Only The Good Spy Young

Gallagher Girl Series 4

Ally Carter

Chapter One

"Targets acquired, ten o'clock."

My best friend's voice was as cool as the wind as it blew off the Thames. Her re

solve was as solid as the Tower of London's ancient stone walls that stood twent

y feet away .I could see the night getting darker - the lights grow brighter - a

nd my best friend's confidence was almost contagious. Almost. But staring at the

crowd in the distance, I couldn't help but think I am not prepared for this.

I mean don't get me wrong, I am prepared for a lot of scary situations. After al

l, in the last year and a half I'd been fake kidnapped once, almost truly kidnap

ped twice, targeted by one international terrorist and two incredibly cute boys.

So, scary? Yeah, scary and I go way back.

But at that moment Rebecca Baxter and I were standing on ice skates on a rink th

at used to be the moat around the Tower of London. We were outnumbered and outsi

zed. So something about that moment was . . . terrifying.

Even though my best friend was beside me. Even though our school had trained us

well.

Even though we go to a school for spies.

"Ooh, Cam. They're looking this way."

Part of me hoped Bex was talking about her father, who stood by the skating rink

s concession stand, or her mother, who was by the rink's east exit. I totally wi

shed that Bex was talking about the agents in the crowd, whose job it was to pro

tect me - like that woman with the backpack who had been trailing us all afterno

on, or the man who was posted at the top of Tower Bridge, as it transportation r

outes for a half mile in any direction. But I knew Rebecca Baxter well enough to

know that she wasn't talking about the spies. She was talking about . . . the b

oys.

When Bex spun effortlessly and skated backward past the crowd of guys that stood

laughing and showing off at the edge of the rink, every single one of them turn

ed to stare at her. Her red scarf waved in the wind as she smiled. "So which one

do you want?

"No thanks." I shrugged. "Trying to give them up.

I mean, sure they looked nice, cute, and completely harmless, but if there's one

thing we Gallagher Girls know, it's that looks can totally be deceiving.

"Come on, Cam," Bex pleaded. "How about the tall one?"

"Nope."

"The short one?"

"No thank you," I said with a shake of my head.

"The one with . . ." Bex didn't finish. Her eyes went wide and she stared past m

e, but my mind was thinking back to a chilly November night in Washington D.C.,

and a steamy summer afternoon on a rooftop in Boston, as the two scariest moment

s of my life flashed before my eyes.

I felt my heart begin to pound. "What is it?" I scanned the crowd, trying to cat

ch a glimpse of what Bex had seen.

"Cam . . ." Bex started.

I spun on the ice, waiting for Bex's mother, for her father, for some of my guar

ds to register the same shock I saw in my best friend's eyes, but their faces we

re blank.

"Bex," I snapped, "what is it?"

"It's nothing. It's just . . . Tell me this Cam . . .? Her smile was pure evil,

and she spoke so slowly that I sort of wanted to hurt her. "Just tell me . . . a

re you sure you've given up all boys?"

"Bex, what are you saying?" I asked.

But my best friend just pouted, raised her hand to her mouth, and said, "Oops."

And then Rebecca Baxter, the most highly coordinated girl at the Gallagher Acade

my for Exceptional Young Women (which, believe me, includes some really coordina

ted girls), tumbled onto the ice.

Well, it turns out that pretending to fall down is an excellent way to make boys

stop staring and start moving. Of, course our other roommate, Liz, would no dou

bt require a lot more evidence before citing that as a scientific certainty, but

considering that fact that eight boys had been staring and seven boys rushed to

Bex's rescue, I'd say our results were pretty statistically sound.

But, honestly, at that moment statistics were the last thing on my mind, because

fluffy white snowflakes were floating through the night sky that stood between

me and the one boy who didn't move, the boy who didn't swoon, the boy who just s

tood by the rails with his hands in his pockets, staring at me, saying, "Happy N

ew Year, Gallagher Girl."

There is a pretty wide range of emotions that any girl - much less a Gallagher G

irl - is bound to encounter on any given day - from joy to sadness, frustration

to excitement.

At that point it's pretty safe to say that I was feeling all of them.

And I was trying to show none of them.

Bex's seven suitors kneeled beside her on the ice, while my skates pulled me clo

ser to the one boy who lingered by the rail.

"You look cold," I somehow managed to say.

"I used to have a warmer jacket, but then I gave it to some girl."

"That wasn't very smart."

"No." he smirked and shook his head. "It probably wasn't."

Despite having known him for almost a year, there were a lot of things I still d

idn't know about Zachary Goode. Like how soap and shampoo could smell so much be

tter on him than anyone else. Like where he went when he wasn't showing up at ra

ndom (and frequently dangerous) points in my life. And, most of all, I didn't kn

ow how when he mentioned the jacket, he made me think about the sweet, romantic

part of the night last November when he's given it to me, and not the terrible,

bloody, international-terrorist-are-trying-to-kidnap-me part that came right aft

er.

From the corner of my eye, I could see that the boys had "helped" Bex to a bench

not far away, but Zach didn't seem to notice. He just inched closer to me and s

miled.

"Besides, it looked better on you."

There are a lot of things that that the Gallagher Academy teaches us to remember

, but right then I was wishing my exceptional education had also taught me how t

o forget.

I mean, it was a chilly night in a foreign city, and an incredibly hot guy was s

miling at me through the soft glow of sparkly lights! The absolute last thing I

wanted to remember was the last time I'd seen Zach - the screeching tires or the

masked men. Seriously, forgetting would have come in so incredibly handy at tha

t particular moment. But I'm a Gallagher Girl. We don't forget anything.

"Why do I get the feeling you aren't here on vacation?" I asked.

I heard Bex laughing. I sensed Zach's hand inching down the rail, closer and clo

ser to mine. For just one second, I thought he might say me - that he was here t

o see me.

"I'm looking for Joe Solomon." He glanced around the Tower grounds. "Thought may

be he was with you?"

And just that quickly the pounding of my heart took on an entirely different mea

ning. Sure, it sounded like an easy question, but nothing about my Covert Operat

ions instructor has even been easy. Ever.

"What's wrong?" I asked, my mind reeling with at least a dozen reasons why Mr. S

olomon might follow me to London - and not one of them was good.

"Nothing, Gallagher Girl. It's probably noth-"

"Tell me or I'll yell for Mr. and Mrs. Baxter, and you can find out how Bex beca

me Bex."

He kicked the hard-packed snow gathered at the edge of the rink.

"We were supposed to meet up a few days ago, but he didn't show." Zach stared at

me. "And he didn't call."

Okay, I know when most teenagers talk about someone not calling, they're usually

complaining. Or whining. But Zach isn't exactly the whining type.

I felt cold for the first time in the ice.

"He's not on my protection detail."

"Your mom's off looking for leads on the Circle, right?" Zach asked. "Could he b

e with her?"

"I don't know," I said, "I guess so, but . . . I don't know."

"Has he checked in with the Baxters?"

"I don't know."

"Has he -"

"No one ever tells me anything, remember?" I searched his face, and despite ever

ything, I couldn't help but savor the face that there was finally something Zach

didn't know. "Being out of the loop isn't fun, is it?"

"Rebecca!" Bex's mother's voice echoed through the cold air.

"You've got to go," Zach said with a nod in the Baxter's direction.

"If Mr. Solomon is missing call-ins, then we have to look for him. We've got to

tell Bex's Parents . . . we've got to call my mom so she can -"

"No," Zach snapped, then shook his head and forced a smile. "It's probably nothi

ng, Gallagher Girl. Go on. Have fun," he said, as if that were possible.

"Cameron," Bex's father called. "Say good-bye to the young man now."

"We've got to tell them, Zach. It Mr. Solomon is missing . . ."

"They'd know," Zach reminded me. His voice softened. "Whatever is going on, I pr

omise you they know a whole lot more than me do.

Zach eased away from the rail while, behind us, Mr. Baxter's voice grew louder.

"Let's go, Cammie!

I looked over my shoulder at my best friend's father, her mother, and the guards

that had surrounded me for weeks. "I'll be right there!"

When I turned back to the rail, Zach was already gone.

Chapter two

Bex's dad is one of England's top spies (not to mention the man who taught his d

aughter how to use a Barbie as a weapon when she was seven), so I didn't run aft

er Zach. I didn't yell. I just kept pace beside Abe Baxter, skating slowly acros

s the ice.

"The Tower of London is the oldest royal building still in official use today, C

ammie."

"She knows, Dad," Bex said, even though A) I actually didn't know, and B) at tha

t point, I had far more covert facts on my mind.

"Mr. Baxter -" I started to say, but Bex's father was already pointing at the To

wer's tall stone walls and saying, "The Jewel House alone is a Grade AA target -

"

"She knows, Dad," Bex said again, rolling her eyes. But she didn't really seem a

nnoyed when she stared up at her father listening for him to go on.

"It has reinforced titanium security gates and a nine-hundred-and-eighty-point s

elf-modifying laser grid." Then he stopped. "I'm sorry, Cammie, you were saying?

"

But something in the way he looked at me made me forget about Zach and Mr. Solom

on and even the Circle of Caven. Something reminded me that dads tell corny joke

s. Dads drone on and on about history facts that don't really matter to ninety-n

ine percent of the world's population. Dads sometimes look at daughters like the

y're more precious than all the diamonds in England. I remembered that - once up

on a time - someone had looked like that at me.

"I . . . I just wanted to thank you again for letting me spend winter break with

you," I managed to mutter.

He squeezed my shoulder. "It's our pleasure, Cameron."

And just like that, I told myself that Zach was right - it was probably nothing.

Everything was probably fine. After all, Mr. Solomon was careful. Mr. Solomon w

as good.

"Ooh . . . ravens!" Mr. Baxter said, easing onto the bench beside me. He pointed

to a blackbird that was scavenging for crumbs near the base of the tall stone w

all. "Now, there's an interesting piece of history, Cammie. According to legend,

England will fall if the ravens ever leave the Tower of London."

Still, as I glided to one of the benches and started loosening the laces on my s

kates, my fingers didn't want to work. It was like I'd forgotten how to breathe.

I looked at the bird but didn't say anything. It was so black against the white

ice.

Mr. Baxter sighed. "They clip their wings so they can't fly away."

And then, despite the icy wind, my face felt hot. My hands were sweating inside

my gloves while I pulled at the scarf around my neck, suddenly dizzy as I stood

in my socks on the frozen ground, while the skaters kept circling around and aro

und.

Mr. Baxter stood. "What is it, Cammie? What's wrong?"

I shook my head. "It's . . . nothing."

But something was coming over me - like déjà vu, only stronger. There was something

in the crowd that I should know. Something I should see. I shook my head, and fo

r a split second I thought I saw a tall graceful woman from the rooftop in Bosto

n.

"No," I muttered.

I looked at Mrs. Baxter and her colleague with the backpack who had been followi

ng us all day. They each held cups of coffee in their right hands - the sign tha

t our tail was clear, that things were fine. But things weren't fine. There was

a ghost in that crowd - something I should see. Something I should know.

"Cammie?" Mr. Baxter's hand was on my shoulder. "What is it?"

"I don't know." I shook my head. "It's just -"

Before I could finish, I heard a burst of static from the comms unit in Mr. Baxt

er's ear - a distant muffled cry. Across the ice, the woman with the backpack sp

un, as it looking for something - someone. The cup fell from her hand and tumble

d toward the ice. And in that moment, my mind flashed back to D.C., and then fur

ther back, to Boston.

Get her. The words echoed in my mind.

Get me.

And then the lights went out.

Chapter Three

Even in the pitch blackness, I knew that commands were ringing in the ears of th

e agents at the rink. In an instant, Mr. Baxter grabbed me, pulling me away from

the ice and closer to the shelter of the Tower's stone walls.

The ground was hard and cold against my feet, but there was no time to grab my b

oots - not a second to do anything but run and listen to the cries that floated

through the dark. I kept on hand against the rough stone wall and the other tigh

tly in Mr. Baxter's grasp as we moved deeper into the crowd of panicking tourist

s - pushing through the chaos - until, suddenly, Mr. Baxter's hand pulled free o

f mine.

"Cammie!" he yelled, and I reached for him through the dark, but there were too

many people.

"Cammie!" he called again, but before I could answer a pair of strong arms locke

d around my waist, and someone pinned me against the stone wall. I started to st

rike out, but the man countered as if he'd known exactly what I'd been trained t

o do. He squeezed my arms to my sides so tightly that I only had one choice: I p

ulled my head back and struck with all my might. I felt the blow land - heard th

e man wince. The something else - a familiar voice in my ear saying, "Cammie, ca

lm down."

For a second I thought I must be wearing a comms unit - that my teacher's voice

was coming back to me, telling how to save my own life.

And I heard him whisper, "Run."

"They're coming, aren't they?" my breath fogged in the cold air, and yet my arms

kept pumping, my feet kept moving, and my teacher kept a solid grip on my hand,

pulling me across the Tower's dim grounds toward a busy London street while I s

aid the words I'd been dreading for weeks:

"The Circle . . . they're here."

"Ms. Morgan, we only have a minute until they find us, so you have to listen to

me carefully," my teacher said, tightening his hold on my hand, urging me throug

h the steady stream of traffic and onto Tower Bridge.

"Are you on comms? You have to tell the Baxters you have me. We have to call in

an extraction team and -"

"Cammie, listen!" his order seemed to echo in the dark, and something about it m

ade me stop there in the middle of the bridge. He sounded angry and frantic and

scared.

Joe Solomon was scared.

He grabbed me by both shoulders. "Cammie, we only have a minute until they find

us, and then they'll take you away -"

"No!" I shouted.

"Listen! Any day now they're going to take you back to school, and when you get

there, you have to -"

"Hello, Joe."

When Bex's father appeared on the dark bank of the river, his voice was even and

calm, but he wore the same expression that Bex does when she's focused and angr

y and when there's no force on earth that can stop her.

And yet Mr. Solomon didn't turn to look at him. He was still gripping my shoulde

rs as if no assignment in my entire life had ever been more important than the o

ne he was about to give. "Cammie, listen to me!"

"Come on, Joe," Mr. Baxter called across the bridge, easing forward like a man b

racing for a fight. "Turn yourself in. Let the girl go."

I shook my head. Nothing made sense in that moment - not what Mr. Solomon was sa

ying or the way Mr. Baxter was looking at us. Neither of them seemed to know wha

t they were both on the same side - my side.

"It's okay, Mr. Baxter," I said, turning to Bex's father, thinking maybe he didn

't recognize my teacher. "This is Mr. Solomon. Joe Solomon. He's -"

"I know who he is, Cammie."Bex's father inched closer. "And he's going to come w

ith me now - fly to Langley and get this mess straightened out."

"Cammie!" Mr. Solomon shook me slightly. "Don't listen to him. Listen to me!"

But Bex's father kept talking. "Joe, you've got to let her go."

Bex's mother walked out of the shadows behind her husband. "Cammie, sweetheart,

I want you to walk over to me now."

The bridge was cold and rough beneath my feet, but I didn't move. I scanned the

shadowy banks of the river, looking for Bex, needing her to help me explain to h

er parents that they were making a terrible mistake. But all I saw were guards a

nd operatives who were closing ranks around us, and in that moment I realized th

at no one was searching the crowd. Now a soul was looking for the Circle. Instea

d, the people who had sworn to protect me were staring as if that bridge were th

e most dangerous place in the world that I could be.

When the operative from the observation tower appeared on the opposite end of th

e bridge, I knew we were surrounded.

"Cammie, now!" Mrs. Baxter ordered, but I stayed frozen in place.

"Her father was my best friend!" my teacher shouted, the words echoing off the r

iver and out into the night.

Bex's father nodded and eased closer. "I know."

"This is crazy, Abe." Mr. Solomon shook his head.

"Sure it is," Mr. Baxter said calmly. "But protocols exits for a reason, Joe. We

know -"

"We know how this ends!" my teacher shouted.

"Not this time," Mr. Baxter said. "Not necessarily. Not if you let Cammie go, an

d come with me."

"Mr. Solomon . . ." I didn't recognize my own voice. It sounded far off and frai

l. I saw the way I stayed in the shadows, not fighting against my teacher's gras

p. Weak. I felt weak. And so I pulled away.

"Cammie, come here," Bex's mom ordered again. I could see Bex behind her, not mo

ving. Dazed. "Cammie!" Bex's mom snapped, but I looked at my teacher.

"Mr. Solomon, what is going on? Why are you here? Why didn't you meet Zach? Why

do they keep looking at you like . . . Why are they talking like you're the enem

y?"

"The CIA has some questions for him, Cammie," Mr. Baxter answered. "That's all.

He just needs to answer some questions."

"You're gonna try to turn me in, Abe?" Mr. Solomon laughed, then turned to Bex's

mom. "Grace? Are you going to cuff me in front of Bex and Cammie?"

Bex cried, "No!" but her mother's voice was even as she said, "You know we have

to."

"Mom!" Bex cried.

"Rebecca, stay out of this," Bex's father warned. Then he turned to look at the

man we all knew - the man only Bex and I still trusted. "You should have known b

etter than to come here, Joe."

"I had to talk to Cammie."

"Cammie was safe with us," Bex's mother told him.

My teacher just shook his head. "Cammie isn't safe anywhere."

I didn't want to cry then, but I couldn't pretend anymore either. I wasn't on va

cation. I was hiding. I was like the ravens, a prisoner of a destiny I didn't kn

ow and couldn't control. So I looked at the grown-up I knew I knew best - the on

ly man I'd truly trusted in a very long time.

"Mr. Solomon, please, what's going on?"

And then his hands were back on my shoulders. "Cammie, you have to follow the pi

geons."

"I . . . I don't understand."

"Promise me, Cammie! No matter what, promise me you will follow the pigeons."

It didn't make any sense - not the words or the look in his eyes or the way my b

est friend's parents stood staring as if the moment they'd been dreading for day

s was finally here.

A siren sounded, and I felt suddenly unsteady on my feet as if the earth was mov

ing.

"Mr. Solomon," I spoke slowly, calmly, "maybe you should come with us . . . We'l

l call my mom and she'll explain that you're a teacher and that there's been som

e kind of mistake and . . ."

But then I couldn't finish because the earth was moving. The siren was growing l

ouder; spectators were beginning to call out from the riverbanks. In a terrible

flash, I remembered that Tower Bridge is a drawbridge, and Mr. Solomon and I wer

e standing in the center.

The bridge lurched and Bex yelled, "Cammie!" but her mother held her back. I gra

bbed at the rail as the bridge rose higher and steeper, and Mr. Solomon reached

for my shoulders, holding me, steadying me.

"Cammie, you have to promise me!"

"Okay, Mr. Solomon. Of course. I promise."

"Thank you, Cammie." He relaxed his grip and lowered his head. For the first tim

e, he seemed to breathe as he sighed, "Thank you."

"Okay, Joe" Mr. Baxter inched closer. "You talked to Cammie. You got your promis

e. Now, come on. Let's go get this settled."

But Mr. Solomon was backing away, his gaze still locked on me.

"The pigeons, Cammie."

"The pigeons," I said.

And then one of the greatest spies I've ever known ran toward the rising edge of

the bridge and propelled himself over the top, flying falling. Bex's parents ru

shed after him, but I was already there, staring into the Thames.

And Joe Solomon was already gone.

Chapter Four

During winter break of our seventh-grade year, Bex helped her parents expose a d

ouble agent who had been working inside M16. The summer she turned fourteen she

swears she disabled a bomb beneath the royal family's box in the bleachers at Wi

mbledon. But as Bex and I sat in the back of an M16 van with the words "Handy He

lpers House Painting Service" painted on the side, I knew no Gallagher Girl had

ever brought a story quite like this one home from school vacation.

I tried recounting the facts for myself - how the first agent to reach us was le

ft-handed and had green eyes, how the phone number on the side of the van had a

Surrey exchange. I remembered all the details - every single one. After all, Mr.

Solomon had trained me well. And that was the problem, really.

Mr. Solomon had train me.

Mr. Solomon had taught me.

And then Mr. Solomon had dragged me onto that bridge and jumped into the cold, d

ark waters of the Thames. So I sat quietly with Mr. Baxter on one side of me, an

d Mrs. Baxter on the other, waiting for the world to stop spinning in the wrong

direction.

But, of course, for all Rebecca Baxter's talents, waiting totally isn't one of t

hem.

"What was that?" Bex exclaimed as soon as the van doors slammed.

"Quiet, Rebecca," her mother ordered.

"Because it looked like the two of you just tried to arrest Joe Solomon," Bex sa

id. "Is that what it looked like to you, Cam?"

"Not now, Rebecca," her father said.

"So what was that, then?" Bex asked. "Training op?"

"Bex," her mother hissed.

"Perimeter security test?" Bex tried.

"Rebecca, I will have that agent pull this van over," her father warned, but Bex

just plowed on.

"Because, correct me if I'm wrong, but isn't Joe Solomon one of the good guys?"

I wish her parents had cut her off, scolded her, said something - anything - bec

ause nothing could have been scarier than the look that passed between Mr. and M

rs. Baxter just then. Even Bex went quiet at the sight.

A minute later I felt the van veer and slow and, all around us, the world got da

rk. Through the van's interior light, Bex looked at me. "Tunnel?" I guessed.

She stared at me and whispered back, "Zach?"

Before I could answer, the tunnel lights flickered, and we were lost in total da

rkness as the driver yanked the wheel. Tires screeched. I grabbed on to the seat

, felt the swerve of the Baxters on either side of me, and yet no one screamed o

r braced for a crash as we careened fast -too fast- toward the tunnel wall. In t

he darkness I felt my best friend's hand reach out and grasp my own, as suddenly

, that wall in front of us parted, and the painter's van was swallowed up whole.

I spun in my seat, and through the van's dusty rear windows I saw the hidden doo

r close.

"Cool," Bex whispered.

Then there was a light at the end of the tunnel (literally). Everything grew bri

ghter while the van slowed and the passage grew wider until the space we were in

was anything but a tunnel anymore.

"Welcome to Baring Cross Station," a high voice said as the van door slid open.

Instantly, Bex's mother's arm was around my waist; her father's hand was grippin

g mine, and the best and brightest part of Her Majesty's Secret Service were sta

ring, watching me climb out of the van as if I were the most interesting thing i

n that cavernous space.

The ceiling must have been five stories high. Catwalks sprawled above, and more

vans sat to my right, parked at strange angles. All around us, people ran, shout

ing orders. There were stainless-steel staircases, polished chrome risers and fr

osted-glass partitions everywhere. I couldn't help but think that it had been al

most exactly a year since I'd been escorted into another super-cool, super-secre

t underground facility, beneath D.C. had been because of a boy. (Or . . . more s

pecifically . . . a boyfriend.) In London, it was because of a man. (Or . . . mo

re specifically . . . a teacher.) The year before, I'd known the trip was coming

. This time nothing about the day was in any way routine. Last winter, my mother

had taken me to that facility to answer questions. But this time I stood beside

the Baxters, consumed by the thing I didn't know.

"Are you okay?" a woman asked.

"Did he hurt you?" a man with surgical gloves and a white coat wanted to know.

"How the bloody hell did he get so close?" another man snapped.

"Traitor's Gate," one woman answered. "He came in through Traitor's Gate."

Of course he did," the man mumbled, and I tried to shake the words from my head.

They were gibberish. Nonsense. Because "he" was Mr. Solomon.

"He" was one of the best spies I've ever known.

"He" was my father's best friend.

As we walked past a massive wall of screen, images of the city flashed by so qui

ckly it was a miracle anyone could see a thing.

"Satellite is up!" a young man in horn-rimmed glasses yelled.

"Get me eyes on every tube entrance, every intersection, every airport. We're cl

ose people!" an older woman cried. "Let's not let him get away."

