

CIRCLE OF THREE

A Novel
by
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PART ONE

PAUL

If a square is made up of four points connected by straight lines and a triangle of three, how many points are necessary to form a circle? The Tomlinsons were four once, but they were never a square. Meredith Tomlinson was a force without an equation, shaping her family into a circle, backs to the outside world, love and a sometimes frantic sense of joy held securely within. And then she was gone. Did she believe the three left behind, a loving father and twin daughters, would quickly adapt, learning to weave themselves together in a real and permanent fashion?

An instruction book would have been nice. A chapter or two on what happens when children leave home. How often to call? Which gestures of affection work over take-out dinner, and which over the telephone? How to evaluate the quality of love and how to spot the dangers ahead?

Ten years and one week after his wife's death, on a bitterly cold day in central New Jersey, Paul Tomlinson sat at his pale green monster of a desk and read through his notes from the morning. Thanksgiving was closing fast and he added potatoes to a list he'd started in a separate notebook. He wanted Thanksgiving to be perfect, to try and pull his daughters closer via mashed potatoes and apple pie, because he wasn't sure how else to go about it. He touched each of their photos with his fingertip, but felt only the slick barrier of glass. Fraternal twins, one light, one dark, one easy, one hard; Ellie at Princeton so earnest and independent, and Helen in Brooklyn, a painter and traveler, equally charming and exhausting. Had he done his best since their mother drove into a freeway underpass ten years before? He didn't dare ask. Not himself, and certainly not his daughters. He simply hoped he'd been enough for them, changing the channel of his thoughts with the speed and acuity of a teenage videogame wizard.

Work was a good thing, his precinct a second home. He soaked up the sound of phones ringing, doors slamming, somebody burping and earning applause. Here, Paul was smart, intuitive, second in command now of Missing Persons. Guys would say Paul had a magnet in his gut for the missing, pulling them in: sons, mothers, uncles lying in dumpsters, daughters running from demons. But none of that buoyed him today.

He took a deep breath and pulled out the Cohen file, willing his hand not to shake. Inside the front cover was a 5x7 photo of a 5-year-old boy named Avi, short for Aviram. Dark eyes, dark hair, and an unsettling serenity about him. Paul let the full weight of failure settle on him and felt his stomach roll. He hadn't lost a kid since before Meredith died.

He laid out everything he had on the disappearance of Aviram Cohen: The half-sister who probably took him, but had no motive that he could find. If he'd been able to talk to her, things would be different.

But he sent one of his new guys, Tony Marcello, to pick her up and he came back with nothing. Where did he look? Last known address, he'd said, but there was something wrong, something shifty about him. The next day, he turned in his badge. He'd fucked up, he said. Ran into a girl he used to see and showed up at the last known address too late. Paul shook his head. He'd hand-picked Tony. Now he was working against time, the boy's face too real. He wished for the old photos, grainy and approximate. Not like this. This boy was perfect.

Paul dug in his pocket for a Tums just as his partner Randall walked by.

"Want a soda, T?" Randall asked, his hand on his round belly, as always.

"No. I'm fine."

Randall looked down at the Thanksgiving list. "You cooking this year, Paul?"

"Looks that way."

"You need a woman. All of you do. You can't cook for shit."

Paul laughed. "Yeah, I know. Haven't poisoned anybody yet, though."

Did he really need a woman? A new wife? He simply couldn't imagine it. Meredith was no ordinary wife. Her beauty was bright like broken glass in the sun, imperfect, mesmerizing, haunting.

"Both girls coming home?"

Paul nodded. "My allotted time. Have to use it wisely. Pie seems like it might help."

"Help what?"

"Just help. If we can't figure out what to talk about, we'll eat pie."

Randall studied Paul. Randall didn't go in for a lot of thought about relationships, more a turn-on-some-football-to-ease-your-pain kind of guy. "You look tired. Why don't you call it quits for today? Come to our place. Have some dinner. Shit, you closed three files last week. Nothing new you're gonna find in the same chicken scratch you been staring at for hours." He was funny, a regular guy's guy, unlike Paul who was known to listen to jazz on an ancient pair of headphones. Still, Randall was a loyal friend. They'd watched each other's backs for a long time.

Paul shook his head. "Not yet. I want to make a couple more calls."

"All right, buddy. I'm outta here. See you tomorrow." Randall ambled down the narrow corridor to the bank of lockers where they kept their coats.

Randall was probably right - there was nothing new to be learned from the papers on his desk, but Paul followed a system he'd developed early in his career: Look, look again, turn the page sideways, look, look, look. Anything less would be wrong, both lazy and dishonorable and above all things, Paul was an honorable detective.

A phone call offered a brief reprieve: Helen, calling from Brooklyn, her voice warm and smooth. "Hey Daddy."

"You okay?"

"Yes. Chill. Everything's fine."

"Okay. Good."

"How's your day?"

Paul rolled a pencil under his palm. "Just another day. Couple good leads."

"Good."

He heard it in her voice, in just one word. As usual, he'd missed it at first. "So what's up, H?"

"Nothing really. I just wondered, and you can totally say no, obviously, I don't want to be an asshole, but you always say to tell you when I need something."

"And you need something."

"Yeah. I need some money, Daddy. Just a couple hundred. A loan. I'm getting a raise soon, but it's a little tight since the Rathsmans screwed me."

Paul sighed. It would be better not to know, but he was a detective from belly to fingertips. "Why the

hell don't we go after them, Helen? I can take care of this, if you'll just let me."

"No."

