when he was speaking from the heart.

Was he telling Jessica that his favorite sound was the thump that laundry made when it was turning around in a dryer? That sometimes he could walk by the telephone and think she was going to call, and sure enough she did? That once, when he was ten, he broke into a candy machine because he wanted to know what happened to the quarters once they went inside?

Was she even *listening*?

Suddenly, Trixie felt someone grab her arm and start dragging her down the hall, out the door, and into the courtyard. She smelled the acrid twitch of a match, and a minute later, a cigarette had been stuck between her lips. "Inhale," Zephyr commanded.

Zephyr Santorelli-Weinstein was Trixie's oldest friend. She had enormous doe eyes and olive skin and the coolest mother on the planet, one who bought her incense for her room and took her to get her navel pierced like it was an adolescent rite. She had a father, too, but he lived in California with his new family, and Trixie knew better than to bring up the subject. "What class have you got next?"

"French."

"Madame Wright is senile. Let's ditch."

Bethel High had an open campus, not because the administration was such a fervent promoter of teen freedom but because there was simply nowhere to go. Trixie walked beside Zephyr along the access road to the school, their faces ducked against the wind, their hands stuffed into the pockets of their North Face jackets. The criss-cross pattern where she'd cut herself an hour earlier on her arm

wasn't bleeding anymore, but the cold made it sting. Trixie automatically started breathing through her mouth, because even from a distance, she could smell the gassy, rotten-egg odor from the paper mill to the north that employed most of the adults in Bethel. "I heard what happened in psych," Zephyr said.

"Great," Trixie muttered. "Now the whole world thinks I'm a loser *and* a freak."

Zephyr took the cigarette from Trixie's hand and smoked the last of it. "What do you care what the whole world thinks?"

"Not the whole world," Trixie admitted. She felt her eyes prickle with tears again, and she wiped her mitten across them. "I want to kill Jessica Ridgeley."

"If I were you, I'd want to kill Jason," Zephyr said. "Why do you let it get to you?"

Trixie shook her head. "I'm the one who's supposed to be with him, Zephyr. I just *know* it."

They had reached the turn of the river past the park-and-ride, where the bridge stretched over the Androscoggin River. This time of year, it was nearly frozen over, with great swirling art sculptures that formed as ice built up around the rocks that crouched in the riverbed. If they kept walking another quarter mile, they'd reach the town, which basically consisted of a Chinese restaurant, a minimart, a bank, a toy store, and a whole lot of nothing else.

Zephyr watched Trixie cry for a few minutes, then leaned against the railing of the bridge. "You want the good news or the bad news?"

Trixie blew her nose in an old tissue she'd found in her pocket. "Bad news."

"Martyr," Zephyr said, grinning. "The bad news is that my best friend has officially exceeded her two-week grace period for mourning over a relationship, and she will be penalized from here on in."

At that, Trixie smiled a little. "What's the good news?"

"Moss Minton and I have sort of been hanging out."

Trixie felt another stab in her chest. Her best friend, and Jason's? "Really?"

"Well, maybe we weren't actually *hanging out*. He waited for me after English class today to ask me if you were okay . . . but still, the way I figure it, he could have asked *anyone*, right?"

Trixie wiped her nose. "Great. I'm glad my misery is doing wonders for your love life."

"Well, it's sure as hell not doing anything for *yours*. You can't keep crying over Jason. He knows you're obsessed." Zephyr shook her head. "Guys don't want high maintenance, Trix. They want . . . Jessica Ridgeley."

"What the fuck does he see in her?"

Zephyr shrugged. "Who knows. Bra size? Neanderthal IQ?" She pulled her messenger bag forward, so that she could dig inside for a pack of M&M's. Hanging from the edge of the bag were twenty linked pink paper clips.

Trixie knew girls who kept a record of sexual encounters in a journal, or by fastening safety pins to the tongue of a sneaker. For Zephyr, it was paper clips. "A guy can't hurt you if you don't let him," Zephyr said, running her finger across the paper clips so that they danced.

These days, having a boyfriend or a girlfriend was not in vogue; most kids trolled for random hookups. The sudden thought that Trixie might have been that to Jason made her feel sick to her stomach. "I can't be like that."

Zephyr ripped open the bag of candy and passed it to Trixie. "Friends with benefits. It's what the guys want, Trix."

"How about what the girls want?"

Zephyr shrugged. "Hey, I suck at algebra, I can't sing on key, and I'm always the last one picked for a team in gym . . . but apparently I'm quite gifted when it comes to hooking up."

Trixie turned, laughing. "They *tell* you that?"

"Don't knock it until you've tried it. You get all the fun without



any of the baggage. And the next day you just act like it never happened.”

Trixie tugged on the paper clip chain. “If you’re acting like it never happened, then why are you keeping track?”

“Once I hit a hundred, I can send away for the free decoder ring.” Zephyr shrugged. “I don’t know. I guess it’s just so I remember where I started.”

Trixie opened her palm and surveyed the M&M’s. The food coloring dye was already starting to bleed against her skin. “Why do you think the commercials say they won’t melt in your hands, when they always do?”

“Because everyone lies,” Zephyr replied.

All teenagers knew this was true. The process of growing up was nothing more than figuring out what doors hadn’t yet been slammed in your face. For years, Trixie’s own parents had told her that she could be anything, have anything, do anything. That was why she’d been so eager to grow up—until she got to adolescence and hit a big, fat wall of reality. As it turned out, she *couldn’t* have anything she wanted. You didn’t get to be pretty or smart or popular just because you wanted it. You didn’t control your own destiny; you were too busy trying to fit in. Even now, as she stood here, there were a million parents setting their kids up for heartbreak.

Zephyr stared out over the railing. “This is the third time I’ve cut English this week.”

In French class, Trixie was missing a quiz on *le subjonctif*. Verbs, apparently, had moods too: They had to be conjugated a whole different way if they were used in clauses to express want, doubt, wishes, judgment. She had memorized the red-flag phrases last night: *It is doubtful that. It’s not clear that. It seems that. It may be that. Even though. No matter what. Without.*

She didn’t need a stupid *leçon* to teach her something she’d known for years: Given anything negative or uncertain, there were rules that had to be followed.