Bex's eyes found mine, and I knew what she was thinking: our teacher wouldn't ha

ve walked onto that bridge if he hadn't had a way of getting off; he wouldn't ha

ve come to London if he hadn't had a way of getting out; and when Joe Solomon do

esn't want to be found, there's not a camera, satellite, or operative on earth w

ho can see him.

"Baxter! A voice called from the catwalk above us. "You have the girl, then?"

Bex's father placed his arm around my shoulder. "She's here. She's fine."

The man gestured to a metal door at the end of the catwalk. "Then come this way,

" he told me, but Bex stepped closer.

We'll be happy to wait in there," she said.

The agent looked at Mrs. Baxter, whose face was just as determined as her daught

er's.

"I'm going with her," Mrs. Baxter said. "Cammie is our responsibility."

"Then you should have thought about that before you took her bloody ice skating,

" the agent snapped.

I wanted to say something in protest - to remind them that it wasn't the Baxters

' fault - whatever "it" was. But Mrs. Baxter's hand was on my shoulder, gently p

ushing me forward, telling me that the path I was on now was one I had to walk a

lone.

Chapter Five

PROS AND CONS OF SPENDING THE NIGHT IN A TOP SECRET ROOM OF A TOP SECRET FACILIT

Y, BUT NO ONE WILL TELL YOU WHY

(A list by Cameron Morgan)

PRO: Turns out, top secret underground government facilities are an excellent pl

ace to warm up after ice skating.

CON: The warming-up process includes no friends, no family, and absolutely no an

swers.

PRO: Sometimes it's nice having a moment alone to compose yourself after fairly

traumatic (and totally confusing) experiences.

CON: The "moment" stops being nice when it goes on for almost two hours.

PRO: Three words - Extra. Credit. Essay.

CON: Two words - No. Bathroom.

PRO: Knowing there are fifty operatives and at least two hundred cameras between

you and the people trying to get you.

CON: Realizing, you know even less about those people then you thought you did.

A lot less.

Every good operative knows there are several reasons to keep someone waiting bef

ore questioning them. Sometimes you want to make them nervous; sometimes you wan

t to let them think; sometimes you need to gather the facts; and sometimes talki

ng to them isn't that important. But there was only one reason that occurred to

me when I heard the door creak open and pulled my head and arms off of the cold

steel table.

"Is my mother here?"

"No."

The door slammed, and I turned to watch a man I'd never seen before walk to the

other side of the room. He was tall with black wavy hair and deep blue eyes, and

as he spoke in his rich British accent, both the spy in me and the girl in me b

ecame instantly aware of the fact that I was drooling.

"How are you, Cammie?" he asked, but barely waited to hear my "Fine."

"Is there anything you need? Water? Something to -"

"What happened on the bridge?"

The man chuckled softly. "Well, that's what I was hoping you could tell me." He

dropped a file onto the table between us and moved to the chair opposite me, but

there was something about the gesture - the sound of his laugh - that felt stra

nge to me. Nothing seemed that funny anymore.

"He didn't hurt you?" the man asked.

"Mr. Solomon is my teacher. He would never hurt me."

"Are you sure we can't get you something? Some hot cocoa, maybe?"

"I don't want cocoa. I want to know why a six-person grab team just surrounded J

oe Solomon. I want to know why one of the CIA's best operatives had to break me

out of M16's protection to talk to me. I mean, we are on the same side, aren't w

e?"

And then the man's smile disappeared - faded in a flash. "Oh, we know who our fr

iends are."

"Really? Because it seems -"

"What happened on the bridge?"

"That's what I'm asking you."

"What did Joe Solomon say on the bridge?" he gritted his teeth as he reworded hi

s question.

"I don't know. It all happened so fast. I didn't really understand."

Again he laughed, and this time mumbled, "Of course you didn't."

"What's your name?" I asked, but he didn't answer. "You're MI6, right?"

"Impressive," he said, but something in his tone told me he wasn't impressed at

all.

"Who are you? Where are the Baxters?"

He shifted in his seat and leaned forward. "Thanks to the Baxters, half of Londo

n saw what happened today, which, in our business, is a bad thing. So the Baxter

s are a little tied up at the moment."

I didn't know what was worse, that Bex's parents were in trouble because of me,

or that the man across from me was talking to me like I was an outsider - a frau

d. Sure, I am a sixteen-year-old girl-slash-operative-in-training get me wrong,

the sixteen-year-old -girl part has come in seriously handy on occasion, but he

was giving me the kind of look I've come to expect from people who didn't know t

he truth about my school - and the man across from me was supposed to know the t

ruth.

At least I thought he was.

"Um . . . just out of curiosity," I said, "what level clearance do you have?"

"What level of clearance do you have?"

"I asked you first."

The man smirked, then said, "High enough." Which wasn't really an answer, but I

didn't think this was the time to say so.

"Why is everyone looking for Mr. Solomon?" I asked. When the man leaned back in

his chair, I leaned closer and searched his blue eyes. "There's been some kind o

f mistake," I told him. "Call the Gallagher Academy. Call my mother.

"What did Joe Solomon tell you on the bridge?" the man snapped, but I barely hea

rd the words.

"My mother is Rachel Morgan, operative ID 145-23-6741. Headmistress of the Galla

gher Academy for Exceptional Young Women. You have to-"

"I know who your mother is," he stated calmly. "Now tell me about Joe Solomon!"

I let the words wash over me, tried to find the center of my rage, of my fear, b

efore I slowly whispered, "The pigeons. Mr. Solomon told me to follow the pigeon

s."

I waited for him to laugh again, but this time he studied me. "Does that mean an

ything to you?"

"No."

"Not a lesson you've had? A cutout you've used?" he asked, then shook his head i

n frustration. "A cutout is a go-between two spies might use to carry informatio

n between -"

"I know what a cutout is."

"And the pigeons don't mean anything to you?" he asked again.

I closed my eyes, thought back to the feeling of the cold wind on my face and th

e pressure of Mr. Solomon's hands on my arms, but it was his eyes that I saw mos

t plainly.

"It happened so quickly. He was scared. He wasn't himself."

"There's good reason for that," the man said without a hint of emotion. "You don

't know Joe Solomon."

"You're wrong," I said flatly. "There's been a mistake. Mr. Solomon is on the Ga

llagher Academy faculty. He's CIA, and he came to London to protect me or warn m

e . . . he was just worried because of the threat."

"You still don't get it, do you?" he was almost smiling as he closed the folder.

"Joe Solomon is the threat."

"That's ridiculous," I shot back. "Mr. Solomon is my teacher."

The man stood. "You can stop calling him 'mister,' young lady." He walked to the

door and rapped on the glass. "Joe Solomon will never be your teacher again."

Chapter Six

Over the next six nights the Baxters and I slept in five different safe houses.

There was seemingly abandoned gardener's shed on an estate in Scotland, an apart

ment with a view of Big Ben, a cottage in Wales, and something that could best b

e described as a small castle, which came complete with a suit of armor and a pe

acock.

Every morning we would drive. Every second there were guards.

Sure, you might think that full access to that many covert strongholds would hav

e made Bex and me the envy of the entire student body; but as a rule, we Gallagh

er Girls don't envy anything that involves guards (when you're the guardee) and

spiders (and MI6 safe houses have a lot of spiders.)

On the sixth night I woke in a narrow bed to the peaceful sound of Bex's breathi

ng and something else - a muffled word: "Caven."

For a moment, I lay there, then I slipped out of the lower bunk.

The floorboards were surprisingly quiet beneath my feet. It was freezing, but I

didn't stop to rummage through the duffel bags and suitcases that sat open but n

eatly packed, ready for a quick escape. Instead, I walked out to the hall and ea

sed toward the narrow, crooked staircase that led from the second story to the s

mall landing outside the kitchen.

Perched on the landed, I could see Mr. Baxter's legs as he sat at the kitchen ta

ble, shifting slightly as he spoke. "Have you seen Rachel?"

"Yes," a woman said in a hoarse whisper.

"I'm surprised that was possible," Mrs. Baxter said.

The woman laughed softly. "Well I wasn't in the mood to hear that it was impossi

ble."

"I see," Mrs. Baxter said.

"Grace, how is she?" the woman asked.

"Fine," Mrs. Baxter said. "Should I go get her?"

"No."

I stood in the dark listening, while the wind blew and the castle moaned and the

woman said, "Let the squirt have her sleep."

There was only one person in the world who ever called me Squirt, so I didn't th

ink - I just stood, ready to bolt down the narrow stairs toward my aunt Abby. Bu

t then an arm was around my waist, and a hand clasped over my mouth. I glanced o

ver my shoulder and saw Bex's wide eyes gleaming in the dark.

She shook her head once, quickly. No, she was telling me. Think. We might not ge

t this chance again.

My best friend's smile was especially mischievous (which believe me, is saying s

omething) as she whispered, "I have a better idea."

Three minutes later I was standing on the top floor of the castle, looking at a

small wooden box and a less-than-sturdy-rope, listening to my best friend insist

, "You should do it."

"Why me?" I whispered, watching as the ancient box dangled in midair over a dark

, empty shaft that disappeared into the cold stone of the castle walls.

"You're shorter," Bex said. (Which I am.) "And I'm stronger," she said. (Which s

he totally could be.) "And I'm . . ."

"Afraid of spiders?" I guessed.

But Bex plowed on, " . . . still a little deaf from the percussion grenade incid

ent during final week."

So, yeah, that's how I ended up in the dumbwaiter.

I felt myself descending through the castle walls, lower and lower, while the no

ises in the kitchen grew louder and clearer.

"Are you sure you don't want some tea?" Bex's father asked.

"No thanks, Abe." My aunt's voice sounded weak - almost frail. "I haven't been s

leeping all that well, to tell you the truth."

"Neither have we," Bex's mother added.

The kettle began to whistle. A chair scrapped across the floor.

"How close was it really, Grace?" Aunt Abby asked. "Was she in any danger?"

"Cammie is in contest danger," Mrs. Baxter said as the whistling stopped.

"You saw him, Abe?" Abby asked. Even though there wasn't a doubt who he was, it

seemed to take forever for Mr. Baxter to answer.

"Yes."

"How was he?" Abby asked.

"Desperate," Bex's father answered.

"Do you believe it?" Abby asked.

"This is the way the Circle has worked for more than a hundred years . . ." Mr.

Baxter started.

"But, Abe, we knew him," Abby pressed again.

After another long pause, Mr. Baxter said, "I believe Joe Solomon is the sort of

man that no one will ever truly know."

Three seasoned and decorated operatives sat on the other side of the wall. Betwe

en them they'd probably mastered a hundred identities in a dozen countries. Name

s were just covers. Just legends. Hanging in the darkness, I wondered if anythin

g about Joe Solomon was ever real at all.

It felt as if the truth were slipping away from me, falling, until . . .

Wait, I realized too late, I was slipping - literally.

Through a crack in the top of the dumbwaiter, I could see Bex holding the frayin

g rope, trying hard to pull me back up, but the rope slipped again.

Outside, the adults kept talking. I heard Mrs. Baxter saying, "We can't tell Cam

mie until we're absolutely certain . . ."

"We can never tell Cammie," Aunt Abby said.

"Hold on!" Bex's frantic whisper echoed down the shaft as the dumbwaiter dipped

again.

This is not good, I told myself. This is not . . .

But outside the shaft, Mrs. Baxter's voice was calm. "She's almost seventeen, Ab

by. And the more she knows, the safer she'll -"

"Cammie will never be safe!" Abby said, and I remembered that a semi-stable dumb

waiter was the least of my problems.

"Hang on, Cam," Bex whispered from above. "I'm -"

"We don't know that Cammie would do something foolish," Mrs. Baxter went on.

"Of course she would," Aunt Abby laughed. "I would. Trust me, Grace, Abe. Cammie

can never know -"

Before she could finish, I felt the bottom of the dumbwaiter dropping out from u

nder me as, ten feet up the shaft, the old rope broke and I went hurling toward

the kitchen floor.

"What the -" Mr. Baxter started to yell.

With a groan, I rolled over and found myself staring at a pair of gorgeous highheeled

boots, long legs, and a familiar face looking down at me, saying, "Hey, S

quirt."

Chapter Seven

"Cammie can never know what?" I asked.

Bex was sitting beside me, the two of us in the hard, straight-backed chairs, lo

oking up at her parents and my Aunt Abby. Bex's hands were rope burned. My elbow

was bleeding. But my only concern was what had brought my mother's only sister

to England and, most important . . .

"Cammie can never know what?"

"See?" Abby said, gesturing at the two of us. "This is exactly what I'm talking

about."

"It's true." Mr. Baxter crossed his arms and eyed us both. His voice wasn't even

a little bit playful as he finished, "They are a liability."

"What cant Cammie know?" Bex asked, choosing, I guess, to let the liability thin

g slide for the time being.

"Go to bed, Cammie," my aunt ordered, sounding exactly like my mother.

"No," I said, sounding exactly like my aunt.

I was pretty sure there was about to be a hole in the space time continuum, when

Abby snapped, "Cameron!"

I was already on my feet. "So you know what you would do if you were me, and you

knew this big secret . . ." I leaned across the table, almost daring her as I f

inished, "Now, imagine what you'd do if there was something you didn't know."

As threats go, it was a good one. I could see it in Abby's eyes. After a moment,

she pulled out the chair on the other side of the table and sank into it. I tri

ed not notice the stiffness in the movement or the way she held one arm carefull

y by her side. I tried not to think about the fact that she'd almost died.

She'd almost died.

She'd almost died.

"We caught one of them." Abby's voice brought me back. "Election night . . . you

were out, and I was . . ." She trailed off.

She'd almost died.

"From the grab team that came for you, we caught one." My aunt gestured to the p

lace where she'd been shot. "We caught the one who did this. A week ago he decid

ed to start talking."

Beside me, I felt Bex shaking, her impatience coming to a boil. "What's this hav

e to do with Mr. Solomon?"

Her father warned, "Rebecca," and Abby carried on.

"The Circle works in cells - small, isolated groups. Two Circle operatives could

be sitting right beside each other and not know it. So the man in custody has s

ome knowledge of cell operatives, but he doesn't know much. He doesn't even know

why they want you, Cammie."

She looked right at me, and I felt my heart fall.

"He only knows the people he's worked directly with and . . ."

As my aunt trailed off, I saw Mrs. Baxter tense. Mr. Baxter brought his hand to

his mouth as if he couldn't bear to say the words aloud.

"And he knows the people he was recruited with," Abby said slowly. Her gaze fell

to the floor. "When he was Blackthorn."

For days I'd wanted answers - I'd begged and pleaded for the truth. But now we w

ere there and I didn't want to hear it.

"No. That's just what MI6 thinks, for some reason, but they're wrong. There's be

en some kind of mistake." I tried to push away, but Abby leaned closer.

"Joe's a double agent, Cam. He was recruited by the Circle a really long time ag

o."

"How could you say that?" I snapped back. "He's your friend."

"He was also friends with the man who did this!" she yelled, pointing to her inj

ured shoulder. She looked so angry and betrayed, and when she spoke again her vo

ice was more like a plea. "We have to believe it, Cammie. You of all people need

to believe it."

"But . . . he was CIA . . ." It sounded childish, and yet I had to say it. I was

, after all, still a child. "He was our teacher. He couldn't have been working f

or the Circle."

Mrs. Baxter was calm as she took the seat next to Abby. "Think about it, girls.

You know having operatives deep inside the Agency would be a high priority for t

he Circle. And an operative at the Gallagher Academy - an operative with so much

access to Cammie . . ."

"You're wrong," Bex said.

"It's an old and effective practice," Mrs. Baxter said softly. "Recruit operativ

es who are young, encourage them to spend their breaks training with the Circle,

working with the Circle. And then send them back to school." She was so poised

- so good and wise and beautiful that it was almost impossible to doubt her as s

he looked at us both and said, "But make no mistake, girls. We know what Joe Sol

omon did over his summer vacation."

"What if he's changed?" Bex challenged. "People change. Maybe he's not working w

ith them anymore."

"It's not the Boy Scouts," Abby answered. "It's not that easy to just walk away.

"

We sat in silence for a long time before I finally turned back to my Aunt Abby.

"Why did you come here tonight?"

"I was worried about you, Squirt. I was - "

"Where's my mom?" I heard my voice rising, but I didn't try to stop it.

"She's fine, Squirt." Abby looked at me. "She couldn't come herself, so I came.

She's fine."

"Why couldn't she come?" I blurted. "What's so important that -"

"All right, then." Mr. Baxter pushed up from the table, signaling that the Q&A p

ortion of our night was officially over. "It's best you two get some sleep. Big

day tomorrow. We'll have to get up early to get you back to school.

Tomorrow. School. Bex and I looked at each other. Wordlessly, we both stood and

started for the door. Roseville felt a million miles away.

"Abby?" Bex stopped and turned in the doorway, waited for my aunt to look up. "H

ow old . . . When he joined them . . . how old was he?"

Abby's smile was soft but sad. She swallowed hard before she said, "Sixteen."

Chapter Eight

How To Return To School

(A list by Cameron Morgan and Rebecca Baxter)

􀀀 Do laundry. This is far easier , by the way, when you're at your grandmother's h

ouse and not an MI6 safe house (because, while the latter might have far cooler

defense mechanisms, the former has a way better laundry room).

􀀀 Pack. Which is where living in a series of safe house comes in handy, because yo

u've never actually unpacked.

􀀀 Set alarms. Because even a Gallagher Girl's internal alarm clock has a tendency

to get wonky when you're dealing with vast amounts of stress and jet lag.

􀀀 Dress in layers. Because planes are always cold. And also, it's far easier to ch

ange your appearance and lose a tail if you can also lose your sweater.

􀀀 Double-check that you have the essay you wrote for Culture and Assimilation, the

codes you broke for Practical Encryption, and the research paper I did for Cove

rt Operations.

􀀀 Take the CoveOps paper out of the bag. Stomp on it. Kick it. Throw it in the tra

sh.

􀀀 Take it out of the trash and pack it again. Just in case.

It took three planes, two SUVs, and at one point a very questionable-smelling VW

van, but sixteen hours later I found myself staring through bulletproof glass a

t the bare trees and patches of half-melted snow and ice that lined Highway 10 a

s it cut through the forest like a snake. After three weeks of living like a gyp

sy in a foreign land, it felt especially strange to be coming home.

Home.

"Whatcha thinking about, Cam?" Bex poked me and smiled.

"Oh, you know . . . the usual," I said as calmly as possible while sitting in th

e back of a limousine that was as unusual as possible. (I'm pretty sure it used

to belong to the president.)

"Have you covered vehicular surveillance yet?" Aunt Abby asked.

Bex shook her head.

"Really?" Mrs. Baxter said. She sounded genuinely surprised. "I thought you woul

d have covered that in . . ."

She trailed off, but I knew what she was going to say: Covert Operations. CoveOp

s. Mr. Solomon's class.

"Oh, well. I guess there's no time like the present." She crossed her legs. "Tel

l me, Cammie, What do you see?"

Two cars ahead of us."

"Lead cars, yes." Mrs. Baxter nodded her approval, then turned to her daughter.

"Bex?"

"One tail vehicle."

"Right," Mrs. Baxter said. She went on, citing the origins of moving surveillanc

e and protection, something about the chariots of ancient Rome and the death of

Caesar, but my mind was drifting. I was watching the dozens of other cars - limo

usines just like ours (though slightly less bulletproof) that filled the road, w

aiting to carry my classmates back through our towering gates.

"I've never seen the line so long," Bex said, and I'd been thinking the same thi

ng. "Guards must still be on vacation time," she joked.

Aunt Abby shifted in the seat beside me, but she didn't say anything. I expected

the car to slow and wait its turn in line. But instead, Mrs. Baxter asked, "Wha

t's the second rule of countersurveillance?"

"Resist routine and expectations," Bex and I replied just as Mr. Baxter jerked t

he limo into the passing lane. I felt the car moving faster and faster, flying b

y the long line of cars waiting to carry my classmates back to school.

Mrs. Baxter sounded just like Bex when she said, "Exactly."

I know the Gallagher Academy. I mean, a person doesn't ruin as many white blouse

s as I have without spending a lot of time crawling through filthy sewer lines a

nd secret passageways. So as we flew farther and farther from the gates, I felt

pretty certain that we were actually speeding toward . . . nothing. Or so I thou

ght until Mr. Baxter jerked the wheel again and we found ourselves on a narrow l

ane that, I swear, I'd never seen before.

The good news was that the car was bulletproof and missile proof and had tires t

hat were filled with solid rubber instead of regular air, so they could never, e

ver go flat.

The bad news was that I was starting to figure out why Bex was such a bad driver

, because the rougher the road got, the harder Mr. Baxter pressed on the gas.

"Shortcut," Aunt Abby offered."

"To where?" Bex and I both asked.

The car was barreling down the narrow path, tires plunging in and out or rough g

orges, mud slamming against the undercarriage. Barren limbs scraped against the

sides of the car, and it felt as if we were being swallowed by the forest, drivi

ng straight toward an electrified stone wall and at least a dozen of the most hi

ghly calibrated security cameras in the world.

"Now?" Mr. Baxter asked from the front seat.

"This'll do," Abby told him."

Mr. Baxter pushed a button on the dashboard and floored the accelerator.

And for the second time during my winter vacation, I saw my (relatively short) l

ife flashed before my eyes. I gripped my best friend's hands, waiting for a cras

h that never came.

Believe it or not, I've never actually been in the Gallagher Academy lade. Well,

I hadn't been. Until then.

I still don't know what was the most shocking - the feeling of the car hitting s

ome kind of ramp at eighty miles an hour, the sensation of flying through the ai

r and soaring over the fence in a limousine, or the sudden splash that comes whe

n a two-ton car dives nose first into water, seat belts snapping, holding us int

o place.

I felt the heavy car sinking. Water was over the hood and rising above the windo

ws, but not a drop was seeping inside as we sank below the surface, into the mur

ky darkness of the lake. Fish swam past the windows as if limos drop out of the

sky every day - and neither Aunt Abby nor Mrs. Baxter seemed the least bit conce

rned that our bulletproof car was sinking.

But wait, I realized a second later. We weren't sinking.

Bex and I both leaned forward, watched the way the limo's headlights sliced thro

ugh the water as a propeller emerged from the trunk and began churning, pushing

us through the murky haze like a submarine.

"WARNING: RESTRICED AREA. AUTHORIZED PERSONAL ONLY," a shrill mechanical voice o

rdered in stereo, echoing through the car's speakers.

Mom . . ." Bex started to say, but her mother merely shushed her.

"ACQUIRING RENTAL IMAGAMES NOW," the voice said just as an orange light flashed

through the car like lightning. I squinted, and it felt like thousand tiny flash

bulbs were going off inside my eyes.

"PRESENT VOCAL RECOGNITON, PLEASE," the voice commanded, and my aunt responded,

"Abigail Cameron. CIA."

"Abraham Baxter, MI6," Bex's father said from the front seat. Beside me, Bex's m

other gave her own name, then nudged me softly in the ribs.

"Um . . . Cameron Ann Morgan . . . Gallagher Girl?" I didn't have a clue what my

official title was or should be. International terrorist target? Teenage girl?

Spy in training? Person who really, really wants to know what's going on?

I heard Bex reply in the same way I had, and then the movement stopped. Water fe

ll away as if the car were emerging from the lake, but there was no sunlight str

eaming through the windows. I peered through the bulletproof glass and saw the h

eadlights sweep over solid stone. Then the car doors popped open automatically,

and Abby stepped out, and nothing in my sixteen (almost seventeen!) years of liv

ing, or five and a half years of training, had fully prepared me for what I saw.

"There are caves under the lake?" I guessed, but Bex's mother was already out of

the car walking toward the trunk.

I'd heard of underground waterways, caverns, and caves my whole life, but I'd ne

ver known I was living right beside one, I stared at the stalactites and stalagm

ites that covered the cave's floors and ceiling. The ground sloped down behind u

s, toward the water of the lake while my best friend and I stood on an undergrou

nd shore, and I remembered that I didn't know all of my school's secrets - not e

ven close.