Helen had an unsettling ability to shut down a conversation. Paul thought, falsely, that if he had her at the precinct, across from him at his desk, it would be different.

"No why? Come on, Helen. What aren't you telling me?"

"I just want to leave that alone, Daddy. It's the best thing. No need to burn bridges, right? Look, I'm trying to be gracious and move on."

"Okay, okay. Gracious is good, God knows. Come for dinner next week and I'll give you the money."

"No meat. I'm cleansing."

"No problem. Sounds great." Paul paced nervously, as if he were contemplating a date. "I'll make something good, I promise. We'll hang out. It'll be fun."

"Of course it will, Daddy. I have to go."

"Wait. Have you talked to Ellie?"

"Not much. She's too busy for little old me, apparently." Helen sounded genuinely hurt.

"Ah. I'm sorry, honey. She's under a lot of pressure there."

"Yeah, I know. Heard it all before. But seriously, how supportive are we supposed to be? Is it really okay for her to study til her eyes fall out? She thinks I'm the basket case, but she's bitten off all her fingernails. I think she needs me. Maybe I'll take the train out this weekend."

Paul laughed. "Just take it easy on her. She's not used to moving at warp speed like you."

"I'm not gonna break her. I'll be extra careful."

"No, I didn't mean it like that."

"Sure. I should go sharpen my fangs. Get my smack spoon ready. You know."

"I don't want to know. Better that way."

Helen sighed. "Oh Daddy. I do love you. I hope you save somebody this week. It always cheers you up. I'll call about dinner. Go have some fun, old man. No PBS."

And she was gone. Poof. There was a tinge of illusion to all of Helen's comings and goings, or was that too harsh? He'd just been suckered out of two hundred dollars, minimum, on the promise of dinner at home. Neither of them could cook. He'd been suckered for *takeout*. Paul leaned back in his chair and stretched his arms overhead. He was tired. Lights were out in the records room and the small kitchen with its scorched coffee pot and endless packets of sugar.

Time to go? He sorted and piled his paperwork, rinsed out his coffee mug in the dark kitchen, and tucked his Thanksgiving list into his pocket. His in-house line lit up, a page from downstairs, a visitor without an appointment. Did he want to see her? Sure he did. Paul didn't think much of appointments. The best leads wandered in, immune to time.

One of the young guys, watching the girl's ass all the way, showed her to Paul's desk. He recognized her right away, adrenaline surging. Rina Cohen, the key suspect in the disappearance of her half-brother, the child haunting Paul. Nine days was a long, long time for a five-year-old boy to be gone. Nine days usually meant the worst.

Rina at first glance looked fragile - thin and dark and haunting. Even attractive, he thought, sweeping aside the sentiment as a mere observation. But the big question was: Why had she come in? He had a photo of her wearing a ripped tee shirt and too much black eyeliner, but she looked like a nice young woman today, not like the others who lived in the musty converted warehouse she'd last frequented - a different world from the Orthodox Jewish community on the fringe of East Orange where she'd grown up. Based on her stoned friends and the icy accusations of her father, Paul had her up high on his meager list of suspects. And now, like a gift, here she was.

She sat down across from Paul. "Thank you for seeing me, Sir."

Paul nodded. He studied her; cautious, always, in his assessment of young women who might remind him of his daughters and engender a false sense of compassion. He had placed her in a category of the dangerous, the sharp, resting her in the knife drawer in the kitchen of his files. He thought now that he might have been wrong.

She chipped at the peeling paint on the backside of his desk as she talked and when she looked directly at him, he was startled by the intelligence and beauty in her eyes. She said, "Detective Tomlinson, I know that you may not believe me, or understand me." She glanced at the photos of Ellie and Helen. "But I think you can," she said. "I think you might, so I'm here."

He leaned forward and dropped his shoulders so as to appear earnest and open-minded. "Go on," he said.

"I'm sure my father has told you what he thinks of me."

Paul didn't answer.

"You can't believe what he says, or anybody else there. You understand how insulated they are."

"Yes," he said slowly. The Cohens' Orthodox Jewish community took care of its own. They rarely left their four-block area, each supporting the businesses of the others, the butcher, the grocer, the family physician who kept secrets for a living. The community would do its best to quietly fix the problem: chastise a man given to violence, pray for and keep watch over him, counsel his family, offering both shelter and camouflage, which in some cases infuriated Paul, along with the condescending nature of a corrupt rabbi's smile and explanation that not everyone could understand their way, as if the issue was one of religious freedom, but it wasn't the time to dwell on these truths. "It's hard to imagine a boy disappearing from such a tight-knit community."

She said nothing in reply. She was street-smart and something else. What Meredith would call an old soul.

"Tell me more about your father," he said.

She sat taller, as if she'd rehearsed this part. "He's not what he seems. I guess that's the most important thing to get. You meet him and he's charming and well-dressed. But underneath, something changed in him after my mother died, or maybe later. I can't be sure when." Her voice softened slightly. "He wasn't always like he is now."

"How so?" He wanted to keep their conversation light and easy, like new friends.

"When my mother was still alive, we lived in a regular neighborhood. We went to temple, but Conservative, not Orthodox. She had breast cancer. He sat with her constantly at the end and he was a decent father. He worked a lot, but if he had a bad temper, I wasn't really aware of it. Then again, I was a teenager and my mother was dying, so there's a lot I may have missed."

Paul nodded. "I'm sorry for your loss." He thought of the girls. He couldn't remember any details about their grief beyond the funeral and their horrific first Christmas without Meredith.