Before I knew it, Mr. Baxter had our bags out of the trunk and Mrs. Baxter was h

ugging Bex, whispering in her ear. I was still taking in the long, dark cave tha

t stretched far beyond the headlight's glare.

I stepped to the wall, and ran my fingers along the Gallagher Academy crest that

was carved into the stone.

"Good-bye, darling," Mrs. Baxter kissed my cheek. And then Aunt Abby's hands wer

e on my shoulders.

"Cammie, stop for a second. Before you go any farther, I need you to promise me

something."

"Okay."

"I need you to be careful this semester." She did sound like herself I realized.

She sounded like Mr. Solomon. "Cam, do you hear me?"

"Yes . . . I know."

"Do not take unnecessary chances."

"I know."

"And, Squirt, you need to be . . . strong."

I started to tell her again that I knew, but something same over me. "You aren't

coming, are you?" I asked.

Abby looked from me to the Baxters and back again. "This is as far as I go."

"But I thought maybe you'd . . . We won't have a CoveOps teacher."

"Sure you will, Squirt." She smiled slightly. "Sure you will."

Chapter Nine

"Dr. Fibs's filing cabinets?" I heard myself mutter five minutes later - still a

little shocked, to tell you the truth. But what else is a girl supposed to feel

after riding in an underwater elevator, going through six more scans (two retin

al, three voice, and one full-body), and them climbing fifty feet up a rickety s

taircase that looked older that the school itself?

So, yeah, shock probably covers it. But that didn't stop me from examining the h

idden door thorugh which we'd just emerged. "I never knew there was a passageway

behind Dr. Fibs's filing cabinets!"

"Which is the sole reason it's still functioning."

Bex and I spun around to see Professor Buckingham behind us, standing in the doo

rway of the dim room with her arms crossed, looking like the most intimidating b

arrier of all.

"Cameron, Rebecca, come with me."

There are three things it's important to know about Professor Buckingham. 1) She

's our oldest faculty member. 2) She is an absolute legend at MI6. And 3) She wa

lks faster than should be humanly possible with a bad hip. At least it seemed th

at way as Bex and I dragged our heavy bags up the staris, trying to keep pace.

"I hope your break was nice, ladies." She glanced back at us. "Or as nice as can

be expected under the circumstances."

"Professor!" Mr. Mosckowitz called from the stairs above us. "I need the -"

"My office. Second shelf," she called back without missing a beat. "I have been

asked to convey three very important facts to you both. The first is to remind y

ou that what happened in London is highly classified. Anything you might have se

en . . ." she stopped and stared at us over the top of the glasses. "Any convers

ations you might have had are not to be repeated to anyone - especially your cla

ssmates. These are stories you will not share on school grounds."

Bex shot me a quick glance, and knew she'd heard the loophole too. That's probab

ly why Professor Buckingham didn't waste a second before adding, "The second thi

ng is that there will be no more trips off school grounds." She turned to climb

again. "Extracurricular or otherwise."

Climbing up the stairs. I watched my teacher turn her back to me. "I'm sure we'v

e missed some, Cameron. And if we did . . . well . . . I do hope you'll tell us.

"

Before I could ask exactly what they might have missed, I stopped midstride and

studied the wall, staring at a piece of molding used to twist and open into a pa

ssageway to the barn where we had Protection & Enforcement. The entrance was cov

ered now - a solid wall of stone blocking it forever.

In the first-floor corridor, we passed the place where a grandfather clock used

to stand, concealing a trapdoor to the mansion's original ventilation system . .

.

Near the library, I looked for the bookcase that used to swing open to reveal a

rope ladder that ran from the mansion's basement to its roof . . .

But it was gone. They were all gone.

Professor Buckingham must have read my mind, because she stopped at the top of t

he Grand Staircase and studied me.

"I think, Cameron, that you'll find a lot of things are different."

Armed guards stood in the foyer below us, scanning the fingerprints of my classm

ates, rifling through their luggage. The stained-glass windows I loved so much w

ere covered with bulletproof glass. The Gallagher mansion had endured hundreds o

f years of storms and termites and overzealous seventh graders, but in that mome

nt I knew my school was wounded, and all I could do was stand there, staring at

its scars.

"They did all this for me?" I wasn't sure how it was supposed to make me feel -

flattered or sfe or just really, really guilty.

The hallways were quiet. The Hall of History was dark. Below us, the last of our

classmates were being cleared to come, home, but nothing of the place around me

felt like the home I'd left.

Well - that is, until I heard the screaming.

\* \* \*

"You're late!"

There was no mistaking Liz's voice. Her accent was stronger, like it always was

after a break. And yet as I turned and looked at the incredibly tiny blonde who

stood in the mouth of the Hall of History, hands on hips, I was totally not expe

cting what I saw, because Elizabeth Sutton, supergenius and amazing friend, was

angry.

Not the kind of angry that she gets when she oversleeps and wakes up to study at

6:05 a.m. and not at six sharp - not like how she gets when Bex teases her abou

t her patented system of color-coded flash cards. Not even the kind of angry tha

t comes with hearing that a teacher won't be offering assignments for extra cred

it.

Liz was angrier than I've ever seen her as she looked between the two of us, the

n threw out her arms. "I have been so worried!" She shot toward us like an eight

y-five-pound bullet, grabbing us both, squeezing with more strength than I thoug

ht humanly possible (well- when Liz is the human is question). I would have felt

pretty lame, except Bex was totally thrown too.

"Hey there, Lizzie," Bex said with what little breath she could draw. "Have a ni

ce holiday?"

But I doubt Liz even heard.

"Why didn't you two call me? Why didn't you e-mail or write or . . ." She pulled

back, then looked from me to Bex. "I told myself that you were probably bust ha

ving fun and . . . were fine. And then I got back and I saw all the new security

measures and I was so worried!"

Before I could say anything, we were back in a dual head-lock, and Liz was breat

hing deeply. And then, just as quickly, she jerked away.

"So what happened? Where'd you go? What'd you see?"

"Liz, we -"

"I'm afraid that classified." Buckingham shot me a look as she spoke.

"All of it?" Liz asked.

"All of it," Bex and I answered.

"Patricia!" Mr. Smith was running up the stairs. "We're ready to start the -"

"Coming!" Buckingham called without even a glance. She was too busy looking at m

e.

"Three things," I told her. "You said there were three things."

"Yes, Cameron, I've been asked to tell you that your mother has been temporarily

detained."

"But -"

"She's fine - I can assure you. Just a little delay. But she's not back quite ye

t."

"Patricia, Harvey seems to think we'll only have one shot at this so . . ." Our

Countries of the World teacher motioned as if to say let's hurry this along. And

, with that, Professor Buckingham made a move toward the stairs.

"The Welcome Back Dinner will begin shortly," she told us. "You girls go on."

"But . . ." I started, but then forgot what I was about to say. Because, in the

foyer below us, Madame Dabney was helping a senior explain to the guards why she

had fifteenth - century saber in her duffel bag. At the end of the hall, Dr. Fi

bs was complaining that the entrance to the seventh-grade labs had been moved an

d he couldn't find it. The Gallagher Academy was stronger than it had ever been

- technically. Physically. And yet, in a way, I could almost feel it crumbling a

round me.

"And, Cameron," Professor Buckingham said from the top of the stairs. "Welcome h

ome."

Climbing the stairs to our room, I tried not to count the secret passageways tha

t we should have passed, but didn't (4); or the underclassmen who suddenly stopp

ed whispering as soon as they saw me (6); or even the number of fingerprint-sens

itive doors we had to pass through to reach our suite (9).

I tried to concentrate on how cute Liz's hair looked (because, unlike me, she ca

n totally pull off a bob). I focused on my jetlagged body and my growling stomac

h (because while MI6 safe houses might be incredibly safe, they do not come part

icularly well stocked foodwise, let me tell you).

"So I came back a day early to show the formula for my new truth serum to Dr. Fi

bs," Liz said, eyes shining. "It's ten times more effective than Sodium Pentotha

l . . . and it makes your teeth whiter . . . and -"

"Wait," I said, stopping in the door to the suite that we'd shared since seventh

grade, knowing - sensing - that . . .

"Something's different," Bex said, easing past me into the room.

The beds were made. The curtains were open. Everything was exactly as it was sup

posed to be, except . . . it wasn't. There were shoe prints on the freshly vacuu

med rug, the faint smell of coffee and strong cologne.

I was stepping toward the dark bathroom, reaching for the light, when Bex yelled

, "Wait!"

But it was too late. A strong hand grabbed my wrist. I saw the shadow in the bat

hroom mirror, looming in the dark. And I didn't hesitate: I stepped back and gra

bbed the arm that grabbed me, spinning, using my attacker's own momentum to flin

g him through the open bathroom door and to the other side of our room.

He smashed into a dresser and sent a lamp crashing to the floor. Then Bex was th

ere, lunging forward with a textbook kick. The man quickly, avoiding her foot my

inches.

He held out his hands and opened his mouth to speak, but before he could say a w

ord, a Louis Vuitton suitcase came flying into our room, struck the man squarely

on his face, and dropped him to the floor like stone.

"Hey, Macey," I somehow managed to mumble through Bex's hair as my best friend p

ressed me into the corner of our suite. "That was a nice -"

"Don't move," Macey warned. I wasn't sure if she was talking to me of the man wh

o lay at her feet with blood pouring from his swelling nose. Macey McHenry is on

e of the most gorgeous girls in the world, but the expression on her face wasn't

beautiful in that moment. It was terrifying.

And yet, the man at her feet didn't tremble. Didn't fight. He just shook his hea

d and sai, "Now, I wouldn't do that if I were you."

I followed his gaze to the corner of the room, where Liz was trying to decide wh

ether or not to punch a big red button on the wall marked PANIC BUTTON: TO BE US

ED IN EMERGENCIES ONLY. I'd never seen it before, but I was fairly certain that

pushing it would bring the full force of the Gallagher Academy down upon our sui

te.

"A strange man is in our room, Liz. Push it!" Bex ordered (Sounded a tad irritat

ed that she hadn't been the one to hit him with a suitcase).

"No," I blurted. I looked past the blood and swelling nose and focused on the bl

ue eyes that I'd last seem staring at me across a cold, metal table.

"That's right." The man almost smiled as he stared up the four of us and said, "

I'm not a stranger. Am I, Ms. Morgan?"

Chapter Ten

So okay, technically I had seen him once before, but he was still a total strang

er. After all, he hadn't given me his name in London - no rank, no serial number

. I knew he had high enough clearance to be in a top secret MI6 facility and an

equally top secret school. But if I didn't know Joe Solomon, then I didn't know

any man.

Unfortunately, knowing something and convincing Liz of something are two differe

nt things.

"But why is he doing the security check of our room?" she pleaded after we'd cha

nged into our uniforms and stared downstairs. "Is he on the security staff?"

"I'm not sure, Liz, I admitted. "He's just an agent I met in London."

Liz was practically jogging to keep pace beside me, her hand on the banister. "S

o he was on your protection detail?"

I looked at Bex and shrugged. "Not exactly."

"Did you met him?" Liz asked whirling on Bex.

"No," Bex said truthfully. "I didn't."

"You left her alone?"

I'd almost forgotten that Macey was there, to tell you the truth. She'd been so

quiet, walking ahead of us, but now she was standing at the bottom of the stairc

ase, glaring up at Bex.

"I thought we agreed . . ." Macey started, then stopped suddenly.

"Agreed to what?" I asked, but got nothing. "What?" I asked again. "Did you guys

get together before break and agree to never let me go someplace by myself? Or

was it more like and agreement to monitor my mood and behavior so you could warn

someone if I was about to crack up and do something stupid?"

My three best friends in the world looked at each other as if they'd all forgott

en how to speak English. Finally, Bex said, "Both."

The big double doors of the Grand Hall were standing open. I smell fresh bread a

nd heard the voices of a hundred girls talking, laughing. I was home. After week

s of running and hiding, I was finally home; but looking at my roommates, I reme

mbered that being a Gallagher Girl sint about a building. It's about a sisterhoo

d.

I remembered that I'd never really left.

"She didn't leave me, Macey," I said. "They hauled me in for questioning one day

, and he's the one who did it." I stepped toward the Grand Hall, with one last s

mile back at my friends. "She didn't leave me."

\* \* \*

Four things came to mind as I took my regular seat at the junior table. 1) Being

on the run in a foreign country is enough to make a girl seriously miss our awe

some chef's cooking. 2) The windows of the Grand Hall had been upgraded to a sub

stance that could probably survive a direct hit from a missile. 3) The packets o

f sweetener on the table now bore the words "The contents of this packet have be

en certified psychoactive-free."

But it was the fourth thing that I hadn't really been expecting: silence. As soo

n as I sat down, it felt like the entire table - the entire hall - stopped talki

ng.

Only Bex seemed to be immune to the silence as she threw one leg over the bench

and took her place next to Macey. "Everyone have a good holiday?" She reached fo

r the pitcher of water at the center of the table and filled her glass. And stil

l the silence drew longer.

"I said," Bex repeated slowly, "did everyone have a nice holiday?"

"Yes."

"Sure."

"Uh-huh," everyone hurried to say, but the eyes of my classmates . . . the eyes

still stayed on me: Cameron Ann Morgan, Chameleon no more.

And then, just as quickly, their gazes passed to Tina Walters.

"So, um . . . Cammie," Tina started, "how was your break?"

"Our holiday was lovely, Tina," Bex answered for me. "Thank you for asking."

Her back was perfectly straight as she said this. She gently shook out a linen n

apkin and laid it across her lap. Madame Dabney would have been so very proud, b

ut of course Madame Dabney wasn't there - none of our teachers were - so maybe t

hat's why Tina felt safe putting her elbows on the table and leaning closer.

"But did they . . . you know . . . catch them?" she asked, maybe because she's t

he daughter of both a spy and a gossip columnist and she wasn't going to rest un

til she heard the full story. Or maybe she was just hoping for a different story

from the one that should have obvious to every girl in the (recently reinforced

) Grand Hall.

"No, Tina," I said carefully, "they didn't. Not yet."

"But they have a lot of good leads, don't they?" Eva Alvarez asked.

"Of course they do." Bex's gaze found mine, the unspoken words coursing between

us: And his name is Joseph Solomon.

"Yeah. I bet your mom and Mr. Solomon are going to find something any day now,"

Anna Fetterman said, and I glanced around the Grand Hall, processing, thinking,

realizing that no one had heard a rumor. Not a single one of my classmates had o

verheard their moms and dads whispering about a rogue operatives and sleeper age

nts in the middle of the night.

"Yeah," Anna said again. "Mr. Solomon will catch them."

She nodded and smiled and sounded so sure.

I nodded and smiled and wanted to cry.

To them, Mr. Solomon wasn't a sixteen-year-old boy who had joined the Circle. He

was still was man who had walked through the double doors at the back of that v

ery room a year and a half before.

I turned and looked at the doors and almost jumped out of my skin when they swun

g open - as if I'd willed it to happen, traveled back in time. I half expected t

o see Joe Solomon among the long line of teachers making their formal entrance d

own the center aisle. I felt the room around me changing as, one by one, my clas

smates counted heads, scanned the line, and realized someone was missing.

I was staring down at the table, unable to look, as Tina asked, "Hey where's Hea

dmistress Morgan?"

Buckingham had said she wasn't back yet. That she was detained . . . delayed. An

d delayed meant running late. Delayed meant "back in a flash."

Buckingham hadn't said gone.

"She's got to be here," I said flatly, certain Tina had missed her. "My mom has

to be back by now," I said, despite that fact that Professor Buckingham was movi

ng to my mother's place behind the podium at the front of the room.

I was standing, desperate for a better look, when Buckingham asked, "Women of th

e Gallagher Academy, who comes here?" and every girl in the room stood there too

.

The hall echoed. "We are the sisters of Gillian."

"Why do you come?"

"To learn her skills. Honor her sword. And keep her secrets," my classmates repl

ied, but I didn't say the words. I was too busy staring at Professor Buckingham,

who as standing proudly behind the Gallagher Academy crest as if that were her

place - her job.

"Welcome back, ladies. I have a few announcements," she said with no more emotio

n than when we'd stood in the Hall of History and she'd told me my mother had be

en detained.

"Headmistress Morgan is not able to be with us tonight, so it's my duty to infor

m you that Joe Solomon will not be teaching our Covert Operations courses this s

emester."

She said it just like that - no excuses, no explanations - as a gasp went throug

h the room.

"Fortunately, the Gallagher Academy has a long list of alumni and friends from w

hich it can choose its faculty. Therefore, I am pleased to welcome an operative

who has excelled on many continents, working in some of the most challenging cir

cumstances that one can experience in the clandestine services."

I knew what she was going to say, of, course. A part of me had known it as soon

as I had felt the hand on my arm and heard the voice - long before Liz asked her

questions. When I turned, I saw those blue eyes staring back me. I heard Profes

sor Buckingham say, "Please join me in welcoming Agent Edward Townsend."

Watching the man from London make his way down the center aisle, a hundred thoug

hts rushed through my mind: Who is this guy, really? What does he want with us?

Can a suitcase really do that much damage? But Liz was the one who asked what my

roommates and I were all thinking.

"We don't like him, do we?"

"No," Bex answered for me as our new CoveOps teacher made his way to the front o

f the room. "I don't think we do."

He looked directly at me as he passed, but he didn't wink - didn't smile. (Of, c

ourse, technically, he probably just didn't want to turn his back on Macey.)

"This is probably a good thing, Cam." I could feel Liz staring at me. "The only

way your mom and Mr. Solomon would miss the start of school is if they're really

close to finding something big. They'll find it and then they'll be back."

"I bet Mr. Solomon is this close to catching the Circle." She looked at me. "Rig

ht?"

I know this is going to sound crazy, but when you're a spy, your life isn't defi

ned by the lies you tell, but by the truths. A lie wouldn't change anything. I s

at there, numb, knowing that the truth . . . the truth could set me free.

And that was how I found the strength to whisper, "Mr. Solomon is the Circle."

Chapter Eleven

In our room an hour later, Bex was the one who told the story. About the Tower a

nd the Circle and the mad look in our teacher's eyes as he stood shaking on the

bridge. It sounded like a dozen other crazy tales she'd brought back after break

, but this one, I knew, was true.

"He was sixteen?" I watched Liz plug that number into some formula in her mind,

then shake her head as if it didn't compute. "No, he couldn't have been bad. I m

ean he can't be. He is . . . I mean, he was . . ."

"Our age," Macey finished for her.

One of the downsides of going to a school where they teach you that you're capab

le of anything is that eventually you start to believe it. But none of us had ev

er thought ourselves capable of that.

"How does someone our age end up working for Circle?" Macey asked in disbelief.

"Blackthorne," I said simply. "The Circle recruits at Blackthorn."

"Cammie, no," Liz started, already knowing where my thoughts had gone. "Zach can

't be . . ."

"But he might be. These are the facts: We know Zach was in London. And D.C. And

Boston. Zach knew the Circle wanted me before we even knew the Circle existed."

I looked down at my hands. "And we knew Zach's always been close to Mr. Solomon.

They've both always known too much."

"Cam, no," Macey ordered. "Stop it. Even if Mr. Solomon is a double agent or wha

tever, that doesn't mean Zach is too."

"Bex's mom said that having someone at the Gallaher Academy - having someone clo

se to me - would be a high priority." I laughed sadly. "And Zach got pretty clos

e."

"Cam, that doesn't mean anything." Liz rushed toward me. "Maybe Mr. Solomon used

to work for the Circle, but now -"

"He's the good guy?" I guessed.

"Yeah," Liz said.

"Good guys don't jump into rivers in the middle of winter to get away from other

good guys," I answered. "Besides, I don't think the Circle really offers early

retirement."

"Okay, so Joe Solomon's a traitor . . ." Macey said as simply as if she'd said "

So Joe Solomon looks good in turtlenecks." "Do you really think he'd be stupid,

too?" she stepped closer. "Think about it, Cammie. Why was Mr. Solomon there?"

"He said I had to follow the pigeons."

"Follow the what?" Liz asked.

"He was talking crazy, okay?" I took a deep breath. "One second he was telling m

e to run, and then . . . you know."

"So you're saying that one of the CIA's best undercover operatives - not to ment

ion one of the most wanted men in the world - walked through an MI6 surveillance

detail just to tell you to follow the pigeons?" Macey didn't try to hide her di

sbelief.

"Yeah," I said. He said he had to see me before I got back to school. And he sai

d when I got back to school I had to follow the pigeons."

"Tell me this, Cam." Macey placed her arm around her shoulder. She seemed so muc

h taller than me then. "Do you believe Mr. Solomon is working for the Circle?"

"Abby and the Baxters say he is."

"What do you say?" Macey asked.

"It's true," Bex answered for me, leaning against the wall, arms crossed. "My mu

m and dad have been taking me on missions since before I could walk. They've nev

er lied to me before. They wouldn't start lying to me about this." She turned an

d looked right at me. "Abby would never lie to you about this."

Sometimes I hate it when my friends are right. Unfortunately, it happens a lot.

"But, Bex, your parents weren't there on election night," Macey countered. "Abby

was there, but she was half dead. Cam, you were drugged and practically knocked

unconscious, so you won't remember either - but I do." She shivered a little.

"I remember everything. Everyone was worried that night, but Mr. Solomon was ter

rified. He was as worried about you as your mother was."

"Mr. Solomon's been working for the Circle since he was sixteen! He's pretty goo

d at faking things," Bex challenged.

Macey shook her head. "He wasn't faking."

"You can't know that," Bex said.

Macey laughed softly. "I know fake love when I see it."

I didn't know what to say, so I sank to the floor and rested my arms on my knees

, suddenly far too tired for the first day of school.

On the other side of the room, Liz sat perfectly still on her bed, weighing opti

ons, waiting to cast the tie-breaking vote. When she spoke, her voice was so low

. "Cam, where's your mom?"

"Buckingham said she's been temporarily detained. Whatever that means." I sighed

. "She didn't even some to England after . . . everything."

"I wish she was here," Bex admitted. "There is something they're not telling us.

"

I pictured Zach, his breath fogging in the air as he'd said They know more than

we know. But my mother was gone. The Baxters and Abby were a thousand miles away

. That morning Bex and I had walked away from England - from our last chance at

answers - except . . .

I smiled.

"Cam," Liz said softly, "What is it?"

"Townsend."

"What?" Liz said. "Do you think he's going to be a good teacher?"

I shook my head.

"Do you think he's hot?" Macey asked.

I laughed.

"Then why are you smiling?" Liz's voice went up and entire octave, but I just lo

oked at her - thought about a folder on a metal table and eyes that looked like

they'd seen everything.

"I think he knows things."

Chapter Twelve

Covert Operatives Report

When Operatives Morgan, McHenry, Baxter, and Sutton (hereafter referred to as Th

e Operatives) returned to the Gallagher Academy for the spring semester of their

junior year, they were faced with an absent mother-slash-headmistress, a fugiti

ve former teacher, and a tall, dark, and cocky new faculty member who, presumabl

y, knew far more than he was saying.

The operatives were resolved to make him say.

The first day of the semester started as semesters often do.

Mr. Smith gave a really good pop quiz on the world's most unstable political reg

imes and the top five ways to undermine each. By midmorning Madame Dabney was pa

ssing out place cards and instructing us to prepare a seating chart for a state

dinner that includes two ambassadors, five senators, and three rogue operatives

who may be selling nuclear technology to the highest bidder.

But walking out of Madame Dabney's tearoom that Monday morning, I couldn't help

but remember that nothing would ever be "typical" again.

"That's it. It's official!" Tina Walters whispered to me. "Joe Solomon is in dee

p."

I shot an anxious glance at Bex, but Tine went slowly, savoring every word.

"According to my sources, he hasn't been farmed out to any cooperating agencies.

He's not listed on the in-action list. And he's not exactly the type for offici

al cover operatives, so wherever he is . . . our teacher is in deep, deep cover.

"

The entire junior class, and I recognized the look that was spreading through th

e narrow hall. If possible, Joe Solomon had just gotten cooler. And hotter.

"I bet he and your mom are on some super-secret and dangerous mission, Cam," Cou

rtney Bauer guessed as we emerged into the main corridor on the second floor.

"Yeah." Anna Fetterman's voice had taken on a dreamy quality. "I bet your mom an

d Mr. Solomon are going to find them. I bet . . ."

Anna went on, but I tuned out, barely registering the sounds of my school - slam

ming doors and running girls. I looked into center of the foyer below, where a h

alf dozen teachers stood huddled together in a way I'd never seen before.

"Cam?" Anna asked. "Are you okay?"

One by one the teaches in the foyer began to break away and start down the halls

or up the stairs.

"Cam?" Anna asked, her voice higher.

"Sorry, Anna," I muttered. "I've . . . got to go."

Professor Buckingham was already at the top of the Grand Staircase, walking towa

rd the Hall of History, when I cried, "Professor? Professor Buckingham!"

"Yes, Cameron?" She didn't snap the words, but they sounded weary. She seemed ti

red as she stood beside the sword that had belonged to Ioseph Cavan. "Is there s

omething I can help you with?"

I wanted to know why my mother's door was closed to everyone, even me. I wanted

to ask how it could all be true about Mr. Solomon - how it could be true at all.

But there was only one thing that I knew it was okay to ask.

"It's spring," I said.

"It is?" Professor Buckingham glanced out a window streaked with freezing rain.

"I mean, it's the spring semester. You said last fall that you might be able to

teach me about the Circle of Cavan in the spring. And . . . it's spring."

All around us, girls were filing into classrooms, rushing out the front doors to

P&E. the halls were growing quiet. School was back in session - life was back t

o normal. But behind Patricia Buckingham, my mother's office door stayed closed.

"Junior year curriculum is very challenging, Cameron dear," she said.

"I know that's why I -"

"You need to focus and learn as much as you can."

"I know, but the Circle is -"

"Cameron, the lessons of this school are essential for fighting the evils of the

world - no matter what that evil calls itself. You have to learn those lessons,

" she snapped, and I knew it wasn't advice; it was an order. And she was right.

My classes weren't less important now. Not by a long shot.

"And even if that were not the case, I'm afraid there are a number of . . . pres

sing matters that require my attention for the time being."

And then it hit me: for the first time that I could remember, our oldest faculty

member looked . . . old.

Her hands were dry. Her eyes were puffy. And I could have sworn I heard her voic

e crack as she said, "Now, if I'm not mistaken, you're about to be late for Cove

rt Operations. You don't want to keep our newest teacher waiting."

Chapter Thirteen

Running through the halls toward the elevator to Sublevel Two, I tried to brace

myself for what I had to do.

1. Learn what (if anything) Agent Townsend knew about it my mother, Mr. Solomon,

and the Circle of Cavan.

2. Discern whether Agent Townsend would lean toward practical or theoretical exa

minations and how to best master each. (Because being the target of an internati

onal terrorist organization is no excuse for letting your GPA slide.)

When I reached the small hallway beneath the Grand Staircase and the large mirro

r that was supposed slide aside and show me the way to the Covert Operations cla

ssrooms, I pressed my hand against it waited for the eyes of the painting behind

me to flash green. But the glass beneath my palm stayed cool, and nothing happe

ned.

It was first lecture with Agent Townsend, and I was already late. I actually kno

cked on the mirror as if there were someone back there, waiting to let me in.

Still nothing.

I was turning, starting for the other elevators, when I saw it: a small, neatly

typed piece of paper taped to the wall.

ATTENTION STUDENTS: UNTIL FURTHER NOTICE, THE SUBLEVELS WILL BE CLOSED. ALL COVE

RY OPERATIONS COURSES WILL TAKE PLACE IN ROOM 132.

I didn't know what was happening. All I knew for certain was that I was late, so

I turned only heel and ran through the empty hall, past the library and the stu

dent - all the way to the classroom that had been nothing but a big storage clos

et at the end of last semester. I almost ran right past it, but at the last seco

nd I grabbed that door frame and skidded to a stop.

"Oh, there you are."

Okay, I don't know about regular schools, but let's just say that at the world's

premiere spy school, tardiness isn't exactly typical. And when it does happen,

it's almost always met with questions like "Was there explosion in the chemistry

lab?" or "Do you have another concussion?" It is most certainly never met with

"Oh, there you are."

But those were the words Agent Townsend chose, and for someone who had questione

d me in top secret facility just hours after one of the world's most wanted men

had pseudo kidnapped me, he certainly didn't seem concerned with where I'd been.

"I'm sorry, I -"

"Just . . . sit," he said with barely a glance in our direction.

I took the desk next to Bex, and without looking at the clock, I knew I was thre

e and a half minutes late. Three and a half minutes in which my classmates had b

een sitting in silence waiting. And as I joined them, I realized our teacher was

n't waiting for me.

Four minutes.

Five minutes.

Ten minutes, we waited. The only noise was the sound of Agent Townsend turning t

he pages of his newspaper.

It was a test, I told myself. He wanted to see if we were memorizing the front p

age of the paper he held; he was gauging how still we could be, how silently we

could sit. Great operatives are naturally patient, I thought. He wanted to see i

f we could wait.

Little did he know, Tina Walters doesn't wait for anyone. (Or, well, she does, b

ut evidently she draws the line at ten minutes.)

"Mr. Townsend?"

Our teacher didn't glance up, didn't say a single word.

"Sir," Tina went on, "is there something we could do to help you get started wit

h your lecture?" She sounded very much like Madame Dabney, but Mr. Townsend wasn

't impressed.

"No," he said flatly, then raised his newspaper higher, threw his feet to the de

sktop, and leaned back in his chiar. "Who can tell me about Joe Solomon?"

It sounded like a pop quiz. It looked like a pop quiz. But I couldn't shake the

feeling that the entire junior class had just been picked up and hauled across t

he Atlantic - plopped down inside Baring Cross Station.

Townsend moved the paper aside for a split second and pointed to Tina Walters, w

ho was about to pull her arm out of her socket, she was raising her hand so wild

ly. "You," he said.

"Agent Joseph Solomon. CIA operative. Faculty member of the Gallagher Academy fo

r Exceptional Young Woman -"

"Know all that," our new teacher interrupted. "Next."

"He said that after break we would probably start with secret writing techniques

," Anna told him. "And if that went well, he promised we could -"

"Boring," Townsend countered.

I could feel my classmates watching closer, sitting up straighter - literally ri

sing to the challenge. But I knew this was no test - it was an interrogation. We

weren't students in that moment; we were witnesses who'd been locked in a room

with a double agent almost every day for a year and a half.

"Where did he go?" Agent Townsend slowly turned the page of his paper. "How did

he fill his days? What did he want . . . here?"

"He's a teacher," Eva Alvarez said. "He wanted to teach."

Agent Townsend laughed, quickly and softly, but there was no joy in his voice as

he said, "I'm sure he did."

"I'm sorry, sir?" Anna said. "I don't understand."

"I'm sure you don't," muttered.

The operatives were able to ascertain that whatever brought Agent Townsend to th

e Gallagher Academy, it was NOT a love of teaching.

Then the feet came off the desk and the paper went down and I got a good look at

his swollen nose (note to self: even soft-sided luggage can make an excellent w

eapon).

"Where does he spend his time?"

"Well, usually we see him in Sublevel Two," Tina admitted, and an odd look cross

ed Agent Townsend's face.

"Nowhere else?"

"Everywhere else," Anna replied.

It occurred to me that it would have been a good lesson - attest of our memories

, of our powers of observation. But Agent Townsend didn't know that. Agent Towns

end didn't care.

"Known associates?" he asked, then shook his head as if for a second he'd forgot

ten that he thought we were idiots. "I mean, who were his friends? Did he have a

ny allies? Anyone he was especially close to?"

"Sometimes he lets Mr. Mosckowitz go with us on missions," Anna said.

"He used to work out in the P&E barn with Mr. Smith," Kim Lee added.

"I think he might be really close to Headmistress Morgan." Tina giggled, but the

n he glanced at me and stopped.

"Is that so?" Townsend crossed his arms and looked at me. "What about you, Ms. M

organ? What do you know about Joseph Solomon?"

Freezing rain hit against the windows. I shivered, remembering the cold wind and

look in Mr. Solomon's eyes as we stood on the bridge, and the fact that I belie

ved him. For a year and a half, I'd believed everything.

The operatives hated Joe Solomon.

"Sir." I heard Bex's voice. "Mr. Solomon used to say that and operative's best w

eapon is her memory, and that -"

Agent Townsend finally stopped staring at me. "You're the Baxter."

"yes, sir." Bex beamed.

"I know your parents' work," he said.

Bex smiled. "Thank you, sir."

"That wasn't a compliment."

The operatives missed Joe Solomon.

Townsend stood and walked around his desk, settled back in his chair. "I've know

n about the Gallagher Academy and its girl for most of my career." He leveled us

with a gaze. "And that wasn't a compliment either."

I noticed something about his accent then. I replayed his words in my mind, whil

e, outside, the sleet fell harder, and the room turned colder, and I knew the en

tire class was starting to feel the chill.

"Fine, if this is all you are willing to bring to today's -"

"How long were you stationed in Mozambique?"

Townsend was rarely surprised, I could tell, and yet my question stopped him. "E

xcuse me?" he said.

"Your Swahili this morning at breakfast was very distinctive." He looked at me a

s if he wanted to protest, but I didn't give him the chance. "You're left-handed

, but the calluses on your palm say that you probably shoot with your right hand

." I thought of how he'd moved when he pulled his feet from the desk. "You favor

your left knee. I'm betting you hurt it . . . what? Six months ago. Your accent

is lower-middle class, but you went to a good school, didn't you? Someplace lik

e this, I'm betting."

"Nice trick, Ms. Morgan."

"It's not a trick." I shook my head. "It's last fall's midterm. Mr. Solomon -"

"Joe Solomon is gone," he snapped. "I make that point very clear in London, or h

ave you forgotten?"

I'd forgotten nothing about that day - not the color of Townsend's shirt of the

cool feel of the hard, metal table.

"Why aren't we having this class in Sublevel Two?" I asked, and watched his eyes

change. "Were you not given clearance?"

"Oh, I assure you, Ms. Morgan, I'll see all of this school I need to see." He wa

ved toward the door. "Now go. Consider yourselves dismissed.

Chapter Fourteen

Over the course of the following week, The Operatives were able to ascertain the

following:

􀀀The work "pigeon" appeared in nine of Joseph Solomon's case files, legend histori

es, or lesson plans.

􀀀There are approximately 4,902 Pigeon Roads, Pigeon Lanes, Pigeon Rivers, etc. in

the United States - not one of which was in Roseville, Virginia.

􀀀An incredibly thorough search of the Gallagher Academy servers revealed database

labeled "Mr. Solomon's Super Secret Pigeons File," as much as The Operatives wan

ted to find one.

􀀀As far as mysteries go, "the pigeons" had nothing to do with Agent Townsend.

\* \* \*

"This is useless," Liz exclaimed, her voice echoing off the high-vaulted ceiling

of the P&E barn.

"No it isn't," Bex said, grabbing the crossbow out of her hand. (Oh yeah, I said

crossbow.) "All Gallagher Girls have to be proficient with two weapons, and I'm

telling you the crossbow is -"

"Not this," Liz said, grabbing the weapon back and giving it a good shake (at wh

ich point both Macey and I dropped to the floor and took cover). "Operation Town

send," she whispered.

Outside, a fresh blanket of snow was falling over the grounds, and the tall wind

ows were covered with fog. Sophomores fenced on the mats below us. A group of se

venth graders were braving the climbing wall, while the whole barn echoed with t

he thuds and cries of girls who had been locked inside for way too long.

"The man is a ghost, guys," Liz said, her voice low. "I mean, seriously ghosty.

He went to some ritzy boarding school in England on scholarship -"

"Good call on that, by the way," Bex told me, but Liz never even slowed down.

Then he joined MI6 right out of college. I'm pretty sure he was stationed in eas

tern Europe, because he did that big sting operation in Romania ten years ago."

"The one with the vampire bats?" Bex asked, eyes wide.

"Yeah," Liz said, eyes wider. "And I'm pretty sure he was the one who took down

that group of KGB generals who were smuggling old Soviet missiles using a travel

ing circus as cover.

"Operation Big Top?" Bex exclamimed.

"Uh-huh," Liz said. "But then . . . after that . . . it's like he disappeared. I

mean . . . nothing."

"Which means something," I said, and Liz nodded slowly.

"Something big."

"Bex, what does our surveillance tell us?" I asked, turned to the girl beside me

.

"He never takes the same route twice; barely eats, barely sleeps, and confides i

n absolutely no one."

"He's up to something," I said, "This is guy doesn't do anything by accident, so

if he's here, it's for something big, and it doesn't have anything to do with t

eaching."

"Liz," Macey said, panic in her voice. "Liz, you're going to want to hold that -

"

"Sorry!" Liz yelled to the girls on the rock wall, who now had to navigate aroun

d an arrow.

"Hey, Morgan!"

I turned and saw Erin Dillard walking through the barn, as if member of the seni

or class regularly came up to talk to juniors, which, let me tell you, they don'

t. "We need to talk."

"Hi, Erin," I said. "Did you have a nice winter -"

"Where's your mother?" As soon as Erin spoke, I knew this want a chat. It was a

mission.

"I'm not sure."

"Do you know how to get a message to her?" Erin asked. "Dead letter drop? Cutout

? Anything?"

"What's wrong?" I asked.

"What do you think? Townsend. I'm a senior, Morgan," Erin said with a cautious l

ook around the barn. "I got offered a spot in the MI6/CIA Cross-Agency Deep Cove

r Training Program."

"That's awesome," Bex said, but Erin merely shrugged.

"Thanks. I got the letter over break. I'm supposed to report to work -to work -i

n June, and do you know what our CoveOps homework was this weekend?"

We all shook our heads.

"We didn't have any."

"No!" Liz exclaimed.

Erin nodded. "A few months from now I'm going to be in deep cover somewhere, and

this is how I'm supposed to get ready?"

She was right, of course. Mr. Townsend's class wasn't just a waste of time. It w

as dangerous.

Erin Shook her head, then turned to stare out the window and together we watched

our newest teacher walk across the grounds then disappear without a trace into

the falling snow. "What's he really doing here?"

Erin's a great student. She's going to be an awesome spy. As she turned and walk

ed away, her whisper seemed to echo, settling down on the four of us.

Our mission was clear.

"He'll be a hard target," Bex said.

"I know."

"We're talking this-guy-makes-Mr.-Smith-look-like-a-candy-striper hard."

I nodded. "Yeah that's right."

"So the question is," Bex said slowly, "how far are you willing to go?"

I looked at my three best friends in the world. "How far is there?"

Chapter Fifteen

Covert Operations Report

Operatives Morgan, Baxter, Sutton, and McHenry began a dangerous information-see

king operation on a highly hostile target. And teacher.

The Operatives were able to ascertain the following:

􀀀Agent Townsend never sleeps past eight or goes to bed before two.

􀀀The Target runs five miles every day and was seen doing 500 sit-ups in a row (whi

ch, according to Operative Baxter, isn't nearly as impressive as it sounds).

􀀀The Target strictly avoids both sugar and caffeine (which, according to Operative

Morgan, is every bit as crazy as THAT sounds).

􀀀Despite two weeks on the Gallagher Academy faculty, The Target has acquired zero

friends.

I've had of lot of memorable meals in five and a half years at the Gallagher Aca

demy, but that was one of the few times when I didn't actually eat anything.

"He's not coming, Liz said, her gaze glued to the big double doors at the back o

f the room. Bex and Macey and I stayed quiet, glancing around the Grand Hall, th

e two of them picking at their food as we took turns staring at the doors.

Liz was the one who voiced what we were all thinking. "What if he doesn't come?"

"Hey, Macey, can I have that -"

"No!" the four of us cried in unison. Macey grabbed a banana out of Courtney Bau

er's hands, which might have looked kinda strange. But at the Gallagher Academy,

"strange" is a completely relative thing.

"Sorry, Courtney," I said, trying to explain. "It's just that we've got this exp

eriment we're going to do later with . . ."

But then I couldn't finish because Agent Townsend was standing at the entrance o

f the Grand Hall, taking a long drink from a bottle of water. His dark curly hai

r was wet with sweat. In his black running suit, he looked as if he could have j

ust gotten back from breaking into an embassy, parachuting behind enemy lines, m

eeting with a particularly shady informant in the darkest alley of the most dang

erous city in the world. As much as I wanted to hate Agent Townsend, there was o

ne thing I didn't dare forget: he was probably a very good spy.

I looked at my roommates, knowing that for the next hour, somehow, someway, the

four of us had to be better.

"Who has eyes?" I whispered as I felt the man pass behind me.

"He's going to the buffet," Bex said, but unless you could hear her you would ha

ve sworn she was talking about the weather.

"What's he doing?" Liz asked. (Her face and voice, I'm sorry to say , were signi

ficantly less covert.)

"Apple," Macey said. Her blue eyes seemed especially big and bright as she looke

d at me and whispered again, "Apple."

It took four seconds for Liz to take the syringe from her bag. Her hands were sh

aking as I pulled the apple from my tray and held it beneath the table.

"You do realize this is probably illegal, right?" I asked, but Liz looked up at

me and smiled as if I were the mast naïve girl in the world.

"It can't be illegal, Cam. It's research."

So that was it. Our teacher's fate, my safety, and Liz's GPA all hinged on what

we were about ot do.

"You're doing great, Lizzie," Bex said, but still Liz's hand trembled.

"Liz . . ." Macey started.

"Got it!" Liz said, and in the next second the apple passed beneath the table fr

om Liz's hand to Bex's.

In a flash, Bex was up and walking toward the door while Townsend did the same.

Three seconds later my best friend was stumbling into him. The apple he's been c

arrying slipped from his grasp and tumbled through the sir, right into Bex's out

stretched palm.

"Mind where you're going, Baxter," he said as she handed one apple back to him.

But there was a glint in Bex's eyes as she turned her back to us, pulled another

apple from behind her back, and took a big bite.

I just sat there wondering what Grandma Morgan would say if she knew what we wer

e doing - no doubt something about forbidden fruit.

The Operatives engaged in a basic four-man rotating surveillance detail, trackin

g The Target through the Gallagher Mansion.

It would have been nice to have comms units. Every operative in the world can te

ll you the extreme disadvantages of tailing someone who knows what you look like

. And to be perfectly honest, it's always easier when your co-agents are all wel

l-trained and confident field agents and not . . . well . . . Liz.

"Oopsy daisy," Liz whispered as she missed a step on the big stone staircase tha

t led to the old chapel.

I could hear Townsend's steps in the corridor above me. After forty-five minutes

of following him through the library and watching from a window while Bex trail

ed him across the grounds - not to mention one very scary moment involving Liz,

a suit of armor, and Professor Buckingham's black cat - my roommates and I pause

d on the steps, listening as Townsend walked faster, but toward what or who, I d

idn't know until I heard him call, "Mosckowitz, a word."

"Oh, hello, Agent Townsend! Out for a run I see. I tried running for a while. It

was really a good . . . fit for me."

Which was sort of an understatement if you ask any of the girls who remember the

semester we had to have encryption lessons on the ground floor because Mr. Mosc

kowitz sprained both his ankles by falling into a ditch.

I watched Bex ease ahead, then signal to the three of us to follow her up the st

airs. Crouched on the landing, I could see two shadows - Agent Townsend's much l

onger and leaner that Mr. M's - as they stretched across the floor.

"Look here, Mosckowitz," Townsend said. I didn't hear a footstep but I saw his s

hadow move. "I was told you were a codes man."

"I . . . I am," Mr. Mosckowitz said, but he sounded like he didn't quite believe

it.

"I was under the impression that you were the best."

"I'm . . . pretty good," Mr. Mosckowitz said, which was perhaps the understateme

nt of the century.

"So why haven't you cleared up this mess with the sublevels? They're used for th

e instruction of Covert Operatives, are they not?" Townsend said.

"Well, yes . . ."

"And I am the Covert Operations instructor, am I not?"

"Someone needs instruct him," Bex whispered, but my best friends didn't move. We

all stayed silent, staring at the two shadows on the floor.

"Well, see, it's . . . complicated," Mr. Mosckwitz said.

Uncomplicate it," said Townsend.

"Every generation adds a new level of defenses, and while the new ones are . . .

well, they're good, the old ones are . . ."

"What?" Townsend snapped.

"Old," Mr. Mosckowitz said simply. "Dr. Fibs and I have been working on a theory

about how some of the older mechanisms might work, but to tell you the truth, m

ost of them weren't meant to be overridden. If they were ever activated, it was

supposed to be . . ." He made a gesture with his hands. "Ka boom."

Townsend gave a slow laugh "And you and Buckingham wouldn't be slow-playing this

process, would, you?"

"We could override the more recent safety protocols, and you could go down there

tonight, but . . ."

"What?"

"Some of the most top secret artifacts in the world might be destroyed, and . .

."

"What?"

"You'd probably die." Mr. Mosckowitz's shadow moved across the floor, easing awa

y.

And then the longer shadow tossed something high into the air. I saw it tumbling

, spinning. The hand that reached out to catch it moved as fast as light.

"I want access to those sublevels, Mosckowitz." There was a sickening crunch as

Townsend took a bite. "Make it happen. Make it happen soon."

"Liz!" Bex hissed twenty minutes later. "How much did you put in there?"

Liz shrugged and looked slightly guilty. And slightly wicked. It was a terribly

evil combination. "I couldn't be sure he'd eat it all, and if he just took one b

ite, that might not be enough to -"

"Liz," I whispered, needing her to get to the point.

"Five times more that recommended!" she blurted.

At the end of the hall I heard a crash. Our four heads peered around the corner

just in time to see Agent Townsend stumble away from the shards of a shattered v

ase.

We looked at Liz, who whispered, "Maybe six."

When turned back to the hall, Townsend was standing thirty feet, staring at us.

I was sure we were busted. But then Agent Townsend stopped and gave a sloppy wav

e.

"I'm going to my room!" he called, and then he turned and collapsed onto the plu

sh cushions of one of my favorite window seats. He tried to pull the red velvet

curtains around he like a blanket.

"What are you doing in my room?" he snapped as I appeared beside him. And then h

e seemed to realize that his "room" was two feet deep and three feet long. "Is t

his my room?"

I shook my head. "No."

"Oh." His blue eyes had warmed somehow, as though something in that apple had ca

used all his defenses to thaw.

"Should we ask him something to . . . you know . . . test it?" Macey asked.

When my roommates looked at me, I realized we hadn't had interrogation training

yet. Not even Mr. Solomon had taught us how to do that.

Fortunately, as with most things covert, Bex was a natural.

"Is there really a Loch Ness Monster?" she asked.

Townsend shrugged. "Of course there is. Chemical warfare training went awry in t

he thirties. Had to lock the thing up somewhere."

"Were the crown jewels really stolen and replaced with faked in 1962?"

He smiled. "Only the rubies."

"Where is Mr. Solomon?"

"That, I do not know." He raised his eyebrows. "Yet."

"Why are the CIA and MI6 after Mr. Solomon?"

"Oh, you know that, Ms. Morgan." Despite the slurred speech, the words were enou

gh to make my heart race. "Anyone who has been a part of the Circle since the ag

e of sixteen is someone we would like to have a chat with."

"Why did you come here?" Bex asked.

"To track a fox, you start at its den."

"What do you know about my mother?"

Townsend turned his head toward the window. His breath fogged up the glass .I wa

s beginning to think he hadn't heard me when he whispered, "They won't hurt her.