Rina shrugged. "It was a long time ago, right? Thirteen years."

"You seem pretty tough. I've seen people who never completely recover from a loss like that."

Rina looked away. "I'm not impervious to pain, if that's what you're thinking. I just had to keep going and our lives changed so drastically that there wasn't much time for anything but trying to adapt."

"Okay, so how did things change?"

"We moved in with my aunt, my father's sister, who lived in a strict Orthodox community. Well, you know what it is. You've been there, I'm sure."

"I know a fair amount. I visited your parents' house the day Aviram was reported missing. I recognized the traditions, the old ways, the lines marking inside and out."

Rina crossed her arms. "Yeah. So you know it's really different. Dark on Fridays. Wigs for the women. Menstruation something shameful, at least in my aunt's house. I just remember being ushered into another

room with very little explanation. I don't know. It might have been different if I was raised that way, but I didn't understand. And I was hitting adolescence, right? So a new slate of rules and regs was like torture."

Paul said that yes, he remembered that age and some of the difficulties, but had to watch himself. He wasn't there to relate to her childhood, other than as a tool to determining whether she, at twenty-six, had it in her to take her brother and hide him well. "So, at that point you were an only child."

"Yes."

"Then your father met your stepmother."

Rina sighed. "Yes. He was 40, she was 25. Ayelet wanted children. She *had* grown up in the community and was very obedient and quiet. At the same time, my father was working his way up in the community. And I can't explain it, but at some point, he just changed. Maybe it was always in him, waiting. I don't know. Maybe it was the idea of a new baby in the house."

"Your brother."

"No. Before Avi, she was pregnant and he was supposed to be happy, but he wasn't. Something was going on with his business, but I didn't know or care, really. I was in high school. You know, ready to get out of there."

Paul nodded. Normal to want to leave, but not to snatch your brother. "Okay, so there's pressure."

"*Then* he turns into a monster, but only sometimes. He's careful to keep how he treats her secret, even from me, but one night she overcooked the chicken. He'd had a business associate over. She told him she was really tired, you know, because she was pregnant and he started screaming about her having an affair and letting the house fall apart. I hid in my room and I'm still ashamed about that, Detective. He was shaking her and I could hear the times when she'd hit the wall next to a photo of my mother because the glass would rattle. And then I heard her fall."

Paul watched her carefully for signs she was lying.

Rina went to work on the chipping paint in earnest. "She screamed. I ran out of my room but my father held out his hand and it was like he was a wall, like a force field from a science fiction movie and I just backed up into my room. I heard her crying. I heard them get up later and leave for the hospital." Rina shook her head. "She lost the baby. Everyone was told that she fell when she got up for a glass of water at night. No one spoke of it in the house again."

Paul chewed on the end of his ballpoint pen.

Rina had placed her folded hands on the desk top as if she needed him to either believe or forgive her. "So, after that, everything was different for a little while. Ayelet got pregnant again, with Avi, and everyone was happy, supposedly. He didn't hit her, I'm pretty sure, but he was so cold and mean. Completely irrational. Ayelet is beautiful. Other men do look at her. She's young. But he knew that when he married her."

Paul nodded. "Did she ever try to get any help?"

"No. Not there. It's just not done." She shrugged. "Maybe I should have tried to help. But she's just so . . . so weak. I despised her for it, whether or not that's fair."

"Because she didn't leave."

"Yes."

"You'd be surprised how often I hear similar stories and how rarely women leave, especially when there are children."

Rina nodded. "I get that. Or I try to. And for her, she'll probably never be able to have any more kids. I heard her say that on the phone once. She spends all of her time and energy with Aviram. She makes his clothes. She sits with him when he works on his Hebrew. Everything a good Jewish mother should do." She shrugged. "He's the only good thing she has."

Paul noticed her use of the present tense, suggesting that Rina did not consider Aviram permanently missing. "What about you? Why aren't you a good thing?"

Rina smiled. "I was a teenager when I lived with them and I left as soon as I could. We never really knew each other well. Honestly, I thought she was embarrassing, her clothes and the way she'd walk with her head down like an old woman. She'd grown up being taught to be meek and quiet. Perfect for my father."

"You're angry at him. Even though you weren't that close to her."

Rina cleared her throat. "I care about her. And Avi is my brother. He's the sweetest kid of all time and he doesn't deserve to grow up with a father like ours."

"So you decided to protect him. To save him."

Rina rubbed her temples and glared at him.

"Okay. Let's ignore that question for now." Paul glanced at his notes, carefully justified, in soft pencil. "What made you think your brother was in danger? Maybe this is all between your father and Ayelet." He felt dirty saying this, because it didn't excuse the way this man treated his wife.

"I was visiting recently. My dad was out and I helped Ayelet make some cookies. Anyway, I went to wipe off his shirt and he winced when I touched him. He had a huge bruise on his back and one near his shoulder. Blue and yellow and horrible. As far as I knew, my father had never turned on Aviram. And Ayelet told me a couple months ago that my father had really changed, that he'd stopped drinking and been to counseling and they didn't fight anymore. That he missed me. She actually stood in the kitchen and told me that, without flinching."

Paul leaned forward. "So you're angry at her too?"

"Hell yes, I'm angry. Ayelet is young and stupid maybe, but her own son? To not protect him? To lie? How is she better than my father? So maybe Aviram's better off now. You could imagine that, couldn't you? That he might just be better off?"

Paul allowed a small, sad smile. If everything she said was true, then yes, the boy needed protection. But there were right ways and wrong ways, he tried to explain convincingly.