"

And with those words, a dread like I had never known filled my chest. "Someone h

as my mother?" I grabbed his shirt and pulled him closer, forcing him to look at

me. "Who?" I shook him. "Who has her?"

His smile was oddly vacant. "We do."

My hands went rigid, forming fists around his collar.

"We? Who's 'we'? Where is my mother?" I yelled, but Townsend was drifting. His e

yelids fluttered. He stared out the wavy glass as if he'd never seen a window be

fore.

"It is beautiful here," he said, then closed his eyes and drifted to sleep.

I released my grasp, watched him land against the pillows. He looked as peaceful

as a baby.

And then Liz slapped him. Ys, actual slappage.

He shuddered awake, his eyes clear for one brief second.

"No!" Liz yelled, slapping him again. "You're wrong!" she snapped.

"Liz . . ." Bex reached for her, but Liz lashed out again.

"You're wrong!" she yelled. "Mrs. Morgan is going to come back, and we're going

to clear Mr. Solomon's name, and then this school will have a real teacher again

."

"Oh now, I doubt that." There was something of the man from London creeping back

into his voice. He smiled. "I don't think Rachel Morgan would want to work besi

de the man who killed her husband.

Chapter Sixteen

It was too hot inside the mansion. I remember passing roaring fires and foggy wi

ndows - pushing through crowed hallways as if I might never breathe fresh air ag

ain. Fire. It felt like the world was on fire.

"Cammie!" Bex called behind me, but I didn't stop until I was across the foyer a

nd pushing against the heavy doors.

I didn't have a coat. The sky above me heavy, dark, and gray as I crossed the fi

eld that stretched from the mansion to the woods.

"Cammie," Bex called again. Behind her, I saw Liz and Macey running closer.

"Cam, are you okay?" Liz called, and I whirled.

"No!" I didn't know I was shouting. I only knew the word had been trapped inside

of me, boiling. "No! I'm not okay."

My roommates stopped, frozen. They seemed afraid to get too close.

"We don't know what he meant by that," Liz told me. "We don't know where he got

his information or if his sources are secure. We don't know what that meant."

"No." I shook my head. "That's just it. We don't know anything. I know bombs and

antidotes and how to say 'parakeet' in Portuguese, but I don't know where my fa

ther is buried."

Liz's eyes were red as they stared into mine. "Cammie, it's okay. It's going to

be okay."

"Mr. Solomon killed my dad. Mr. Solomon . . ."

As I trailed off, Bex stepped closer. She reached for me, but I jerked away.

"They want me . . . alive." Hot tears stung inside my eyes. My throat burned. "T

hey need me alive!" I screamed, unable to stop the words. "How am I supposed to

be? What am I supposed to feel?"

"I know how you feel, Cam," Macey said.

"You don't -"

"Cammie!" I'll never forget the tone of Macey's voice in that moment. "Cam," she

said slowly, moving toward me, "I know how it feels to be watched every second

of every day. I know what it's like to rust fewer and fewer people until you fee

l like you are completely alone in the world. I know you think that the only thi

ngs that are left in your life are the bad things. I know what you're feeling, C

am." Her hands were on my shoulders. Her blue eyes were staring into mine. "I kn

ow."

For two months I'd lived with the knowledge that the Circle of Cavan was after m

e, thinking that no one could possibly know what that felt like. Like no matter

where you were or who you were with, you were never safe. But I was wrong . . .

someone dad. And she was standing right in front of me.

"He won't tell me where my mother is," I said softly. "Agent Townsend knows - he

knows! And he won't -"

"We'll find her, Cam," Bex said, reaching for me. "We will."

"Yeah," Liz said, joining us.

"We'll track your mom down - track her to the end of the earth if we have to - a

nd then we'll ask her . . ."

The air felt warmer with my friends there around me. I felt my heartbeat start t

o slow as I heard a voice behind me say, "Ask me what?"

Chapter Seventeen

She was there. My mother was there. It felt so strange to see her - to hear her

voice, watch the way she walked with us to the front doors and up the Grand Stai

rcase - as if nothing at all had happened since putting me in a limo with the Ba

xters in December and waving good-bye.

"Mom, I -"

"It's good to see you, kiddo." She put her arm around me and held me tightly as

we reached the Hall of History. "Did you and Bex have nice break?"

She hadn't called on Christmas morning. She hadn't come to London after what hap

pened on the bridge. She had been absent from our school for almost a month, and

yet as I watched her unlock her office door, there was only one question I want

ed answered.

"Is it true?"

The Baxters and Aunt Abby and even Agent Townsend had told me the facts, but onl

y my mom could make me believe them. "Is Mr. Solomon really part of the Circle?"

I heard chatter coming the halls, but my classmates felt a million miles away as

my mother stepped into the dark room and softly whispered, "Yes."

She stared toward her desk. Inside her office, I felt brave enough to ask, "Did

he kill Dad?"

"The Circle has a long history of recruiting agents very young, Cammie. When Mr.

Solomon joined, he would have been -"

"Did he kill my father?"

"Cammie, sweetheart . . ."

My lips began to tremble. The pressure I'd been feeling for months rose and swel

led, and then I couldn't stop it. The world was blurry and my cheeks were wet, a

nd no matter how hard I tried, it was like I'd forgotten how to breathe.

"I'm so sorry, Cammie. I'm so sorry."

"Where were you?" I could hear my voice breaking. "I needed you."

"Cam," my mother said softly. "I knew you were safe, sweetheart. The Baxters are

good people - they're great operatives -"

"They're aren't my family. I needed you!"

"Sweetheart, believe me, I wanted to come to you, but it wasn't possible."

I wanted to believe her, but Agent Townsend was like a ghost, whispering in my e

ar. They won't hurt her.

"Why didn't you come to London, Mom?"

"I told you, Cammie. I was detained."

It was the same phrase both Townsend and Professor Buckingham had used, but as I

looked at my mother, I knew she hadn't missed her flight, been caught in a meet

ing, lost her passport. They had meant detained as in handcuffs and had cots and

facilities run by the CIA.

"Detained how? Detained where? Langley?" I watched the light change in my mother

's eyes and I knew that I was right.

"When an operative is accused of being a double agent, it's standard operating p

rocedure for anyone associated with him of her to questioned. It's protocol, kid

do. It's nothing."

"What about the other teachers? Professor Buckingham? Mr. Smith? Why weren't the

y -"

"They were questioned, Cam. We were all questioned."

"Then why were you late? Why are you the only one just getting back to school no

w?"

"I've known Mr. Solomon the longest." She drew a deep breath. "I'm the one who h

ired him and brought him here, so naturally . . ." She trailed off. She didn't l

ook at me for a long time. "But I'm back now." She caressed my hair. "You're saf

e." She pulled me to her, breathed deeply. "You're safe."

There are things that go unsaid between people lingering under the surface for d

ecades, for lifetimes. I've wondered sometimes if spies have of those things of

fewer. More, I think. There are just too many things that even the bravest of pe

ople in the world aren't brave enough to say out loud.

"Mr. Solomon came to me," I whispered.

My mother stepped away. "I know."

"He said they were wrong. He said he didn't do it - that they're after the wrong

man. I . . ." I thought about the sadness in him as he'd hugged me. "I believed

him."

"Joe Solomon is an amazing operative, sweetheart."

"So -"

"Amazing operatives make the best liars." She sank onto the leather couch, seemi

ng almost too weak to stand. "He's never coming back, Cammie."

In the years since my father died, I've seen my mother cry once, maybe twice, an

d never when she knew I could see her. But in that moment, tears welled in her e

yes, and I didn't know is she was speaking of Mr. Solomon or of my father as she

whispered, "He's never coming back."

Chapter Eighteen

Gallagher Girls don't skip class. We don't play hooky and there was never been a

senior ditch day. Ever. But walking through the halls the next morning, I wante

d to make an exception. I wanted to run - to hide like I'd never hidden before.

To crawl back into bed and sleep a million years.

Turns out, I wasn't the only one.

"Good morning, Ms. Morgan."

I heard the floorboards creak behind me. I recognized the groggy voice. But the

face that I saw when I turned wasn't quite what I was expecting.

Sure, Agent Townsend's hair was damp from a shower, and his clothes were fresh a

nd neatly pressed, but his eyes were red and puffy. When he pushed past me and w

alked to his desk at the front of the room, he carried himself delicately, like

a man who dearly wished the world would stop spinning. (His teeth, on the other

hand, did seem significantly whiter.)

Note to self: never volunteer to help Elizabeth Sutton test one of her experimen

ts.

The lights were off in the CoveOps classroom, but when Tina Walters paused by th

e door and reached for the switch, our teacher grumbled, "Leave them off."

As we made our way to our chairs, Townsend squeezed his eyes shut as if our foot

steps were rifle shots in the dark.

"I don't care what you do with the next hour," he said softly, easing into the c

hair behind his desk. "I don't care how you do it. Just do it . . . quietly."

People have bad mornings at the Gallagher Academy all the time - yawning girls w

ho have pulled all-nighters, aching bodies struggling to climb the stairs after

a particularly hard week in P&E. The first time I met Agent Townsend, I'd wanted

him to feel as badly as I felt; and standing there that morning, I thought mayb

e he did.

Especially when the lights suddenly flashed on and I heard my mother say, "Well,

hello."

I saw him squint and jump - watched him turn to take in the woman by the door, b

ut I don't know what if surprise would be the right word to describe it.

"Welcome to the Gallagher Academy, Agent Townsend. We're so happy to have to you

here."

Note to self: Rachel Morgan is a totally awesome liar.

"I wanted to say hello at breakfast, but . . ." She studied his haggard face. "I

can see that you perhaps needed to sleep in."

Townsend slowly turned his gaze toward me. "It must have been something I ate."

"I'm very sorry to hear that, our chef usually gets nothing but rave reviews." M

om strolled across the front of the classroom. She kept her arms crossed, starin

g out the window, before slowly turning to the rest of the class. "Hello, girls.

"

There was a splattering of hellos and welcome backs, but for the most part we we

re quiet - waiting.

"I must say, when the Gallagher trustees told me that the CIA and MI6 had recomm

ended you for the position, I was surprised. I hope the pace at our little schoo

l isn't too slow for you."

"No," he said, sinking to the corner of his desk. "If Joe Solomon can do it . .

."

I felt a flash of rage at the name, but if my mother felt the same, she didn't s

how it.

"And how are you finding things?" she asked. "Is there anything you need?"

"You mean besides access to the sublevels?"

My mother nodded. "Yes. Professor Buckingham has apprised me of the new safety c

oncerns as far as the subs go. We're working on it.

"I see," Agent Townsend said, but the words sounded more like yeah, right.

Then a sort of shocked look crossed my mother's face.

"Oh, I'm so sorry Agent Townsend. Please, continue. Don't let me interrupt your

lecture."

She took an empty seat in the front row on the far right side of the room, and i

t was Agent Townsend's turn to look surprised.

"I'm sorry, Mrs. Morgan. Are you . . . staying?"

"Yes," Mom said.

"Well if I'd known, I would have prepared something special for the occasion."

My mother smiled. "Oh, whatever you had slated for today will be fine, I'm sure.

I just like to pop in occasionally to hear all of our faculty teach. Please, do

n't let me stop you."

I heard Bex stifle a giggle. Tina Walters cut her eyes at me.

"Excellent," Townsend said with a smile. "You're just in time to begin our study

of the Circle of Cavan."

Outside, the sky was a crisp, clear blue, but it felt like a storm brewing insid

e our classroom. There was a static in the sir so strong, I didn't dare touch an

ything - afraid I'd feel a spark.

He turned to look at Mom. "If that's okay with you, of course, Mrs. Morgan."

"That's something that would typically be covered in Professor Buckingham's seni

or level History of Espionage course, but given the circumstances, I think we ca

n make an exception."

I expected her to look at me - smile at me - something, anything, besides turnin

g to take in the entire class and saying, "You see girls, Agent Townsend is some

thing of a legend in the clandestine services. I can't think of anyone more qual

ified for this particular lecture."

"Even Joe Solomon?" I doubt any of my classmates saw the malicious gleam in Town

send's eyes.

I don't think they heard the anger in my mother's voice as she said, "No. not ev

en him."

And with that, Townsend spun on us, he sounded almost like a real teacher when h

e said," The most important thing that any of you should know about the Circle o

f Cavan is that it is an organization composed almost entirely of other organiza

tion's spies - I'm talking about double agents. Sleeper operatives. They have ag

ents - traitors - at every level of every major security service in the world. T

hey could be anywhere . . ." He moved around his desk. "Even here."

I watched my classmates' eyes as the Circle of Cavan became more than just some

legend about Gilly and a ball gown and a traitor and a sword.

"Of course, they operate so deeply underground that some in the clandestine serv

ices think the Circle is nothing but a ghost story - and elaborate legend. But i

n the past hundred years alone, they have been behind at least five assassinatio

ns - that we know of - and they've been strong instigators of three wars. They h

ave sold the identities of dozens of CIA and MI6 undercover operatives to hostil

e governments, and they came closer than anyone outside the Secret Service will

ever know to killing a sitting president of the United States."

He crossed his arms and stared at us. "So make no mistake, they are very real in

deed."

We sat there for fifteen minutes, listening to him cite facts as if the Circle w

as just another group or movement or cause - as if this wasn't personal.

"What do they want?" I heard myself asking.

"Money. Power. Control of -"

"With me?" I interrupted. "What do they want with me?"

I expected him to glance at my mother or avoid the questions, but instead, he se

ttled onto the corner of the desk. That, we do not know. Yet. He paused. "Anythi

ng you'd like to add, Rachel?"

I thought she'd tell him that was enough, that class was over. But instead my mo

ther crossed her long legs and placed her elbows on the desk. "Perhaps you could

talk a little about their history."

He nodded. "Ioseph Cavan was Irish by birth, and conventional wisdom holds that

his followers retreated to his ancestral home after Gillian Gallagher allegedly

killed him."

"Allegedly?" Bex said.

Townsend ignored her. "But now the Circle has strong-holds in every corner of th

e world. It is important to understand that, unlike most political and religious

-based groups, the Circle of Cavan has no cause - no calling or purpose beyond p

rofit and power. They are large enough to be dangerous and small enough to slip

through cracks. They are mobile, careful, and very highly trained. And the scary

thing is - for the most part - we're the ones who trained them."

"What does that mean?" Tina asked.

"It means I wasn't lying when I said they are almost always double agents," he s

napped. "The Circle excels at isolating and recruiting agents who are young, vul

nerable, or both."

"But how do you know?" Tina asked.

A sly smile slid over his face as he stood and studied us all in turn. "Because

I'm the man who tracks them."

If we hadn't hated him a lot, we might have liked him a little at that moment. B

ut we did. So we didn't.

"Make no mistake, girls, the Circle is dangerous now for what they are, but who

they are. And where they are. And they could be anyone. They could be" - he turn

ed to look at my mother - "anywhere."

Chapter Nineteen

Number of hours I wandered around the mansion, going nowhere: 6

Number of secret passageways I looked for in the hopes of going somewhere: 27

Number of secret passageways I found that were actually still working: 1 (But it

only went to the kitchen.)

Number of cookies I swiped while in the kitchen: 1 (Oh, okay, 3 - but they were

really little cookies.)

Number of times I wanted to cry: 9

Number of times I changed my mind: 9

And so I just kept walking - through the library with its rows of books and dyin

g fire, past the elevator that could no longer take me to Sublevel Two. The hall

s were quiet and dark, as if the mansion itself were sleeping - resting up for a

new day. And then I stopped at the Hall of History and stared at the sword of C

ava, realizing that for the first time since November, I was actually alone.

Well . . . almost.

"Hello Ms. Morgan." A deep voice cut through the darkness behind me.

Sure it was two in the morning on a school night, but somehow I wasn't surprised

when I turned and saw Mr. Smith. Well . . . actually . . . the fact that he was

walking around in slippers and one of those old-fashioned nightshirt did surpri

se me; the fact that he was awake did not.

"I . . ." I started. Somehow, even though I technically wasn't doing anything wr

ong, I felt like I'd been caught. "I couldn't sleep."

"It's okay, Ms. Morgan." He came to stand beside me in the warm glow of the swor

d's glass case. Protective beams rippled through the room like waves.

I glanced at my teacher. Maybe it was the hour, or the fact that one of us was w

earing a dress (and it wasn't me), but I dared to ask, "So what's your excuse?"

"A seasoned operative should always check his or her perimeter at unexpected tim

es and in unexpected ways." I glanced at Mr. Smith's nightgown - I mean shirt .

. . nightshirt. If unexpected was what it took to stay safe, then Mr. Smith was

going to be alive forever. "You will do well to remember that, Cammie."

"Yes, sir." I stared at the sword. "Thank you. It's actually kind of nice . . ."

But then I trailed off. I didn't dare say what I was thinking.

"It okay." There was a knowing wink in Mr. Smith's eye. "You can say it."

I glance down at the floor. "It's nice getting some actual Covert Operatives Adv

ice. I've missed it."

"Mr. Townsend is a fine operative, Cammie."

"Yes, of course, I didn't mean to imply -"

"Ambitious. Proud. Calculating . . . but he is perhaps not a natural for the cla

ssroom?"

"No," I agreed. "He'll never be as good as . . ." nut I stopped short, suddenly

unable to say the name aloud.

"No, he isn't what you're used to," Mr. Smith agreed.

"I believed him." I don't know where the words came from, but there, in the ligh

t of that sword, I simply had to set them free. "Joe Solomon is a liar. And a tr

aitor. And I believed him. Even after London . . . He was talking crazy and I st

ill -"

"Was he crazy, Cammie? Was he really?"

I looked at the most careful spy I'd ever known - stared up into the fifth face

I'd seen him wear, and tried to focus on the eyes that hadn't changed since my f

irst day of seventh grade.

"Joe Solomon is many things, Cammie. But crazy? Crazy is the one I don't think I

'll ever believe."

Mr. Smith took a step toward the Grand Staircase, the hem of his nightshirt sway

ing as he moved.

"Do try to get some sleep, Cammie. And good night.

Walking back upstairs that night, I thought of Mr. Smith's words and the way Mr.

Solomon had gripped my hand at the Tower of London and pulled me through the da

rk. As I started up the old circular staircase that leads to the junior suites,

cool air landed on my arms, and I looked out through the old wavy glass. It remi

nded me of the cold wind in London, the rippling waves of the Thames as if flowe

d below.

I remember how lost Mr. Solomon had seemed as he hugged me on the bridge - how v

ery strange and foreign the gesture had felt.

Where do men like Joe Solomon go when they fall? I asked myself. I wondered if t

here would be any help for him, waiting on the shore.

I took another step, but as I moved up the spiral stairs, something outsides cau

ght my eye. Something made me stop and stare out across the grounds.

Lights from the mansion's windows streaked through the darkness, pebbling the da

rk, cloudy sky. And that was when I saw them - the birds that were sweeping out

into the open air and then back again, stretching their wings.

For a moment, I stood still, listening to the howling wind and the faint cooing

of the birds, and my teacher's words that had been playing over and over in my m

ind for weeks.

"Follow the pigeons."

Chapter Twenty

"It's there!" My voice was cracking, and the words came in short gasps as if I w

ere out of shape. Out of time. "Mr. Smith was right. He isn't crazy!"

I heard my roommates' footsteps on the stairs behind me, as Bex asked, "Cam what

are you talking about?"

"The pigeons!" I'm sure I must have looked like an insane person. And technicall

y, I have been hit on the head a lot, so my roommates had good reason to look at

each other as if all that brain trauma was bound to catch up with me eventually

.

"Cam," Liz said slowly, her eyes still puffy from sleep. "Where are we going?"

Something was alive in me then. Maybe fear. Maybe dread. But mostly, I think it

was hope as I climbed the stairs, higher and higher. When we reached the landing

, I felt the cold air that seeped through the seams in the stone, and in that se

cond my heart stopped. I stood, frozen by the cold stone beneath my fingers and

a hope that I didn't dare sat, as I traced rough carving of the bird in flight,

and pushed.

The five largest stones receded, revealing a small compartment and a rusty lever

.

"Cammie!" Liz exclaimed. "No. You're not supposed to leave the mansion! What are

you doing?"

But she was too late, because the door was already swinging open, a rush of free

zing wind was blowing against my face and across my bare legs, but I didn't feel

the chill.

I just turned to look at my best friends, who stood in the light of the doorway,

and said, "I'm following the pigeons."

We'd been here before, of course. Just a few months ago we'd sat on the dusty, o

verturned crates that were the last relics of the Gallagher Academy's once-proud

covert carrier pigeon breeding program. We'd sat there for hours, looking out o

nto the lights of Roseville, talking about the people who were after Macey. Afte

r me. But now, the space looked totally different.

"What . . ." Liz started, looking around. "What is all this?"

Chalkboards lined the inner wall of the rampart, far away from the glassless win

dows that over looked the grounds. The crates were stacked neatly to one side. A

lone chair sat in the center of floor, facing the blackboards, as if someone ha

d spent hours in that place, trying to solve an impossible equation.

"This must be what Mr. Solomon wanted us to find." I stepped closer to the black

boards that had Mr. Solomon's words scrawled over every inch. "He risked everyth

ing - just to tell me to find this," I said.

"Cammie . . ." Bex started. "You know as well as I do he was talking crazy. He w

asn't Joe Solomon."

"But we're here," I snapped back. "It's not crazy if we're here."

"What does it say?" Liz's voice was soft, her eyes focused as she stepped slowly

closer to the board, and I knew she wasn't talking to us; her mind was lost in

code, tying to see through the chaos.

"What is it, Liz?" Macey asked.

Liz shook her head. "I . . . I don't know. I've seen anything quite like it."

"It's crazy, is what it is." Bex banged her fist against the board.

"Think about it, Bex. Think. He's one of the most wanted men on the planet, and

I'm the world's best guarded girl. Why come to me in London? If he's working for

the Circle, why take that risk?"

"I don't know, Cam. Why did he kill your dad? Why did he join the Circle in the

first place? Maybe he snapped or broke or . . ." I thought that she might cry. "

Maybe this is what he is now."

"Was he crazy during finals week? Was he crazy in D.C.?" I felt Mr. Smith's word

s washing over me. "If he's not crazy, Bex, then he came to London for a reason.

" I threw out my arms and stepped closer to the boards. "He came to London for t

his."

The four of us were standing in the very place Joe Solomon had stood, staring at

the words and numbers and diagrams that he'd written. There were answers here.

Clues. He'd risked his freedom - his life - to bring me to this rooftop. I had f

ollowed the pigeons, and that night I stood without a coat in the freezing cold,

trying to decipher what they had to say.

Behind me, a pigeon cawed. The sound was eerie and loud as I squinted through th

e dark toward the ledge. It cawed again.

"Stupid birds," Liz said, shooting her hands toward the lone pigeon that sat per

ched on the railing.

Most people don't know that anything could be a cutout, a go-between, a messenge

r for spies. This part of the mansion existed because pigeons had once been some

of the best. They never talked when interrogated; even the best spy satellites

in the world couldn't track them.

"Go on," Liz said again. "Get -"

"Wait," I said, reaching for my best friend's hands, staring at the small bird t

hat sat stoically, waiting in the dark.

"Cam." Bex's voice was soft. "Cam, what is it?"

I inched toward the bird and reached for the tiny slip of paper wrapped delicate

ly around its leg.

If you're reading this, you've found it. And if you've found it, you know. Must

see you. Meet me at the place where we did the brush passes. Send me back the ti

me.

Please come.

And please be careful.

The words were neatly typed. There was no signature - no name of any kind. And e

ven though I know it had been reckless to send it, reckless for me to read - tot

ally and completely foolish to even think about doing as it said - the truth of

the matter is that a spy's life isn't about never taking chances. It's about tak

ing chances that are worth the risk.