She rolled her eyes and said, "Are you serious?"

He was weary of social services himself these days, the incompetence and delays and report-filing and constant personnel changes. "I can't agree officially, Rina," he said. "But yes, there are weaknesses in the system. Here's the thing: At least in the system, we know where a child is, roughly what he needs and we can try to get those things for him, whether protection or medicine or shelter. And what about Ayelet? She's his mother and has no idea where he is."

Rina crossed her thin arms and in doing so, framed her bosom. One of the buttons on her shirt had come loose and there was the lace of her bra and he looked away for a moment. Something had loosened inside of Paul, but he quickly dismissed it as an inappropriate but common reaction to an attractive woman. The more they talked, the less she looked like a girl.

"I'm sad for her. But you're a detective. What if she's the one that took him somewhere else? Look, I took Avi for ice cream. I dropped him off with Ayelet and she was vacuuming. That's all I know. She's his mother, but she's a child herself. She obviously wasn't as careful as she should have been."

"And you? How did you get so world-wise? Do you plan to be the mother now? Do you understand how, even if the law would allow this, your life would be changed?" He asked all of these things in a rush and a bit of desperation seeped out with his words. He'd heard her ice cream story before and it came off the same way now: As a very clever semi-strong but bullshit alibi. Ayelet had seen the boy when he was dropped off and gone back to cleaning, but she hadn't seen Rina leave and neither had anyone else. "You'll end up in jail and your brother will be back where he started."

Rina smiled. "I'll do what I have to," she said. "That's what family should be about. I have a good job. I have good friends. I'm not some druggie living on the streets, Detective. Just because I dye my hair black, I'm not a delinquent."

"That much I believe, Rina. That much I believe."

“So, you’ll back off a little?”

Paul was both incredulous and sad. “No, Rina. How could you think that? It’s not my job to help you. It’s my job to get your brother back. And to prove he’s been abused, if I can. It’s my job to turn you over to the prosecutor if I can prove you kidnapped him. It’s my job to feed your family to the social services sharks and let them tear it all apart.”

They sat in a deadlock for a few moments.

“An honest cop,” she said. “Who knew?” She sighed. “I’m relieved, though, that you believe me. About my father. It’s a mitzvah for you to tell me the truth.”

“I’ll still see that you’re prosecuted if you don’t return your brother and we can prove you took him, Rina.”

“I know. I know you will.”

He nodded. “Thank you for coming in. This wasn’t what I expected.”

“No, it wasn’t,” she said as she stood up. The squad room was nearly empty. Paul stood to be polite and she reached out one hand. When he offered his, she took it into both of hers and held on tightly for a moment. He was unreasonably, ridiculously sorry to see her go. Paul sat down with a thud. His worn leather chair creaked and groaned.

He was taken with Rina Cohen, completely and irrationally; the life in her eyes, the sadness. Had he really tried his best to extract the truth from her? Could he have better used the connection between them to break her down and to recover the boy? He liked her far too much. He sat, thinking, for too long, finally grabbing the phone to order a taxi. What was she wearing? White. Dark red coat. Just left, he said, but it was too late. No sign of her.

“Shit,” he said, slamming down the phone. Paul said a little prayer for Rina and Avi. Please let them be together. Let her be able to protect him until they were found. He made a note of her visit and closed the file. Saul Cohen, Avi’s father, would call again tomorrow, and Paul should tell him Rina came in, but he wasn’t sure he would, not after everything she’d said. And not after he’d let her walk out the door unchecked. He knew better. He wasn’t a rookie, damn it.

Rina Cohen radiated warmth. Life. She was full of the stuff he was missing. He was forty-seven years old and lucky genetically – didn’t gain weight easily and had a full head of hair, yet he hadn’t really dated since Meredith died, except for one night with a frightening woman in the meat-packing business who had scared him clear off the blind date circuit. How had he lived as if shot through with Novocain for so long?

Ten years, he thought. Ten years only the outline of a man.

ELLIE

Ellie Tomlinson hurried to class. The air was full of change, summer's humid slackness moved along by the crisp of autumn and today, suddenly, the first gusts of winter. Below her feet the flagstone pathways were older than she could comprehend at twenty, struggling across Princeton's campus under the weight of her plans for the future. She had maintained since she was twelve and had successfully closed a wound on her sister's forearm with scotch tape and a kitchen towel that she would become a doctor and heal people. Her mother, watching from heaven, would be so very proud.

All of this teetered and trembled in the face of her latest Organic Chemistry test score. She had never in her life seen a 'D' written in red on her schoolwork and the sight of it turned her stomach. She carried the paper in her pocket and crushed it with one hand, as if she might squeeze the red right off and change the truth. Did it show on her face? The embarrassment and fury?

She was later than usual as she approached the McCosh building, tall and imposing as a cathedral. Amos Cullen, one of the Walking Wealthy, a trust fund kid from Exeter or Choate, she couldn't remember which, nodded a hello. Amos had some kind of misplaced interest in her, or maybe he just liked to make her uncomfortable – she wasn't sure. He was far too beautiful and walked with a sort of practiced nonchalance, his standard-issue Brooks Brothers khaki pants as rumpled as his oxford cloth shirt. His family had been walking the flagstone pathways for generations and they would catch him if he fell, yet he seemed oblivious to how lucky he was to worry so little.

He held the door open for Ellie and called her Ms. Tomlinson and she immediately began to sweat. Why? Why couldn't she just stay calm? She yanked off her scarf and used it to dab at her upper lip, back turned to Amos, more than a little angry at Amos and her Orgo teacher and the evil, ancient radiators cranking out steam and, for absolutely no good reason, the pasty girl who sat in the nearest empty seat before she could get to it.

Room 20 in McCosh Hall was packed full of nearly two-hundred murmuring students there for Psychology 101, a bloated everyman's class she hated but took for the pre-med credits and the easy grade, which she'd need now more than ever. She peeled off her coat and took a seat in the back on the far right side where she hoped to disappear a little. On her armrest, someone had carved: "Life is a bowl of shit," which disappointed her, even if it was true. She liked the old stuff. Walt Whitman quotes or bits of wisdom about communism.

She looked up when the cuff of a winter coat brushed across her head. Amos Cullen settled in beside her, smiling and smelling like cloves and shampoo. God, his hair was perfect.

"You saved me a seat. Thanks."

Ellie nodded. "No problem." She refused to look at him. He'd already made her break into a clammy sweat once and she thought she might just fall apart if it happened again. Crying in psych class would be not only humiliating, but too ironic to stomach.

"You still hate me, El?" he asked.

"I don't hate you. Why would I hate you?"

"If you could see the harsh way you always look at me, you'd understand."

Ellie shook her head and flipped to a blank page in her notebook. "Amos, we have nothing in common. We don't have the same friends. You're not serious about school and I am. I don't mean to look 'harsh' or whatever, but maybe I just don't understand you."

"You mean my *type*? You're actually a snob, Ellie Tomlinson. Who knew?"

Shit, he got her. Again with the underarms sweating. All she could think about was him finding out

about her Orgo grade, which was stupid because what would he say? Something nice, probably, and she'd make room for the idea that he might not be such an asshole after all and then the truth would smack her in the back of the head. She knew better. Amos was nothing more than another of the social challenges she had repeatedly failed at Princeton.

Amos leaned closer to her. "You should go out with me just once, to make up for the snob thing."

Ellie turned to look at him, his perfect, patrician face, the kind of face that would break your heart, and the way his t-shirt rested on his not-in-high-school-anymore chest. "You're not serious? Don't you limit yourself to Cap and Gown girls? The ones with the good shoes and good breeding?"

He smiled at her. "I like your shoes."

The lights in the room dimmed. "Shh," Ellie said. "Pay attention." She didn't mean to be so venomous. It was almost habit now. As she said it to him, she admonished herself too: Pay attention. Amos is not the prize. Ellie was committed, however ill-advised, to the pursuit of Julius Vandergrift, the kind of boy who would be a great leader one day.

Professor Dollinger fed a slide onto the overhead projector and sighed. Bipolar Disorders I, II and III. "Now people, I want you to understand that this is the sort of disease no one talked about for years and years, the sort of untreated nightmare that likely led to the deaths of great minds like Virginia Woolf, Van Gogh, Hemingway. I realize that all of us suffer from what may be called mood swings. I've seen you travel from happiness to morose brooding in one sitting here, after all." Laughter rippled through the big room, up to the carved ceilings and gothic arches, warming the stone. "But what I want from you is a clear understanding of the differences between ordinary mood swings, classic depression, and a true manic-depressive illness, which I'm sure you all read about in your text." She looked over her reading glasses at the two-hundred students before her. "I expect that you have."

Ellie had read the pages. Amos Cullen? No way in hell, she thought smugly. Across the aisle and a few rows down, Cynthia Wu, Ellie's closest friend, was waving to Ellie and motioning that they should get coffee after class. Cynthia looked from Ellie to Amos and smiled to say, Oh lucky you. She meant it. Cynthia wasn't a big fan of Julius Vandergrift.

Cynthia was also the exact type of girl Ellie expected to see on Amos Cullen's arm. Though they met briefly as freshmen, only this year had Ellie allowed that Cynthia might be more than poise. Cynthia was well-traveled, well-spoken and beautiful like a doll you'd lock away behind glass and only occasionally dare to stroke the porcelain of her cheeks, the heavy skein of black silk hair.

As Dollinger droned on about mania and sexual compulsion, Ellie thought of Cynthia's mother, who had been diagnosed with every mental disorder a polite doctor in New York City could mention out loud.

Arguably, they became friends *because* of Cynthia's crazy mother. Ellie was up late studying (fruitlessly, she now knew) and found Cynthia in the bathroom, crying. Cynthia's father had called. Her mother, whom she called Marjorie with great contempt, had run off with her best friend's husband. They were hiding in Bermuda, but she'd be back eventually and Cynthia could just see her storming into the house as if she still deserved to be there.

She said her father was one of those men whom everyone adores, especially Cynthia. He cooked and had always been available to Cynthia, while her mother ("fucking Marjorie") traveled incessantly. She ran a small boutique and went on buying trips to Paris and China and Milan. Cynthia always thought she stayed away longer than she needed to and now, she said, she knew she was right. Her anger and sorrow surprised Ellie – the raw honesty of it and the way she allowed Ellie to comfort her as if they were old friends. And so they were, suddenly.

Ellie couldn't quite fathom how close Cynthia came to hating her mother, when Ellie would have done almost anything to have her mother still alive. She was only ten when her mother died and still fought against images of her trapped in a flaming car. Her father had shared as little detail as possible about the accident, but

as children will, she filled in the blanks with details that, for Ellie, became true over time.

There was no denying that her mother's death was a tragedy, and while it was logically clear that Ellie's mother hadn't *chosen* to leave her, the harm was done just the same. Ellie watched her father fail over the years to be happy on his own and to provide the love their mother would have. In this way, Ellie and Cynthia understood each other instantly, even if they didn't understand the forces at work.