Chapter Twenty-One

"What about the old ventilation shafts in the basement?" Bex asked as we sat bes

ide a roaring fire in the library late the next night.

I shook my head. "Covered with eight inches of fresh concrete."

"The trick fireplace on the second floor?" Macey tried.

"Maybe." I considered the locks and bars that had been added over winter break.

"Assuming we could get a blowtorch. Do any of you have a blowtorch?"

Liz perked up as if she were about to say that yea, she did have a blowtorch in

the back of her closet.

"I'm afraid to know," I said, holding out my hand to stop her.

"Boy, they really want to keep us in, don't they?" Macey said.

"No." Bex shook her head and stared at me. "They want to keep the Circle out." S

he waited a second, as the truth of the matter settled down on the three of us.

"This is dangerous. Too dangerous."

"I'm with Bex," Macey said. "He's asking you to take a really big rick, Cam"

They were right, but all I could think about was the way he'd walking into the c

enter of the very people who were scouring the world to find him. "Maybe it's my

turn."

"Okay. Fine. Let's say it isn't true," Bex offered. "Let's say Mr. Solomon is in

nocent and wrongly accused and that he didn't kill . . ." She looked away, then

back again. "Let's say he is the man we know. Does the Mr. Solomon we know tell

you to sneak out of the Gallagher Academy, go into town, and meet up with a know

fugitive? Does Joe Solomon tell you to be stupid?"

The answer was obvious. That was probably why none of us said it.

"Why don't we go?" Liz said, pointing to herself and Bex and Macey. "See him. Ge

t the message. Bring it back."

"I can't explain it, guys," I said, shaking my head. "I just know I've got to go

."

"That doesn't mean you have to be stupid!" Bex shot back, and I realized that Be

x was being cautious. Bex had become the voice of reason.

"You didn't see it, Cammie," she went on. "You didn't have to watch them drug yo

u and drag you away like a doll. You were there, Cam, but you didn't have to wat

ch your friend almost go away forever. You don't know how that feels."

"Yeah," Macey said softly. "She does."

I looked at the girls I would trust with my life. Then I thought about my dad an

d the man he'd probably trusted with his.

"I have to go," I said. "It's my mission."

"It's our mission," Bex countered.

"What are we saying?" Liz exclaimed. "Cam, we don't have to sneak out. We don't

even have to go by ourselves. I bet your mom -"

"No," I said, cutting her off. "If she got caught helping Joe Solomon . . . No.

We're on our own."

"I know, Cam," Bex said, stopping me. "I know. But if we do this with our backup

-"

"What if they're wrong, Bex?" I pleaded. "What if he' the only chance we'll ever

have at finding out what happened to my dad? What if while everyone is chasing

him, no one is trying to stop the Circle? What if he didn't do it?"

Bex's voice was flat and calm and strong as she looked at me. "What if he did?"

Chapter Twenty-Two

Covert Operations Report

The Operatives utilized a basic Trojan horse scenario. If, instead of a horse, y

ou substitute a 1987 Dodge Minivan.

Well, it turns out that when one of the world's most dangerous and covert terror

ist organizations is after one of your students, school officials care less abou

t keeping in than they care about keeping people out.

Or at least that's what Bex and Macey and I told ourselves as we crawled beneath

a tarp, a blanket, and about ten million physics notebooks, and lay as quietly

as possible in the back of Liz's van.

"Where to this evening?" the guard at the front gate asked. I could picture him

leaning against the driver's side window, chomping on his gum.

I had to hold my breath as I waited for the soft, Southern voice that answered,

"Just a road check, Walter."

"What's she up to now, Lizzie?" the guard asked. In the light that crept in thro

ugh the weave of the blanket, I saw that Bex was holding her breath too.

"Almost four hundred miles per gallon," Liz blurted. "I mean three ninety-five t

o be specific - which I can be. Specific, that is. You know me, Walter. I'm a ve

ry detail-oriented person. I'm just going out to test it in stop-and-go driving.

I'm not hiding anything!"she blurted, and Bex's eyes went wide.

\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

PROS AND CONS OF BREAKING OUT OF SCHOOL

(A list by Operatives Morgan, McHenry, and Baxter)

PRO: As Trojan horse operatives go, the back of a minivan isn't nearly as bad as

it can get.

CON: Rebecca Baxter, despite her many good qualities, is a cover hog.

PRO: There's nothing like a completely unsupervised, possibly illegal covert ope

ration to take a girl's mind of the terrorist organization that is after her - n

ot to mention her Culture & Assimilation homework.

CON: The girl really should have been doing her Culture & Assimilation homework.

PRO: When you haven't had a real CoveOps lesson in months, you'll take any pract

ical experience you can get.

CON: When you haven't had a real CoveOps lesson in months, you can't help but fe

el really, really rusty.

\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

I know the streets Roseville. I've walked them with my classmates. I've held han

ds on them with my first (and technically only) boyfriend. I've seen them filled

with football fans and parade spectators, with ladies selling cakes and candies

for the church auxiliary, and kids out for a Saturday matinee.

It's all-American as a town can possibly be, with its white gazebo and movie mar

quee and town square, but it seems different as I stood in the library bell towe

r, staring down at the square. There was nothing there but me and sky - no walls

, no guards - and yet I felt stranded. Like the ravens, I know I couldn't fly aw

ay.

"You have good cover here," Bex told me.

I could hear Macey through the comms unit in my ear, saying what I already knew:

"The square is clear." I could see Liz in the van, circling the block.

"Liz is tracking you from the van," Bex said. "We've got back-up relays outside

of town in case the van is compromised."

Bex kept talking, but all I could think of was how the air was colder. The stars

felt brighter. The breeze was softer as if blew against my check. It was as if

all my senses were in overdrive, and I couldn't help but think most people feel

like that sometimes - when they're alone or in the dark. When they hear a noise

in the closet or a creak on the floorboards, they sense it. It's not about being

scared - it's about being alive. The nerves work harder, carrying messages to t

he brain, getting it ready for fight or flight, and that night, well, let's just

say that night my nerves had their work cut out for them.

"Cam?" Bex asked as if I hadn't heard her. But she was wrong. That night I heard

and saw and smelled everything. "I'm gonna get into position. Are you satisfied

with this position?"

I scanned the square and nodded. "Yes."

"You're safe here." She touched my arm almost as if she were trying to get my sc

ent, as if she might soon be chasing me around the world.

And then I watched her go.

Standing alone in the tower, I reminded myself of all the things in the world th

at I knew to be absolutely true: Rebecca Baxter was the best spy at the Gallaghe

r Academy and the absolute last person who would lie about my safety. I had GPS

trackers in my watch, my shoes, my ponytail holder, and my stomach (thanks to a

new edible model Liz had been trying out).

My roommates and I all carried panic buttons that could summon an army within th

e blink of an eye. They could track me anywhere in the world (and ,Liz firmly be

lieves, the moon).

And yet I couldn't shake the feeling that the square seemed smaller from where I

stood, or maybe the world just felt bigger.

I held a pair of binoculars to my eyes and scanned the streets, telling myself t

hat I was as safe as I could possibly be. I was prepared. I could handle anythin

g. I ready for everything . . .

Except for the sight of a tall figure with broad shoulder, appearing as if from

nowhere at the edge of the gazebo, and saying, "Hello, Gallagher Girl."

Chapter Twenty-Three

Perspective is a powerful thing. Seriously. I highly recommended it. There are t

hings you just can't see unless you take a good step back and watch very, very c

losely.

I mean, if I'd been standing in the town square and not the bell tower, I might

have heard the girl say, "Well hello yourself," but I might have missed the way

the boy stumbled backward as she turned. I might not have noticed the way his sh

oulders fell and his head jerked in the manner of someone who had not found what

he was looking for.

I might never have realized that Zach was disappointed to find another girl in t

he gazebo.

"Macey?" Zach asked as if he couldn't believe his eyes, which was maybe the most

flattering thing ever. Because no one has ever mistaken me for Macey McHenry. E

ver. But it was dark, and even without access to the world's greatest closet for

deception and disguise, Macey was still the daughter of a cosmetics heiress. An

d in a wig and Zach's old jacket, she made for a good decoy, or at least good en

ough.

"Where's Cammie?" Zach asked.

"You look disappointed to see me, Zach," Macey teased. "Don't you like my jacket

?"

"Where is she?" Zach demanded.

"At school," Macey lied without missing a beat. "Watching from a live video feed

. "She's safe." She inched closer, staring up at him.

"The jammers at the school wouldn't allow that, Macey. Now where is he?" he turn

ed. "I know she's around here somewhere," he said, scanning the alleys and build

ings that lined the square.

"She's safe where she is, Zach." Bex stepped out of the darkened alcove by the m

ovie theater and moved into place behind him. "And we're going to keep it that w

ay."

"I need to talk to her," he told them.

"So talk," Macey said. "We've got comms. She can hear."

"I need to see her."

"I'm coming down," I blurted, desperate to be off the sidelines, but Bex's hand

was on her ear. She was shouting at me. "You stay where you are!"

But I was already gone.

"She's lucky to have you," Zach said after a long time. "She needs you."

"What are you doing here, Zach?" Macey asked, but Zach only shook his head. He l

ooked down at the ground.

"It's complicated."

"So un-complicate it." Even as I said the words, I knew I might regret them. And

soon. Maybe Zach was bait and I was walking into a trap. Maybe Bex would save t

he Circle the trouble and kill me on the spot, but I couldn't stay away.

"You're with him," I said.

"Technically, he's on an errand halfway around the world right now," Zach tried

to joke, but my mind raced on.

"Liz and Macey told me that just because you go to Blackthore doesn't mean . . .

" My voice caught. "But you really are with him."

"Gallagher Girl, listen to me."

"So . . . what happened, Zach? Did the Circle recruit you too?"

He looked at me for a long time before he lowered his head and whispered, "Not e

xactly."

At the edge of the square, a streetlight flickered. Shadows crept across the gra

ss for a split second, and I flinched, remembering the last I'd been alone with

Zach and the lights had gone out. I remembered the sound of a gunshot and the si

ght of my aunt falling to the dark street, while one of the Circle's agents stoo

d between me and freedom. But instead of firing, he had looked at Zach and said,

"You?"

"What are you doing here, Zach?" I asked, my throat suddenly too dry.

"He asked me to get a message to you."

"So send me a message! What was so important that I had to risk my friends' safe

ty to sneak out here?" I demanded. "Huh? What was so -"

"I had to see you." He closed the space between us. His hands were warm from his

pockets as they closed around my fingers. "I had to know that you were okay. I

had to see you and touch you and . . . know."

He brushed my hair away from my face, his fingers light against my skin. "In Lon

don . . ." He trailed off. "After D.C. . . ."

"I'm fine," I said, easing away. "CAT scans and X-rays were normal. No lasting d

amage."

Most people believe me when I lie. I've learned how to say the words just right.

I have a trusting kind of face. But the boy in front of me was a trained operat

ive, so Zach knew better. And besides, Zach knew me.

"Really?" He touched my face again. "'Cause I'm not."

I know Zachary Goode. I've touched him and spoken to him and felt his lips on mi

ne, but I don't know him - not really.

I could feel the clock ticking and knew that the girl I'd been the year before w

as officially out of time.

"I'm fine, Zach," I said, pulling away. "But I've got to go. We only have a half

hour before they miss us."

He pointed to the darkness. "Who else is out there?"

"The usuals," I said, still not wanted to give away too much.

"Your mom?" he asked, but I didn't have to say anything - he read the answer in

my eyes. "Good," Zach said. "He doesn't want her taking the risk."

"What does he care? If he cared about her, then . . ." I trembled.

"So they told you?" he asked stepping away.

"Yeah. They told me he's part of the Circle , and he . . . My father is dead bec

ause of him." My heart was pounding hard inside my chest. My throat was on fire.

"Is this the part where you deny it?"

"No." Zach shook his head. "It's the part where I asked a favor."

"You've got a lot of nerve," Bex said, moving closer, but Zach's gaze never left

mine.

"There's a book, Gallagher Girl," he said, then swallowed. "It might be the only

thing the Circle wants more as much as they want you."

"What kind of book?" I asked.

"A journal. Joe - Mr. Solomon - needs you to read it."

"Why?" I asked.

"It explains everything, Gallagher Girl. And besides, if he doesn't make it out

of this . . . He needs you to read it."

"Where is it?" Bex asked.

"You're not going to like it. It's risky and -"

"Where is it?" Bex, Macey, and I demanded in unison.

"Sublevel Two."

"The subs?" Bex shook her head. "No. Can't. They're closed. Off-limits."

"Oh, and off-limits has always stop you before?" Zach asked her. Look, they're n

ot technically closed - they're just rigged to explode if anyone goes near them,

" he said as if we encounter highly dangerous explosives every day. And . . . we

ll . . . we sort of do.

"How do you know about the subs?"

"Because a week before I saw you in London, Joe heard the CIA had a source who'd

started talking. He had to get off the grid and stay off the grid - fast. They

were coming for him, Gallagher Girl, and he couldn't risk getting caught down th

ere, so . . ."

Zach took a deep breath and smiled his most mischievous smile. "I know about the

subs because Joe Solomon's the one who rigged them."

Chapter Twenty-Four

Joe Solomon didn't booby-trap the sublevels of the Gallagher Academy for Excepti

onal Young Women to explode or implode or fill up with water from the lake.

Don't get me wrong, all of those things could totally happen! But no matter what

you might have heard, Mr. Solomon didn't put those protocols in place - the Gal

lagher Academy trustees did, a long, long time ago. Before I was born. Before my

mother was born. After all, when you have that many covert secrets in one place

, it's important to protect them. And if the protection measures fail, it's impo

rtant to destroy them.

So I really wish people would get it straight: Mr. Solomon did not build the tri

ggers that would destroy the subs!

He's just the one that turned them on.

Or at least that's Zach told us.

And that . . . Yeah, that was the problem.

"What's wrong?" Liz asked, despite the fact that, at the front of the room, Dr.

Fibs and Madame Dabney were in the midst of an incredibly interesting joint lect

ure on secret writing techniques (and why a Gallagher Girl should really learn h

ow to make her own invisibility ink and do calligraphy).

"Is the sensors on the elevator shafts?" she guessed.

I shook my head.

"The two-second delay before the anti-invasion protocols kick in and we get . .

. smushed?"

"Oh my!" Dr. Fibs cried. I looked up to see that he had accidentally spilled his

latest invisibility concoction over Madame Dabney, and that her white blouse wa

s becoming more and more invisible by the second.

"I know what you're thinking, Cam," Liz went on. "We've been looking for a way i

nto . . . you know where . . . for weeks and we aren't any closer. But that's no

t true!"

At the front of the room, Madame Dabney (who, by the way, wears way sexier bras

than anyone would have guessed) started dabbing at the front of her blouse with

an antique tablecloth, and Dr. Fibs reached for a lighter.

"Now, remember, girls, the ink becomes visible again when exposed to heat!" Dr.

Fibs yelled as he flicked the lighter on and the tablecloth went up in flames in

Madame Dabney's hands.

"We have an entry strategy and an exit strategy and . . . we have a lot of strat

egies!" Liz said, her eyes wide, and right then I knew that a part of Liz didn't

care that Zach and Mr. Solomon had asked us to do something that no one had eve

r done in a hundred and fifty years. To Liz, it was just a puzzle, a test. And L

iz is very, very good at tests.

"Yeah, Cam," she said again as soon as the smoke cleared (literally) and we were

gathering our things and leaving class. "We'll figure it out."

"Figure out what?" Bex asked, falling into step beside us.

"Nothing," I whispered.

"Wrong answer," Bex said, leaning closer, her voice barely audible through the c

ascade of girls that filled the halls. "Now what's wrong?"

"Zach," Macey guessed with a shrug. She eyed me. "It's got to be Zach, right?"

"So the subs' next generation cameras with the 360 degree range and heat-sensiti

ve triggers aren't bothering you?" Liz asked. I couldn't tell if she was mocking

me or not.

"There's something he's not telling us," I whispered.

"Like what?" Bex asked, interested again.

Like what's so important about this journal? Like why didn't man in D.C. shoot h

im and kidnap me when he had the chance? At least filled my mind, but the halls

were crowded, and there was only one thing I dared to say.

"There's just . . . something."

"He's a guy, Cam." Macey pushed past me and led the way down the hall. "And a sp

y. He's a guy spy. There's always going to be something he's not telling."

"He fought with us - in D.C.," Liz said. There was no doubt in her voice, no fea

r. "I know you couldn't see, Cam. I know they drugged you and banged your head a

nd all. But he and Mr. Solomon fought with us," Liz said one final time, and the

n turned and ran toward Mr. Mosckowitz's classroom.

I turned to Macey.

"So he's mysterious," she said with a shrug. "Mysterious is sexy." And then it w

as her turn to spin on her heels and run out the front doors, on her way to P&E.

When I turned to Bex, I wanted her to say that everything was going to be fine -

that there was nothing the four of us couldn't do, and it was just a matter of

time until we found our way into the Sublevel Tow, cleared Mr. Solomon's name, a

nd stopped global warming (not necessarily in that order).

I looked at her. I waited.

"We can't trust him." She pushed past me, stepped calmly into Room 132. "We can'

t trust anyone."

I wanted to her she was wrong (but she wasn't). I thought I might think of a way

to prove he was an exception (but I couldn't). I wanted her to stop looking at

me as a spy and start talking to me as a girl, but Gallagher Girls are only exce

ptional because we're both - all the time. I wante3d to go into the CoveOps clas

sroom and pretend to read whatever boring book Townsend was going to give us and

relay every conversation that Zach and I had ver had. But before I could take a

single step, Agent Townsend appeared in the doorway of the classroom, a coat in

his hands, saying, "Junior class, come with me."

I know we're supposed to be in the business of being prepared for anything - of

never, ever being surprised - but let me tell you, most of the people I know sti

ll shock the fire out of me on a regular basis. (Like for example, the time Mr.

Mosckowitz and Liz went rock climbing together and neither of them actually died

.) But in five and a half years at the world's premiere school for spies, very f

ew things have surprised me more than walking with the rest of the junior CoveOp

s class, following Agent Townsend through the halls.

He was the sort of man who always moved with purpose, never wasted a step, but t

hat day he walked even faster. He seemed taller. And though we were still inside

the Gallagher mansion, something told me that Agent Townsend was finally back o

n similar ground.

"Um . . .sir . . ." Tina Walters said, pushing through the crowd, trying to get

as close as possible to the man at the front of the pack. "Are we going to Back

to Sublevel Tow?" she asked, but Townsend acted as if she hadn't uttered a singl

e word.

"The primary job of any field agent is what?" he asked in a manner that made him

sound almost like real teacher. Almost.

"To recruit, run, maintain assets of intelligence," Mack Morrison said, quoting

page twelve from the old copy of Understanding Espionage: A Beginner's Guide to

Covert Operations, Third Edition, that we'd all taken turns reading under the co

vers in the seventh grade.

Agent Townsend looked at her. I thought for a split second that he might actuall

y smile, but instead he just said, "Wrong."

It felt like the entire class missed a step. Townsend, on the other hand, kept w

alking.

"The primary job of a field agent is to use people - strangers, typically. Somet

imes friends. Secretaries, neighbors, girlfriends, boyfriends, janitors, and lit

tle old ladies crossing the street. We use them all."

He stopped in the center of the foyer and turned to face us, while, behind him,

main doors flew open. A van sat idling in the center of the drive. I was tempted

to close my eyes and pretend that it was a really CoveOps lecture, that we had

real CopeOps teacher again.

But then Townsend said, "But, of course, if that's somehow beneath a Gallagher G

irl . . ."

"No, sir!" Tina chanted.

He stepped aside and gestured toward the open doors. "Then, after you."

What happened next was a rush of emotion and adrenalin like I hadn't felt in six

weeks. It was intoxicating. I felt almost drunk. And yet I stayed still, watchi

ng my classmates race out the door and toward the waiting van.

"I suppose you think this optional, Ms. Morgan?" Agent Townsend stood staring at

me through the open door.

"Of course I want to go, but there are these new security protocols" - I glanced

away, somehow unable to face him as I admitted, "Professor Buckingham told me I

'm not allowed to leave the grounds."

"And I suppose you think I've forgotten that fact?"

"No, sir."

"Then you think I'm a fool."

"No, sir, I -"

"Don't worry, Ms. Morgan, I know you're special. And because of you and your mot

her, I've spent a great deal of time and energy making special arrangements," he

said with a condescending smirk. "But if you want to stay in the mansion . . ."

I didn't wait for him to finish. I was

**Chapter Twenty-Five**

Spies need covert operations. I know it sounds crazy, but it's true. Because even though our brains are . . . you know . . . brain-sized, every undercover operative knows that a mind is totally big enough to get lost inside - to go crazy if you're left with too much time and too much room to let your biggest ears run free.

So, yeah. Spies need covert operatives. And as I sat next to Bex in the Gallagher Academy van that was carrying us through the tall, metal gates that had stood between me and the world outside, I had to ask, "Do you hear that?"

"What?" she asked. "A little voice telling you you'd be better off staying where you bloody well were?"

"Nope." I smiled. "Freedom."

She looked at me like I might have been crazier than usual, but I didn't care.

I was riding in a van! (And in a n actual seat this time, which, let me tell you, you really don't miss till it's gone.)

I was outside of school!

I was going on a mission!

I was going to . . .

Then I glanced out the window and realized I didn't have a clue where we were going.

And that made it better.

For two hours we rode in silence; the only sound was the hum of the van and the occasional snore (yes, actual snoreage) as Townsend slumped in the front seat, sleeping.

As the road stretched out before us and the trip got longer and longer, I'm pretty sure I wasn't the only Gallagher Girl in that van to feel acutely aware of three important facts 1) We were missing lunch. 2) It's kinda hard to look like a super-tough, super-skilled superagent when your stomach's growling. And 3) We hadn't had a real Covert Operations lesson in months.

I stretched my arms out in front of me and thought I felt a creak. Rusty didn't even begin to cover it.

And then the van made a hard right turn, and Townsend bolted upright.

"Good," he said, without a glance out the window. "We're here."

In case I haven't mentioned it before, I go to a boarding school. With gates. And walls. Plaid skirts and strict teachers. So while my classmates and I might be used to spending all of our time in a place that is exciting and semi-dangerous and full of incredibly delicious food, I couldn't remember a single time when I'd been in a place like this.

"Oh my gosh," Tina Walter said, summing up the reaction of probably every single girl in the van at that particular moment. "Is that . . ."

But before she could finish, Agent Townsend threw open the doors and Tin's words got lost in the deafening roar of a roller coaster barreling along its tracks and people screaming at the top of their lungs as the ride quickly plunged, then rose again.

Somehow, sitting in the back of the van, I sort of knew exactly how they felt.

"All right," our teacher said ten minutes later in the manner of a man who just wanted to get it over with and go back to sleep, "everybody gets a target. Everybody gets a goal. Everybody gets an hour."

While he spoke, his gaze swept around the entrance of the amusement park as if no place filled with that many tourists and empty calories could every leave him amused.

"There are decent people in the world, I supposed. But the world is full of decent people with useful information, and to them we must lie - from them we must steal. If anybody has a problem with that . . . well, if you've got a problem with that, you would be well advised to choose another occupation."

He was right, of course. There's no softer way to put it. We get close to secretaries so we can bug bosses' offices. We befriend widows so we can conduct surveillance on their neighbors' backyards. We are in the human intelligence business, and most of the people that we need to do our jobs are just people who happen to be in the wrong place at the wrong time.

So we tell lies and pick pockets and, most of all, we use.

"You," Agent Townsend said, pointing at Mack. "There's a forty-year old man behind you with a ball cap."

"Yes, sir," Mack said, but she didn't turn to look in the man's direction.

"Do you see him?" Agent Townsend asked, frustrated.