Today, Ellie wished like hell that she had arrived in time to sit with Cynthia. Dollinger was unbelievably dull, and Amos was fidgety. His leg came to rest against hers. She refused to move away because to do so would mean she had noticed; to let him know it mattered. She felt an alarming need for touch.

Finally, with great relief, Ellie heard the mellow ring, so unlike the tinny, fire-alarm sound of a high school bell, of Princeton's legendary bell, padlocked and hidden high in a stone tower. Every year, a new group of kids tried to steal the clapper from the bell – as if, by doing so, academic time would stop and the students would be free to drape themselves across the lawns and benches, humming bits of popular music or musing about life's inequities and that new guy from California, the one with the tattoo.

Dollinger packed her things, tried unsuccessfully to neaten her hair and Ellie thought that perhaps Dollinger was an older version of herself – a social misfit who had found a place to sink into the comfort of her own intellect. Ellie came to Princeton looking for such comfort; a place of her own, fundamentally if not geographically far from home, her father's lonely fog and Helen's endless needs. She hadn't counted on the social awkwardness of running into the Amos Cullens of the world. She hadn't planned to care what the hell they thought.

Amos said, "See you around, Ellie," and smiled and though she looked really, really hard, she couldn't find any dishonesty or irony in his expression.

"Maybe you'll come by T.I. this weekend. We've got a new band coming in from the city. What kind of music do you like?" T.I. stood for Tiger Inn, Amos' traditionally raucous eating club.

She couldn't make her brain produce the name of a band, which was just irritating. "I don't know. Everything, I guess."

"Perfect." He clapped his hands together. "We have that kind."

She laughed, caught herself and shook her head. "We have a thing at Tower, actually."

"Oh. Sure. You and Vandergrift, right? Saving the world one politician at a time?"

"That's an obnoxious thing to say." Tower Club was full of future politicians, but they weren't all soulless jerks like the old guys in D.C.

"Maybe," he said. "But you can't get a word in to save your life if he's around. You've got to give me that."

Ellie was flabbergasted. "Do you even know him?"

Amos smiled. Not the smile she liked. "Freshman year. We were roommates in the zoo." He stood up. "I know him. And I know you'd have a hell of a lot more fun at T.I. on Saturday night. I'm like a fortune teller. I know things. I know you're close friends with Cynthia Wu. I know you like to put ice cream in your coffee."

She snapped her bag closed and looked up.

"Yeah. I used to watch you in the dining hall last year. I mean, not like some kind of perv."

"No, of course not."

Cynthia had snaked her way through the other students to meet Ellie. Amos turned to Cynthia and said that she should drag Ellie to T.I. to hear Shattered Earth play on Saturday. Cynthia smiled with exquisite poise. "Maybe," she said. "We'll check our calendars, but thank you ever so much for the invitation."

"Later," Amos said as he sauntered out into the cold.

Cynthia gently elbowed Ellie. "He's really got a thing for you, El."

Ellie sighed. "Doesn't matter. Helen's coming this weekend. We don't want her anywhere near T.I."

“Oh, I think maybe we do.”

They moved out into the cold. Helen was coming.

Cynthia knew Ellie only from Princeton and Helen only through a multitude of stories. Stories upon stories and still, Cynthia couldn't really know what it was like to be Helen's twin, to have slept tangled together for most of their lives and to have watched and worried and orbited around Helen. Ellie hadn't known there were other suns until now. Ellie looked at the gothic beauty of the chapel and the library as they walked in search of coffee and hoped that Cynthia would never see where she grew up. Surrounded by the old, Cynthia was *new* and fabulous and all Ellie's. Taking Helen out of the equation, Cynthia was the best friend she'd ever had.

Ellie and her sister both carried with them the desire to be better than and different from suburban New Jersey. It wasn't about money, or cars or furniture – it was the ordinariness of the place. Neither girl could pinpoint why they weren't selling real estate or bath products at the mall like girls they knew in high school. Could have been growing up without a mother, or with a father who told them about his cases while forcing them to listen to Miles Davis. Could have been something inside them. For Ellie, it almost didn't matter why. She came to Princeton to fulfill her potential and without considering any other course (as Helen had, floating around Europe with a temporary family and a couple kids she claimed to enjoy; coming home tan and tattooed).

Cynthia talked about a movie she wanted to see, something with subtitles and emotional angst. Ellie traced lines of stone, counting blocks of granite without meaning to. She thought about telling Cynthia about her midterm, but she couldn't do it. She couldn't tell anyone. The social order was a weighty cloak around the campus, touching each student, even the rebels and saying: Hush now, behave, strive, follow tradition, read these ancient texts and prepare to become someone great.

HELEN

Helen Tomlinson really should have been named something more fierce, more exotic, like Ophelia or Letitia, or even Serena, for the irony. She had come screaming into the world on her twin sister's heels and had rarely, if ever, felt inner serenity. For her part, Helen liked her name because it allowed her a bit of anonymity, which she enjoyed not because she had much to hide, but because she never knew when it might be necessary to reinvent herself. She could shed friends and obligations like a satin evening coat.

Newly twenty, Helen was ripe for reinvention, but troubled by the very strong possibility that she'd be on a fool's errand. Sometimes you just have to stop and make what's happening right now work for you. Some Zen crap she read on the subway, but it lingered. Her father called her a gypsy, but he meant long colorful skirts and dancing in the summer sun, not subway children or thieves.

She almost couldn't believe it was October, all traces of summer gone, her fifth floor walk-up perpetually overheated because the radiator knob had disappeared. Helen sat in her favorite thrift store chair, burgundy velvet with claw feet, and admired Ryan's long hair, not quite dry and glistening, even in the thin light. Ryan was her boyfriend, she'd realized last night after they had untangled themselves from one another and he reached, half-asleep, naked and gorgeous, for her arm. She wasn't sure how she'd let it happen. After a recent series of self-concept-sucking affairs, she'd made a pledge to keep men at a safe distance. But Ryan was earnest and persistent and unlike anyone she'd ever let close.

Ryan was left with the shitty chair – plastic and stolen. He tipped forward, running a finger down her cheek and along the edge of her jaw, wondering at the components, the hard bone and the very thin layer of soft tissue. He smiled. "The face that moved a thousand ships."

Helen pulled away, stood to put some distance between them. "Shut the fuck up. And it's launched. Not moved."

"Whatever. The point is, you know you're beautiful."

"You say that with such scorn. Like I should be ashamed, or like it's just hilarious to you, the thought of being me." In fact, she had done nothing to improve her appearance today, just a perfunctory wash of the face and teeth, black hair twisted into a messy knot as was the fashion in the nicer sections of Brooklyn.

Ryan shook his head. "No scorn intended." He stood, stretched his lovely, loose body up toward the low ceiling, pulled down a fleck of peeling, yellowed paint. "This place is a piece of shit."

Helen nodded. "Looks are over-rated. This is a damn good apartment. No lead in the paint. Good airflow. Good light." She moved to the sink to wash an apple.

"Is that new?" Ryan pointed to a painting of a tulip, the kind with jagged edges, enlarged and twisted in her composition. Brown rained from the tips, the color of earth and blood.

"Yes."

"You didn't say you were painting again."

"No."

"Don't get annoyed. I like it. You should do more of those. Enter them over at that gallery where Billy's working. What the hell is it called?"

"Gallery Two," she said, irritated that she knew the name and at the urgent, high tone she used when she spoke it.

"Yeah. Gallery Two. Do you want me to call him?"

"No." She made much of washing the narrow countertop, digging into the stained grout with an old sponge. "What's with all the pressure, Ryan?"

"Pressure?" He lightly drummed the couch with one hand; a musician, limbs always engaged in subtle,

meaningful motion. “I was just trying to be supportive. Look at what you’ve done in this tiny space. Those two are really great.” He pointed to two large landscapes dancing with color. “You have a lot of talent and you’re working at a desk at Pratt and I know you want more. You just seem sort of stuck.”

“I don’t see you filling out those grad school applications. Define stuck. Seriously. Go.”

Her eyes were frighteningly cold at times like this. Helen had to have enough space to allow him, anyone maybe, to orbit around her, but Ryan remained hopeful. They’d been together almost six months now and he constantly worked to make himself into what he thought she wanted because he’d never felt so alive as he did when they were together. It wasn’t just her beauty. It was the paint under her fingernails and the way she’d curl into a ball against his side when she slept.

A siren outside rose and fell and Helen thought of her father. He had a cushy desk job for a detective his age, but he didn’t use the advantages. He worked long hours like he always had, like years ago when she and Ellie waited at home alone, wondering why it was enough to him that they were safe in their alarmed and padlocked house.

Truth was, Helen knew all about stuck. Paul had long lived a murky, watercolor life. Mom was oil – flamboyant and gorgeous straight from the tube, captured in photos all over the old house. He’d never taken them down, but they didn’t seem to help him either.

“You thinking about your Dad?” Ryan asked.

“Yeah. I guess so.” She took a paring knife from the dish drainer.

“You picked the wrong city to get away from your childhood, you know.”

Helen sliced the apple into equal sections and cut out the seeds. “Who says I’m trying to escape anything?”

“You always flinch a little, from the sirens.”

“Always?”

“Yeah.” He shrugged. “It’s kind of nice to know you worry about someone. I know I’ve never made you twitch.”

She pointed the knife at him. “Last week, in the shower. Your memory is short, my dear boy.”

He smiled. “That’s not what I mean.”

Helen dropped the apple slices into a coffee mug with “I’m with stupid” printed on it and added a scoop of mayo.

“I’ve got to go. And,” he said, as he pointed at the mug, “that is so vile it’s almost unforgivable.”

She leaned against the worn Formica countertop, stacked haphazardly with dishes, strictly limited to two of everything, mismatched and worn. Plates, one geometric design in rust and black, one floral, porcelain, with gold around the edges – someone’s wedding china, once. She sometimes made Ryan, or other men, eat from the floral, just to mess with them. “You better go then.”

As he turned to leave, she thought she saw a glimmer of sadness, or mere distraction, she couldn’t quite tell. She didn’t like to see him sad, but more important, she didn’t like to *be* sad. Sad could cling. She thought then that he’d been around too much lately. Better to keep things loose. Less to worry after, less to break, less to clean up.

“I’ll be at the Metro tonight. I’m sitting in with Eddie and Jackson.”

She nodded, carefully disinterested. “Have fun. Make sure they pay you this time.”

Ryan was better than either Eddie or Jackson; he was meant to play lead guitar, or solo, but he failed to stand up for himself and Helen felt the failure was a character flaw, the sort of thing that cost a man respect.

He paused at the door and turned back, shifting from foot to foot. “So, Eddie and I were just talking about our lease. It’s almost up and he’s thinking of moving back home to save up some money.”

Helen stared deep into her mug of apples and mayo and thought, here we go.