"Yes, sir. Blue cap, green polo, navy backpack." Mack pointed at the reflection of the man that gleamed in the window behind our teacher's head. He glanced back and saw it, and for a split second - nothing more - I thought he might have been impressed. Maybe.

"Okay," Agent Townsend said slowly, "that man just pout a piece of paper in the outer pocket of the bag. I don't care how you do it, but you need to figure out what's written on that piece of paper."

Mack didn't need to be told twice, she turned on her heel and set off through the crowd, while I turned to study the man she was tailing.

"Wow, he really fits in," I admitted. "I never would have guessed he's CIA."

"He's not," Townsend said simply, still scanning the people who filled the park. "There, Ms. Walters," he said, pointing at on older lady riding and electric scooter.

"Is she from Langley?" Tina asked.

"I have no idea where's she's from." Our teacher shrugged. "What I do know is that she just put her credit card in her purse, and it's your job to get me that number."

"But she's not an operative . . ." Tina hesitated. "She doesn't know it's an assignment . . . So if I get caught . . ."

Townsend started at her. "Then don't get caught."

It was still a game, I knew, but for the first time in the history of our exceptional education, the players on the other side didn't know we were playing. One by one, our classmates got their assignments until Bex and I were alone with our teacher.

"Baxter," Agent Townsend said, turning to Bex, "do you think you can find out the serial numbers of the five-dollar bill the man working at the Tilt-A-Whirl just put into that lockbox?"

The look on her face said that yes, she did think she could find out, and yet she didn't turn to walk away. She waited as our teacher's gaze landed on me.

"And I guess that leaves us with Cammie Morgan." He slowly scanned the crowd. "I think maybe we'll find something especially fitting for you."

I didn't know what to say, so I stood quietly, waiting.

"There." He pointed toward a man in a official theme-park jumpsuit. "There keys on his belt - bring me an impression of at least three of them."

He smiled like he was so smart. I shrugged like it was so easy. Then, with my best friend beside me, I turned and started through the crowd.

Although it pains me to admit it, for his very first lesson, Agent Townsend had managed to bring us to one of the most challenging places a spy could ever be. After all, Mr. Solomon had spent the last year and a half training us to see everything, hear everything, notice everything. And as I walked through the park, it was almost too much for my highly trained senses to take.

"Ooh!" I exclaimed, craning my neck as we walked past a stand selling some kind of deep-fried delicious on a stick. "I want one of those!"

"We don't have any money, Cam."

"Ooh, I want to ride that!"

"We only have an hour."

"I want -"

"I want you to take this seriously, okay?" Bex said, whirling on me.

"You sound like your mother," I said.

She practically glowed. "Thank you."

"Bex . . ." I said slowly. "I'm fine."

"You say that -"

"Bex." I cut her off and stopped in the center of the main avenue that snaked through the entire park. "Weren't you supposed to be following that guy?" I pointed to the attendant pushing a cart full of lockboxes in the opposite direction.

"I'm good where I am," she said.

"Bex . . ."

"Cammie . . ."

"Spot the surveillance," I told her.

"What?"

I thought back to the way her parents had led us all around London - the game we hadn't played in weeks. "Spot the surveillance."

"Man selling balloons by the bumper cars," she said, not even blinking.

"The woman with the cotton candy," I added, pointing at just one of the guards that surrounded me at every turn.

It was her turn, but I couldn't shake the feeling that the game was over. We'd stopped keeping score on a bridge overlooking the Thames.

"By my count, there are thirteen operatives tailing me right now. And those are just the ones I've made. There are cameras every hundred yards, and if I'm not mistaken, a Blackhawk helicopter just did a flyby."

"Two Blackhawks," Bex corrected. "In a rotation."

"See? I'm fine," I said, and for the first time in a long time I meant it. I really did. It was as if the walls of my school had been picked up and transported here. It was like my school, but with cotton candy. No wonder I couldn't hold back a smile as I asked, "Do you think my mom would let Townsend bring me here if this place wasn't the Fort Knox of family fun?" Bex opened her mouth to speak, but I didn't give her the chance.

"Go," I said.

For a moment she just stood there, watching. Waiting. The my best friend turned away without another word.

For the next twenty minutes I walked alone in the busy park - past lines of people waiting to ride the Ferris wheel and buy cotton candy, through the crowd that had gathered around Eva Elvarez as she shot ninety-seven little mechanical ducks in a row. Roller coasters roared overhead with their screaming masses and screeching tracks. Wheels spun, fountains splashed, and the smell of people and junk food and heat wafted all around me until I wondered if I might be sick, overdosed on freedom.

So when the man with the clipboard walked off the main thoroughfare, I didn't mind.

Even though a girl in a private school uniform should probably stand out in a busy, public place, I was still the Chameleon, and I followed at the same easy pace and comfortable distance that had been bred into my DNA (a fact that Liz had once tried to verify in the lab, which led to the "no more blood samples this semester" rule of sophomore year).

When I wanted to stop to watch the jugglers, I watched. When I wanted to make faces at myself in the funhouse mirror, I did. When I wanted to try something called a Waffle Burger, I cursed myself for not keeping an emergency twenty in my sock, like Grandpa Morgan always taught me, and just kept walking. The man in the jumpsuit remained a constant figure in the corner of my eye.

I should probably point out that in all that time, the man never turned around. Not once did he check his tail. I was starting to think that this was the easiest covert operations lesson ever, when he slipped through a small gate in the fence that ran behind the merry-go-round, but I didn't hesitate. I didn't wait. I just did what I was born to do: I followed, knowing that whatever guards were following me would be quick to do the same.

It was quieter there, behind the barricades. A large manmade lake stretched out beside me. The smells of corn dogs and popcorn were lost beneath the scent of oil and grease. The bright lights and spinning wheels of the park were gone, replaced by a maze of carefully placed trees and perfectly engineered scaffolding that stretched high into the sky, blocking out the sun.

I thought of all the things I might say if someone saw me: I was there to meet my boyfriend. My classmates had sent me on a dare. I'd seen a stray animal come this way and it had appeared to be hurt.

So I wants afraid when the man stopped and opened the door of a long building that sat hidden in the midst of the park. I waited ten seconds, then followed, praying the door's hinges wouldn't speak as I pulled it slowly open and stepped inside.

Christmas decorations lined one wall, and Fourth of July sparklers and banners covered the other. There were broken, faded bumper cars and log ride relics, and a statue of a clown. It was like a graveyard - where amusement came to die.

And that was the thought that filled my mind as I eased down the center aisle - soaking in the sights and smells and sounds that filled the air around me. Every fiber in my training and my gut wound together to tell me that the workman was gone - lost, out of sight.

But then I heard the faint scruff of heavy shoes on concrete and knew I was anything but alone.

"You really shouldn't be here."

**Chapter Twenty-Six**

The first time any of us had seen Joe Solomon, we'd thought he was a highly trained operative, a seasoned CoveOps veteran and . . . well . . . hot. But a year and a half later I barely recognized my teacher in the man who stood behind me. His face was drawn and pale. His hair was longer, his clothes grungier, but it was his eyes that had changed the most as he stepped toward me and demanded, "Cammie you have to come with me. You have to come right now!"

As he reached for me, I jerked away. I didn't know whether to hug him of hit him (a feeling that frequently associate with Blackthorne Boys, to tell you the truth), so I just shook my head. "No."

"Cammie, if I heard you were going to be here, then they'll know you're here. I have to get you out of here. Now!"

"It's true, isn't it?"

"The Circle could be here any second."

"You are the Circle!"

Joe Solomon had had far more practice telling lies than I've had detecting them, but I could see the truth in his eyes.

"It is true, isn't it?" I asked, even though, deep down, I knew it wasn't really a question. Even though I knew.

"I'm sorry, Cammie." he ran his hand through his hair. "Cammie, I'm so -"

"No," I said numbly. I felt myself backing away, my left hand tracing the cinder-block wall of the building. I scanned the room, looking for a piece of a pipe of a tool - a weapon of any kind.

"Cammie, listen to me. I'll explain everything, but if my sources are right, then you're not safe here. You have to come with me."

"I'm not going anywhere with you!"

I wasn't think about the guards, who, moments before, I had been sure were watching my every more. I didn't reach for the panic button that I wore around my wrist like a watch, or call into my comms unit for help. I wasn't thinking as I brought my hand up along the side of his face - hard.

It was just a slap - nothing special. Hardly something they would teach in P&E. and yet I felt like doing it again. And again.

"I'm not going anywhere with you!" I said, striking out again.

"I'm not. I'm not. I'm . . ." I stopped and stared at him. "How could you?"

"I was young, Cammie."

"You were my age! And you grew up and . . ." I didn't want to cry, and so I screamed. "You killed him!"

I expected him to lash back, strike me down where I stood. He was bigger, stronger, and more experienced, but rage is a force of its own. I watched him stumble back as if he knew that - as if I scared him.

"He's dead because of you!" I yelled, stepping forward, but Mr. Solomon didn't brace to block the blow.

Instead, he leaned against the wall, his eyes deeper and darker and sadder than anything I've ever seen, as my father's best friend stared at me, voice cracking and whispered, "I know."

What happened next was a scene I've played and replayed in my mind a thousand times. I'll probably play it a thousand more. All I know for certain is that one second, a man I had revered, trusted, loved, and hated (in that order) was in front of me, crumbling. And in the next moment, time seemed to freeze as the door to the building swung open and a long shadow sliced across the concrete floor, and I heard a woman say, "He said we'd find you here."

I remember everything about my trip to Boston last summer - the sight of the balloons, the sounds of the crowds, and of all, the way a masked woman and two men walked toward me through the spinning shadows of a helicopter's blades.

"No," I said, as if that simple word could stop it from happening again.

The woman looked so calm as she stood in the open doorway, as if nothing could go wrong this time. As if it were over. I reached for my watch, punched the button again and again, not daring to calculate the odds of beating the Circle for a third time - not willing to waste one second more.

"No!" I yelled. It didn't matter that she was older and taller and probably far more experienced - I charged toward her, knowing that my only hope lay on the other side of the open door.

But then I stopped, because the woman was no longer alone. Agent Townsend was there. Agent Townsend was looking at Joe Solomon and me as if Christmas had come early.

"You were right," the woman told Agent Townsend with a smile. "This was almost too easy."

I looked from the woman I could had sworn had been in Boston, to my new teacher. It didn't make sense, but sense was the last thing in the world that I could worry about, because Joe Solomon was rushing part me, flying through the open door. In one fluid motion, he knocked Townsend and the woman to the ground. I rushed outside and saw the three of them rolling down a hill, fighting through the dirt and the weeds. Dust swirled around me, and standing there, I realized I had no idea whom to trust. All I really knew for certain is that sometimes all an operative gets is one second - nothing more.

And I had already started to run.

**Chapter Twenty-Seven**

It was a trap. It was a trap. It was a trap.

The words echoed in my mind, keeping rhythm with my feet as the hit the ground.

"Bex!" I yelled as I ran through the tall trees that grew up around the roller coaster. Far above me, people were flying through the sky, but down below, there was only static in my comms unit, and the rough ground that no tourist was ever supposed to see. I hurtled over spotlights and dodged cables as I bolted to the top of a hill, not once allowing myself to think of Mr. Solomon or the woman of Agent Townsend. I just kept running - toward the lake, toward the fence, toward help.

It was a trap.

At the top of the hill I could hear the sounds of the park floating across the lake. All I had to do was keep running, keep fighting, but then I saw them - the agents who had been in the crowd all day - watching my every move. They were descending through the woods - emerging form behind the tall trees and the roller coaster's massive pillars, rushing past me.

Past me?

Not a soul tried to usher me to safety. And in that moment I knew that they weren't protectors. They were hunters. And me? I was the bait.

It was a trap.

I heard footsteps behind me, hard and fast.

"Zach," I called to the boy who was running toward me.

"Where is he?" Zach yelled, out of breath. I lunged forward and grabbed him. "Let me go, Gallagher Girl. I have to -"

"Do you want them to take you too?" I shouted, shaking him. When he stopped fighting I held him tighter. "They have him, Zach." I heard my mother's words coming back to me. "He's gone."

Mr. Solomon lay on the ground in the clearing below, bloody and bound, while agents still swarmed from all directions. I remember how, once on a helicopter en route to Ohio, Mr. Solomon had told us that often the hardest thing an operative can do is nothing. Standing there that day, I knew that it was true - that Joe Solomon was always right.

"Stupid!" Zach yelled. He banged him hand hard against the truck of a tree, and I couldn't tell whether the hand of the tree for the worst of it. He turned to me. "What happened?"

"CoveOps exercise. I tailed a man here. And then Mr. Solomon was there, talking about the Circle, saying I was in danger. And then there was a woman. I thought she was the woman form Boston."

"That wasn't her, Cammie."

"I know that know."

He grasped my shoulders. I could see a kind of fear settle into his eyes as he whispered, "There's no way Joe Solomon would ever be with her."

The roller coaster roared overhead, and I felt the ground vibrate beneath my feet.

"Why would he come here?" I asked. "It was a trap. Joe Solomon walked into a trap." Believe it or not, of all things I'd seen and heard since London, that was what surprised me most of all.

"You." Zach sounded almost amazed that I did know. "If he thought you were going to be here - virtually unprotected . . . There's nowhere he wouldn't go to save you."

"Why would he do that?" I snapped, trying to pull away, but he just held me tighter. "That doesn't make any -"

"It's in the journal, Cammie." Zach's gaze bore into mine. "It's all in the journal."

"Cammie!" someone said.

"I think I see her!" someone else called.

I could hear my classmates' voices in my ear. I knew they had crossed the fence and were running closer, but Zach's gaze never left mine.

"Look at me." Zach's hands felt like a vise. "Read the journal, Gallagher Girls. Read it all."

And then he pulled me closer, squeezed me so tightly that I could barely breathe. He pressed his lips hard against my forehead for a split second - nothing more - and when he finally let me go and disappeared back into the trees, I thought that I might fall.

"Oh my gosh, Cam, are you okay?" Eva Alvarez was screaming. "Are you -"

I heard Eva stop, Breathless. I watched her pull up short and turn to stare with the rest of my classmates at the scene that lay behind me. The agents. The chaos. The blood. And the way our former teacher lay on his stomach in the middle of it all, hands bound, legs shackled. Unconscious.

"Is that Mr. Solomon?" Anna asked.

"Yes." Bex's voice was low.

"What . . ." Tina's voice caught. "What is that?"

"It was a trap."
**Chapter Twenty-Eight**

You may think it would be impossible for a van full of teenage girls to be completely quiet for the duration of a two-hour drive, but that night I didn't hear a single voice. A soft rain fell, and only the sloshing of the windshield wipers - the sound of water splashing against the undercarriage of the car - could break the stifling silence on the long ride back to school.

Parte inferior do formulário

I recognized the sound. I'd heard it once on our Arlington town house as neighbors brought casseroles and condolences. I'd felt it at the ranch as relatives I barely knew spilled onto my grandparents' porch, the four walls of the house too thin to hold us and the news that my father was never coming home. The junior CoverOps class was mourning, and one by one, every girl in the van came to realize what my roommates and I had known for weeks - that Mr. Solomon hadn't been on a mission. Mr. Solomon was a whole different kind of gone.

When we pulled through the gates that night, it seemed like every light in the mansion was on. I could imagine girls inside, laughing and heading downstairs for supper, talking about papers and tests. But as we crawled from the van and watched Agent Townsend stride through the front doors, we all stayed perfectly still, a heavy drizzle and the memory of all we'd seen settling down around us, no one wanted to carry in all inside.

"I never knew," Anna Fetterman said. "I never even guessed. I'm making a mistake, aren't I?" She looked right at me as if I should know. "I shouldn't be on the CoveOps track. I shouldn't . . . I never knew."

"No one knew." Eva Alvarez placed an arm around Anna's shoulders. "No one knew what he was."

"Is."

No one heard me whisper, but that was just as well. After all, no one else had stood in the amusement park graveyard and heard him say the Circle was coming. No one else had felt his warm hands on the bridge. I might have been the only Gallagher Girl in the world at that moment who knew that Mr. Solomon wasn't in the past tense.

So I walked toward the doors and stepped inside, certain of one thing: Joe Solomon was very much alive.

Well, actually, technically, I tried to step inside.

Girls filled the entryway and covered the stairs, and it took all the strength I could muster to press out the rain and into the crowd that was staring as my mother and Agent Townsend stood in the middle of the foyer floor.

"What's going -"

"Shhh," a senior hissed, stopping Tina midsentence.

"You're welcome, by the way," Townsend said, turning toward the stairs, but my mother blocked him, looking anything but graceful.

"You had no right to take my daughter out of my school -"

"Your school?"

He should have been afraid. The last time I'd seen my mother look that way had been on a street in Washington, D.C., as he sister lay bleeding.

He should have been terrified.

"My daughter is not some pawn to be used on a whim!"

"Now, Rachel, don't think of her as a pawn. It's more like . . . what is it you Americans say . . . we dangled an apple out in front of Joe Solomon and -"

"The term is carrot," my mother corrected. "And it doesn't apply to teenage girls."

There was a knowing gleam in Townsend's eyes as he smiled. "Oh, is it? Maybe you use apples for something else?"

Some people think the key to strength is knowing how to hit. But that's now it. As I stood peering through the crowd at my mother and the man who had taken me out of the safety of the mansion, I knew real strength is not hitting when what you want to do most is kill.

Townsend must have sensed it too, because something changed in him then. "We had thirty agents in the park's interior and another sixty on the perimeter grid. We had eyes on her the whole time. We knew Solomon would show himself and as soon as he did, our agents were on him. She was fine."

He leaned closer to my mother, not blinking, not teasing, not even mocking. He laughed, but not like it was funny. It was closer to a laugh of disbelief.

"Ms. Morgan, we got him!"

"If you even put a student in danger again -"

"Oh, I thought you Gallagher Girls were immune to danger."

Despite the hundred girls that filled the foyer, no one moved or gasped or tried to defend our honor. We stood silently, waiting for our headmistress to say, "Oh, we are quite used to being underestimated, Agent Townsend. In fact, we welcome it."

That conversation probably violated every spy code and teacher code and headmistress code know to man, but that didn't matter. They couldn't see the hundred girls who stood watching. Despite their training, they didn't hear the way we held our collective breath. This fight was like the tide: it had been a long time coming and there was no way to hold it back.

Parte inferior do formulário

"Joe Solomon agreed to take this job only when he knew he would be teaching your daughter, isn't that right."

Mom folded her hands in front of her. "I've already answered that question in great detail for people with far more authority that you."

"And that didn't strike you as odd? A man like Joe Solomon coming here?" He laughed again. "But of course the Circle has always liked to recruit agents young. What is it they say, the greener the fruit, the easier it turns?"

"Yes," my mother admitted.

"He was here a year and a half?" Townsend asked, but my mother's voice was clam, as if he'd asked about the weather.

"He was."

"That's a long time - long enough to recruit anyone he might need. Turn someone?"

"As I already informed your superiors, Agent Townsend, if the Circle has any Allies here, they'd better pray that you find them before I do."

Agent Townsend was a large man, for covert operations. He was at least six inches taller and seventy pounds heavier than my mother (and that wasn't counting his ego), and yet there wasn't a doubt in my mind that he knew she was exactly right.

He watched her slowly turn and start up the stairs. She was almost gone when he called, "Joe Solomon isn't going to hurt your daughter, Ms. Morgan. You don't have to worry about him hurting anyone ever again."

I realized in that moment that he believed it - he really did - and for a second I wanted to believe him. He was a good spy, after all. A senior operative. A teacher. And standing there, surrounded by my sisterhood, I might have convinced myself that it was true - that I was safe.

But then my mother stopped and turned.

"I'm sorry, Agent Townsend, but Joe Solomon is the last of Cammie's worries."

\* \* \*

Our chef was making my favorite soup for dinner, but my roommates and I didn't run to the Grand Hall. We stood silently side by side while the rest of our school slowly drifted down the halls and up the stairs, carried away by a wave of gossip and fear and disbelief.

"Sublevel Two." I didn't whisper. I know that was foolish now, but at the moment, I , Cammie the Chameleon, didn't have the strength to hide. "We're going to find a way into Sublevel Two."

**Chapter Twenty-Nine**

HOW NOT TO BREAK INTO

SUBLEVEL TWO

(A list by Cameron Morgan, with

help from Macey McHenry)

•Digging: Because a person would have to dig . . . a lot. And besides, the maintenance staff would totally notice any big holes that appeared in the middle of the lacrosse field. (Plus, it can totally ruin a manicure.)

•Anything involving an elevator shaft: Sure, every Gallagher Girls gets her very own crossbar on the first day of eighth grade, but it's not as simple as prying open the doors and shimming on down to the subs. (Besides, in our experience, doors at the Gallagher Academy aren't exactly pry-able.)

•Sweet-talk: Because sweet-talking might make the sweet-talkee suspicious about the sweet-talker's plans and motivations - not to mention that even the burliest members of the security staff are probably afraid of taking us into the sublevels and getting . . . you know . . . killed.

•Teleportation: Sure, Liz says she has an excellent working theory, but she doesn't have a prototype yet, and without a prototype it's pretty much a moot point.

•That thing Bex's parents did in Dubai with liquid nitrogen, and earthquake simulator, and a ferret: Because we don't have a ferret.

\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

It only took three weeks.

I know that sounds like a lot of time - and it is. But also, it isn't. Because . . . well . . . in the clandestine services, nothing ever happens quickly (except when it does). Nothing is ever, ever easy (except when it is). And, most of all, nothing ever goes perfectly according to plan (except in the movies).

Parte inferior do formulário

It's dirty work that is almost universally slow, tedious, repetitious, mundane, morose, and just in general boring (except for the parts when people might die).

We could have done it sooner and it still wouldn't have felt soon enough. We could have planned for years and we still wouldn't have felt ready. So, yeah. It took three weeks.

For Liz, to crack the code. For Macey and Bex to gather the gear. For me to plan our way inside.

By one a.m. on the night in question, we were making our way down the third-floor corridor as quickly and as quietly as we could without making it obvious that we were trying to be both quick and quiet.

The Operatives fully understood that the first step in Denial and Deception Operations in denial. And it's way easier to deny being involved in some rogue, undercover operation if you're wearing jammies.

"There's still something I don't understand," Liz whispered. "If Mr. Solomon is so desperate to have this book or whatever it is that is located inside Sublevel Two, then why did he make it impossible to access Sublevel Two?"

"Because he wanted to make it impossible for the wrong people to access it," I said peeking around the corner, where, as if on cue, Agent Townsend bounded down the stairs. I threw myself against the wall, forgetting that we hadn't broken any rules at that point and there were at least a dozen perfectly valid reasons we might have been there. But I'm a chameleon. I'll take being invisible over being justifiable any day.

His footsteps echoed like thunder in the empty hallway.

I didn't want him as I whispered, "It's time."

At 0135 hours, The Operatives proceeded to the small stairway beneath the Grand Stairs, but they didn't stop at the mirror that concealed the elevator to the sublevels.

At 0136, Operative Morgan's stomach began to growl, and the entire team realized the importance of not skipping meals prior to incredibly important covert operations!

Bex led us to the small closet at the base of the stairs and pulled out a backpack stocked with utility belts, cables, and a very handy gadget that Macey had made in her Intro in Accessories class (which is never what the new students think it's going to be about).

And as we stepped outside, I realized that it was warmer. Spring was coming, but I had barely noticed.

"Look." I stopped and looked at my three best friends in the whole world. "We've only got three minutes until the guards are going to patrol this sector, and I totally understand if you don't want to go. I don't know if this is going to work, and even if it does, we don't know exactly what we're going to face down there."

From the look on Bex's face, I knew there was no way she was going to be left out of anything covert. And dangerous. And utterly gray in the black-and-white spectrum of right and wrong.

Still, I had to go on. "If anything happened to any of you . . ." I started, but then I couldn't finish.