“What do you think about me staying here for awhile, or we could get a bigger place, if you want.”

Doesn't have to mean anything major, Helen. Save us both money, spend some more time together. Maybe you could work less and paint more."

"Now?"

"Well yeah, now."

"I can't," she said, meeting his eyes because she didn't want to be a coward, even if she was panicking inside.

He pushed against the wall with his palm. "Of course not. I guess I should know better." He shook his head.

"Ryan, come on. I've only been back here what, nine months? I think you know by now, I need my privacy. It's nothing personal."

"Nothing personal?" He gave her enough time to reach out, his shoulders sagging a little when she said nothing. "Forget it. I'm gone." The steel door slammed behind him.

Helen stood like an old wooden masthead on a ship, leaning slightly forward as if she were testing the strength of the air around her to hold her in place. Ryan was a good person. He was talented. She wouldn't be lying if she said she loved him.

What had just happened? Was he gone gone? For good?

He'd mentioned the idea of living together a month or two ago and she had laughed into her beer and said maybe, someday. She should be flattered, she thought, but instead felt cold and rigid. Thing was, he would know too much about this cold if he moved in. How could he help but be disgusted by her inability to tolerate another person in her home, day after day; her dark days impossible to hide from someone sharing her bed with oppressive regularity? Not even Ellie really knew what Helen was like now.

Helen slowly finished her snack. She would be late for work, but she didn't care. Ryan was right, it was a shitty, stupid job, and worse, had led her right into the arms of Brooklyn's own Rufus Jaspers, king of etched photography featuring, in more than one piece, Helen's breasts. He'd gone on a promotional tour to San Francisco, at which point she'd started spending more time with Ryan, who actually wanted to be with her. Rufus was an asshole, and too old for her anyway. Too old, too successful, too full of himself. Too good at shaking her up, turning her on. There were times she couldn't tell the difference. She should have left Pratt by now, gotten as far from him as she could. But she wouldn't be bullied. He was nothing, she told herself. Nothing.

Helen pulled on her favorite jeans, locked her precious apartment with her one lone key and ran, nearly losing her balance, down the stairs to the street, all of Brooklyn's color and grime reaching for her like a welcome blanket. She had traveled to Morocco and Crete, taught herself and the Rathsmen children, for whom she had nannied, the history of Rome, wandered Vatican City looking for God (didn't find him) and still she believed, firmly, that New York was the only place in the U.S. for a person of her eager spirit to live.

Whether gift or flaw, Ryan was right about Helen's beauty. She wore no makeup and still people turned to look at her, both women and men. Some of the women quickly looked away, lips pursed. But some admired her like a painting and even if she shouldn't, she always liked that they looked so carefully at her skin, a fair olive, and her big eyes, Audrey Hepburn kicked a little into biker territory and fattened up.

Helen moved through the world of men with the enhanced capabilities of all beautiful young women, spinning from one good kiss to the next, unaware that she was moving too fast, ignoring the signs: Adulthood Ahead! Real Love! Vulnerability! Trust! Guilt! The guilt was new. She had to work hard to ignore it, pushing Ryan's hurt from her mind.

She passed her favorite corner grocery and waved to Mrs. Larusso, who ran the place herself since her husband died a few months back.

Mrs. Larusso yelled to Helen: "Where is your coat?" and Helen laughed. She liked the feel of the air on her skin and wore only a wool scarf around her neck for warmth. She passed black men, Latino women,

children in strollers, a community she fancied herself part of, yet she knew none of them, not really. She had few friends, having lost track of everyone while she traveled abroad with the Rathsmans.

The travel was great, a job too good to be true for high school graduate dying to get out of Jersey, but it messed her up, she thought now. Back in the states and newly unemployed, she found her apartment almost too quickly, stuttering forward, unsure how to fill her days. Ellie was busy at school. Helen's old friends had scattered. She was teetering on the edge of despair when Dave (a.k.a. Mr. Rathsmans), called to say hello and how the kids missed her and him too and could he bring by a set of pastels they'd all picked out for her?

That was how things happened, Helen thought, one little phone call, one little gift at a time, and then twice a week he showed up, never mentioning Mrs. Rathsmans or the children when they were together. He brought her flowers and wine. He watched her move as if she were a jewelry box ballerina. She painted while he was with her and though he knew nothing about art, his adoration of her as she worked made her feel like a real artist, every flick of the brush imbued with magic and sex.

And then it was over. What did she expect? Nothing lasts forever, she admonished herself. Nothing. She didn't get calls to babysit after that, something she counted on for extra money (her job at Pratt was hardly lucrative). And worse, she didn't see the Rathsmans children anymore and she missed them. Something like loneliness was creeping into her life, and she had no one to talk to. If she talked to Ellie, she'd have to tell her everything and Ellie would ask her what the hell she was doing and Helen would feel even smaller. So she told no one about Dave, or the affair with Rufus the Great (which was really dickhead Dave's fault because she had to do something to get over him). Ellie would hate both men, and Helen was working hard as she could to hate them too. That phase was over. She could never tell Ellie, who seemed so proud of her, back in New York with her own place and a job too!

Ellie. Helen missed her more and more as her life quieted down and become frighteningly fucking ordinary. Mid-morning, settling into her shitty cubicle at work, and Helen thought: Where would Ellie be? History of rich white men? Philosophy of rich white men? Or that one class about women, what was it, gender and economics? It would be cool, Helen thought, to just show up on campus for lunch one day and completely freak Ellie out.

They lived in such different worlds.