"So if there's a computer down there that we've got to hack into in sixty seconds, you're going to do it?" Liz asked, strapping a belt on over her pajamas.

"And you really think I'm going to miss this?" Bex pulled her belt from the top of the pile.

We all looked at Macey. "You need me," she said reaching for her belt like a queen taking her scepter.

As I leaned down and disabled the security devices around the small grate, I felt Bex watching over my shoulder.

"I always thought the elevators to Sublevel Two put us somewhere over there." She pointed in the opposite direction. I smiled up at her. "But we're not going to the elevators, are we?"

At precisely 0147, The Operatives tested their theory that the mirrors in the new compacts from McHenry Cosmetics are the appropriate sixe to slide over and deflect the laser beams that cover the opening of all ventilation points.

(The Operatives were correct.)

At precisely 0207, The Operatives tested the new Electromagnetic Signal Reallocator (Official Name and Patent Pending) that Operative Sutton had developed for the occasion.

(It was successful.)

At precisely 0208, Operative Baxter said a prayer. And jumped.

The airshaft was small. Crazy small. I'm-really-glad-I-skipped-dinner-after-all small. There was no way a grown man could have fit. It was an entrance that was only suitable for a girl. A Gallagher Girl, I thought as I slid down the cable like it was a fireman's pole, the clamp in my hand growing hot, searing into my gloves as I zoomed into the depths of the ground.

Parte inferior do formulário

I knew Bex was below me, but I couldn't see a thing, Macey and Liz were above me, and I hoped that was why I couldn't see even the faintest hint of light above me as I hurtled into what felt like the world's tiniest volcano.

Deeper and deeper I went. Faster and faster I fell. I felt the air rushing past me, my hair blowing away from my face, the cable burning hotter in my hands until . . .

"Look out!" Bex yelled, as suddenly I broke free of the shaft. My arms felt as if they might pop out of their sockets when I squeezed the clamp and slammed to an almost instantaneous stop. I was dangling from the cable, looking down into the cavernous space of Sublevel Two.

"I can't believe that worked," I admitted, breathless.

"Cam!" Bex shouted, stopping me before I could release my hold on the cable. "Don't. Move. A muscles."

We were suspended thirty feet above the hard stone floor of a room that, despite a semester of studying in Sublevel Two, I'd never seen before. The subs are a vast and winding maze of classrooms and offices, resources libraries and storage for some of the covert world's most highly classified secrets. And right then, Bex and I were looking through the dim glow of security lights at a massive room filled with hundreds of shelves and filing cabinets, a complex system of wiring and explosives . . .

And the most complex laser grid system I had ever seen.

"So," Bex said, smiling up at me through the pulsing glow of the emergency floodlamps, "wanna hang out?"

A moment later, the vibrations on the cable grew stronger, and I looked up in time to see Liz hurtling toward me through the air, stopping just above me.

Macey was close behind and out of breath as she asked, "What if all this?"

Bex and I looked down at the rows of top secret information and the high-grade explosives that ran the length of the room, neither of us able to hide the awe in our voices. "It's a burn bag," we said in unison.

"What's that?" Macey asked.

"It's the stuff that can't fall into the wrong hands. Ever. It's the stuff that rigged to blow up in case . . . in case the worst happens."

Which was true. But scary. Because at that moment, technically, that worst that could happen was us.

Bex was the first to drop to the floor, nimble as a cat, landing between the red beams, then flipping and jumping through the air, navigating her way to the small panel on the side of the room. It if hadn't been so utterly terrifying, it would have been beautiful. Like ballet. But with a way higher casualty rate.

"Now, Liz," she yelled, and Liz pulled out her crossbow and took aim at the wall six inches above Bex's head.

"Uh . . . Liz . . ." Macey started.

"Sorry," Liz said, and raised her aim about a foot.

I don't think any of us could draw a breath as the arrow sailed through the air, a small cable trailing behind it, then landed perfectly just above the panel on the wall.

"Awesome," I said. "Now, just like we practiced - take the extra clip on your harness and put it on Bex's cable. Yeah. Just like that. You're doing -"

"Whoopsie daisy."

And that's when Elizabeth Sutton, supergenius, forgot that her bag was unzipped and let her Advanced Encryption textbook fall, end-over-end, into the heart of the laser field below.

"Liz!" I yelled, but it was too late. Lights began to pulse. Below us, the lasers began to move, red lines snaking over the ground, and I realized our only option.

"What do we do?" Macey yelled.

"We run!"

As we dropped to the ground, I couldn't hear my own thoughts - much less the footsteps of the girls who ran beside me. Red lights swirled. Sirens screamed. It was as if Sublevel Two were burning as Liz carried her laptop to where Bex stood waiting by the electronic nerve center that controlled all of Sublevel Two's modern defenses.

But modern . . . yeah, modern was the least of our problems.

At the far end of the room, there was a massive window made of stained glass. For a second I stood there, wondering why anyone would install a window in an underground room. It would have been far more weird and way less terrifying if the space behind the glass hadn't been quickly filling up with water.

Parte inferior do formulário

"So that coming from . . ." Macey started.

"The lake."

"Sp if we don't stop this . . ." she started again.

"We drown," I said, but Macey was already gone - sprinting across the room.

"What do we do?" she cried. She was searching the walls, pushing on stones - frantically looking for a way to make the water stop rising. "Where's the switch? I thought Mr. Solomon told Zach there was a way to turn it off."

As the water rose, the stained glass seemed to sparkle. The light looked different the higher the water went, and I couldn't help but remember the very first assignment Joe Solomon had ever given me: notice things.

"I've seen this before," I said, still staring at the familiar images in the glass - brightly colored shapes and lines. "Macey, have you seen it before?"

"Sorry, Cam," she said, still searching. "I'm a little busy here."

"it's like the one upstairs. You know, the big one? Except . . . it's different. It's almost like . . ." I trailed off. My voice caught. And I knew when we had to do. "It's not a window - it's a puzzle!"

The glass was cold to the touch when I reached for it. The device was at least a hundred years old, and when I pushed on a deep blue section of glass, at first it didn't budge, and I thought I was wrong. But I pushed harder and . . . movement. The window was like a kaleidoscope, a moving, swirling mass of glass and hidden gears as I slid the blue section smoothly into place in the center of the massive frame.

"Macey, help me," I said, and together we went to work, our eyes and hands feverishly flying over the window's hundreds of sections as quickly and deftly as we could, trying to duplicate the upstairs window that I had never truly looked at until Joe Solomon came into our school.

All around us, though, the sirens kept blaring. The lights kept swirling. And, worst of all, the water kept rising.

"Lizzie?" I heard Bex yell behind me.

"Almost . . ." Liz said, her fingers flying over the laptop's keys. "Almost . . . got it!"

Instantly, the sirens went silent. The lights stopped swirling. From the corner of my eye, I saw Liz and Bex give each other a high five, but the water level kept rising.

I thought of what Mr. Mosckowitz had told Agent Townsend that night in the shadowy halls - that every generation had added a layer of defense to that honored place - and I knew that the original Gallagher Girls were in many ways the wisest.

"Got it!" Macey, yelled, pushing the final piece into place, but nothing happened.

It felt like an eternity before a shrill mechanical voice sounded through the echoing space. "IDENTIFY. IDENTIFY. IDENTIFY. WHO GOES THERE?" it asked.

And then instinct must have taken hold, because the four of us shouted the first words that came to mind : "We are the sisters Gillian!"

I held my breath and said a prayer until the water began to recede and the mechanical voice said, "WELCOME HOME."

**Chapter Thirty**

There are things people like Townsend would never understand about the Gallagher Academy. Ever. You see, it isn't about a Gallagher Girls - it's about being one of the Gallagher Girls. Plural. All of us. Without Bex, I would have triggered the sensors. Without Macey, I might never have solved the puzzle in time. And without Liz . . . well, Liz had multiple roles on this particular mission.

"How high is that again?" she said as she walked beside me.

"Not that high," I said slowly, looking up at the towering shelves that lined the walls of Sublevel Two.

It wasn't where we stored the chemicals. As I looked around the long rows of tall shelves, there wasn't single weapon in sight. But the information contained within this room was volatile enough to bring my school crashing down, potent enough to poison every member of our sisterhood. And I knew we didn't dare stay too long - that we live our lives on a need-to-know-basis for reason.

Unfortunately, I was the only one who felt that way.

"Ooh! Cool!" I heard Macey cry from one row away, despite that fact that, upstairs, half of the Gallagher Academy security team was now on high alert, wondering what in the world had just happened in Sublevel Two.

"Hey, Cam," Bex called, "did you know Amelia Earhart spent the last twenty years of her life undercover in Istanbul?"

A half second later, Macey came running around the end of an aisle, a file in her hands. "Quick, guys, I've for pictures of Professor Buckingham . . . in World War Two . . . in a swimsuit!"

Parte inferior do formulário

Bex raced to look at the images, but my gaze was locked on Liz as I ran a cable through the utility belt that hung around her tiny waist.

"Liz, this is silly. I'll do it," I told her.

"But Cammie, Zach said it's in the very middle of the highest shelf. It's going to be really hard to get someone in exactly the right place, and I'm the lightest," she said, citing the one scientifically verifiable - and thus relevant - piece of information we had.

"You don't have to prove anything, Lizzie. I can -"

"They need you, Cammie," she said, her voice no louder than a whisper. "And if their side needs you alive . . . our side needs you alive." She looked up at the tall shelves and took a deep breath as if clearing all those unpleasant thoughts away and focusing on a single, quantifiable fact: "I'm the lightest."

"Bex, we're ready," I called out. A second later she appeared, Liz's crossbow in her hands. It looked absolutely effortless as she took aim at the ceiling fifty feet overhead. I heard a cable whirling, watched the coil at my feet slowly disappear, until I heard the metallic noise that titanium makes when it strike soild stone.

"Ready?" I asked Liz, who nodded.

"You can do it," I silently whispered while Bex grasp the other end of the cable and pulled. In the next moment, Liz was floating gracefully (or as gracefully as Liz does anything) over the shelves marked: WARNING, HIGH VOLTAGE.

I stood, holding my breath as I watched. Maybe that's why I was the one who heard it, a buzzing sound, so distant that at first I thought it was the whirling of my own mind.

But I heard it again.

"Did you guys hear that?" I asked, straining.

Bex was trying to maneuver Liz into position, and Liz was staring at the high-voltage sign as if her life depended on it, which . . . well . . . it probably did.

"Do you hear that?" I asked Macey.

"We're five hundred yards beneath the ground," she said with a shrug.

She was right, of course. I was probably as safe here as I could have probably been anywhere in the world, but there was something about the eerie quiet that surrounded us. I stood for a long time, listening to the sound of my heartbeat - a rhythm that hadn't slowed in months until . . .

"There," I said again, and this time Macey stopped too.

"Maybe it's a furnace of something?" she asked as the sound got louder.

I held my breath. "That's no heating unit."

"How much longer, Liz?" Bex asked.

"Almost got it!" she called, reaching as far as her thing frame would go, but still the book stayed out of grasp.

"Liz," I said again. The noise was growing louder, and it came with more regularity. "Liz, how long would it take you to bring the laser grid back up?"

"Two minutes." She said.

But in the depths of the space, the noise growled to life again. I looked at Bex and Macey. "We don't have two minutes."

In that moment there were a lot of fears that came to mind: What if there was some backup security measures that we hadn't neutralized and we were about to be gassed, crushed, drowned, electrocuted, pinned, or trapped?

What if the Circle had tracked me into the depths of our school and, knowing that I was locked away from my mother and our guards, had found a way inside?

What if it was my mother, and we were caught . . . busted?

But despite my crazy fears, there was one thing I knew for certain: someone else was trying to get into Sublevel Two.

"You can do it, Lizzie," Bex shouted up. "Just . . . hurry. And maybe move a little to the -"

Bex pulled the rope to the right, but either she underestimated her own strength or overestimated Liz's weight, because next I saw a blond blur swing past the shelves and stop to hover somewhere over the section dedicated to the Cuban Missile Crisis.

The mechanic whirring had grown louder, and now we could tell it was coming from somewhere in front of us.

"Are those . . ." Macey started.

"The elevator shafts?" Bex guessed.

"I think so," I said. "Do you think it's -"

"Townsend," we all said in unison.

"But how is he planning on getting around the security measures down here?" Macey asked.

I shrugged. "Either he knows we've already done it for him . . ."

"Or he doesn't care," Bex said, staring at me, and I couldn't tell from the look in her eyes that neither of us knew what was scarier.

A small pile of dust had started to appear on the floor, and I noticed the small hole that was appearing in the stone wall. Agent Townsend was drilling his way out of the shaft and into Sublevel Two.

Parte inferior do formulário

I spoke over the sound of the drill and the panic of my pounding heart. "We gotta go!"

The operatives realized they were about to have a very hostile encounter with a very angry teacher-slash-possible-enemy-agent, so they utilized a number of highly recommended covert tactics.

1.Operative McHenry said, "Are you ready yet? Are you ready yet? Are you ready yet?" in rapid succession until Operative Sutton was, in fact, ready.

2.Operative Morgan pushed a shelf in front of the wall the enemy operative was trying to drill through, forming a temporary barricade.

3.Operative Baxter took that opportunity to say some very choice words about the Gallagher Academy's new Covert Operativtions instructor.

"Got it!" Liz said, and in the next second she was sailing through the air, falling, Macey and I caught her and guided her to the ground, but we barely had a second to unhook her - not a moment to retrieve any of our gear - before Bex grabbed my and whispered, "Run!"

And then we were off, dodging through the shelves as quickly as we possibly could.

Glancing back, I could see the beam of a flashlight playing over the shelves at the end of the massive room. We were well away from the beam's reach, but we were anything but safe.

The cable still dangled from the ventilation shaft in front of us. I watched Macey grip hold of it, latch on to one of the clamps that had brought us down, and shift the device into reverse. A spilt second later, she was rising through the air, hurtling into the shaft, toward the night sky and freedom.

But in Sublevel Tow there were footsteps behind us and coming closer.

He's never been here before, I told myself as I listened to the man make his way slowly through the maze of shelves.

Bex was standing at the base of the cable, hurriedly securing Liz to the device, while I stayed frozen, watching the play of the flashlight between the shelves. It was eerie and beautiful at the same time. A hundred years' worth of covert items lay inside that massive space - blue prints and plans, secrets so explosive the best spies in the world were willing to risk everything to make sure they never saw the light of day.

But right then, there was only one top secret artifact that mattered to me. It was my turn, so I reached for the cable and felt myself faster and faster toward the fresh air of the night.

**Chapter Thirty-One**

 It was a nearly starless sky. Black clouds hung heavy overhead, blocking out the moon. But after the darkness of the tiny hole, I had to squint my eyes. It was like staring at the sun.

"And just when we thought we weren't going to get to do any CoveOps training exercises this semester," I said I Bex as she yanked me out the hole by my arms; but my roommates weren't smiling.

"What?" I asked. My friends just looked at me. "What?" I asked again, but I never got to hear the answer, because in the next moment the air around us was drowned in light. Sirens were ringing, piercing the air, screaming that something was terribly, terribly wrong.

The front doors of the mansion were a hundred yards away, but I knew they were our best chance at safety, and Bex and Liz were already running. Macey and I hurried to catch up.

Guards ran from the main mansion to the fences, checking the perimeter, barely able to restrain barking dogs on the ends of long leashes.

Searchlights flashed across the sky. From a distance, it might have looked like a party. People in Roseville probably had a dozen crazy theories about what was going on at the school right then, but none of them, I knew, would remotely resemble the truth.

The instant my roommates and I pushed breathlessly through the front doors, I heard Professor Buckingham call my name from the top of the stairs.

"Cameron Morgan! Has anyone seen Cameron -"

"There she is!" an eighth grade yelled, and in the next second I was trapped in a crush of bodies. Mr. Smith reached me first. A man from the security department grabbed me from the other side.

"What's happening?" I asked, looking at Mr. Smith.

"Breach," he said simply as I was dragged (or practically carried) up the stairs.

Girls crowed the hallways. They had pajamas and bare feet. And weapons. Oh yeah, they'd brought a lot of weapons.

"Is it the Circle?" one seventh grader yelled, voice breaking. "Are they here?"

But the faculty kept me gripped in a tight circle. I could barely make out a single face until Tina Walters broke through. "Cammie, are you okay?"

Parte inferior do formulário

"I'm fine!" I yelled, trying to squirm free.

And then the alarms stopped.

"You gave us quite a scare tonight, young lady," Townsend greeted me on the landing. My friends stood at the bottom of the stairs, staring up at me. Their hair was tangled and full of cobwebs. Their faces were filthy (which meant mine probably was too). "Exactly where have you girls been keeping yourselves?"

"Secret passageway," I said. "I just found it. It's awesome but . . ." I glanced at Macey, who had a large black mark on one perfect cheekbone. "Dirty."

"You," Townsend said, pointing to Liz. "What do you have in that bag?"

Okay, so maybe it did look a little strange. After all, a hundred girls had filled the hallways and lined the staircases that night. There were face masks and retainers, but Liz carried the only backpack, and Townsend wouldn't have been the spy everyone thought he was if he hadn't wondered what was inside it.

"Well?" he asked again, stepping closer.

"Homework!" Liz blurted. "Books."

"You may not know this, Agent Townsend," Dr. Fibs said, "but Ms. Sutton here is one of our most dedicated -"

"Open it," Townsend demanded. He grabbed the bag and turned it upside down. I held my breath and watched as two notebooks, a pack of gum, and fourteen colored pencils scattered across the floors.

I'm pretty sure I supposed to breathe a sigh of relief, but instead I felt panic. Terror. We'd risked our lives to get that journal, and it was nowhere. Gone.

"Where's the . . ." I found myself saying aloud, but Macey gave the slightest of nods. The journal was hidden, it told me. The journal was safe.

"Cammie!"

I knew that voice.

"Mom," I said, trying to see through the crowd.

"It's okay, everyone," my mother - our headmistress - told us. "The security department assures me that the perimeter had not been breached. There's no one within the mansion or the grounds who is not supposed to be here, go back to bed, everybody." When she looked at me, there was no doubt it was on order. "Go straight to bed."

Yeah, in case you're wondering, we totally didn't do that.

Sure, we went to our suite. Sure, we turned out the lights. But ten seconds later the four of us were huddled in the bathroom, staring at the book that looked especially dark in Liz's pale hand. When she handed it to me, a single piece of paper slipped free, fluttered, and landed on the floor.

*Dear Cammie,*

*If you're reading this, I must be gone. I know I should probably apologize for keeping this journal from you for so long, but I won't because I'm not sorry. In my professional opinion, you weren't ready. And in my personal opinion, I had hoped you never would be.*

*I've made mistakes, Cammie - too many to name here. But the biggest of which, I still carry. The worst of which, I've spent a lifetime trying to make it right.*

*I did try to make it right, Cammie, I really tried, but if you're reading this, I must not have tried hard enough.*

*Forever sorry,*

*Joseph Solomon*

The thin book felt heavier than, more precious than all of the first editions in the Gallagher Academy's library put together. The cover was brittle and dry. The pages tallow with age. I was almost afraid to open it. But needless to say, not reading it wasn't really a viable option at that point.

I took a deep breath and turned to the first page, read the heading - COVERT OPERATION REPORT - but beyond that, I couldn't read a single work.

"It's encrypted," Bex hissed in frustration. "We risked our bloody necks and we can't even read it. I tell you, I'm half tempted to break into CIA custody just so I can break Joe Solomon out of CIA custody just so I can break Joe Solomon."

But at the word encrypted, Liz had snatched the journal form my hands and was holding it up to the light.

"It's the pigeons!" she shouted, and I worried that Tina, Eva, Courtney, and the rest of the junior class might come barging into our suite with crossbows and curling irons.

"This is it," Liz said, jabbing her finger onto the page. "See, look at this. It's almost more like hieroglyphs in a way. Almost like a -"

"Language," Macey said.

Liz's eyes shone in the dim room. "Yeah, that exactly it."

"And you don't crack languages - not really," Bex said. "You learn them."

"Or you translate them," Macey said.

"Exactly. Mr. Solomon didn't leave a bunch of crazy scribblings on a board . . ." Liz started.

Parte inferior do formulário

"He left a key." Macey reached out to take the book. She ran her finger over the page. "Is this Mr. Solomon's handwriting?"

"No," I found myself whisper. "It's my dad's."

**Chapter Thirty-Two**

 Covert Operations Report

(Translated by Operative Morgan and Sutton)

Day 1

Joe's nightmares are back.

He says they're nothing, but I can hear him screaming down the hall - something about Blackthorne and Vatican City. Last night I ran to his room and found him reaching, half asleep, for a knife.

He says he had an op go bad there. Only problem is, according to Langley, Agent Joseph Solomon has never been to Rome.

Day 26

I wish someone would tell me that it's okay to spy on my best friend. I keep this journal in code. I listen to his calls. Tonight I followed him to a dead letter drop in Georgetown.

I wish someone would tell me that I'm crazy. It would be far better than being right, because all I can think about is the passport I found in his safety deposit box (yeah, I also broke into his safety deposit box).

Three years ago he went to Rome on a passport not issued by the CIA - at the same time that someone tried to kill the Pope.

With a knife.

I really hope I'm going crazy.

Day 92

I think I know what Jose was. What he is?

But . . . no. it can't be true.

I don't want it to be true.

Day 96

Some people say the Circle doesn't exist - that there is no ancient association of spies and assassins out to manipulate the world order, but it turns out they are real.

Turns out my roommate is one.

Turns out a people are.

Day 100

Joe told me the truth tonight. Joe told me everything.

We're going to stop them. It might be the last thing we ever do, but we'll do it.

I didn't dare linger on those last words - think about what they meant.

"How old were they when they wrote that?" Bex asked.

I looked at the date at the corner of the page and did the math in my head. "Twenty-three," I said, and then I re-did the math, because it didn't seem right that my father had started chasing the Circle of Cavan before he'd even started dating my mother - that this mission was officially older than I was.

"Turn," Liz said, not trying to hide her impatience at being forced to read at a non-speed-of-light pace, but these were the last things my father would ever say to me. I wanted to make every sentence count.

Day 219

After nine months of bureaucracy and protocol, Operatives Morgan and Solomon have concluded that the criminal organization known as the Circle of Cavan has too many double agents placed within official intelligence organizations to be effectively neutralized through official channels.

It's a good thing Operatives Morgan and Solomon and very good at being unofficial.

Day 290

After two weeks in Rome, The Operatives have ascertained that the Circle's base of operations here has been shut down or relocated since Operative Solomon was sent to Vatican.

They have also learned that a person will really get sick of pasta. Eventually.

Day 407

Today, Hungarian officials positively identified the body of the man found in a river in Budapest as the man who was thinking of providing intel to The Operatives about the Circle's Eastern European operatives.

They killed him.

He was the best lead we'd had in over a year, and they killed him.

The air around us was warmer; it was almost spring; and yet there were goose bumps on our arms. It still felt a long, long way from summer.

Day 506

The Deputy Director warned The Operatives again about taking on the Circle themselves, but Operative Solomon insists that the Circle has recruited too long and too well to be effectively targeted by a large-scale operation.

The Circle has spies. Literally. The Circle has spies everywhere.

The Operatives must go alone.

The more I read, the faster I turned the pages until, finally, I flipped to the end, desperate to read the last pages first - as if, maybe, this time it might have a different ending.

Day 5,860

The Operatives received word that their asset in Athens had had a breakthrough. Operative Solomon had begun preparations to travel to Greece, but the Deputy Director of the CIA suspects The Operatives are still taking on the Circle on their own, so he has placed Operative Solomon on desk duty. Operative Morgan will go instead.

Parte inferior do formulário

My father was thirty-nine when he wrote that, and the book was almost out of pages - the story, in a lot of ways, was almost at its end. So I held my breath and turned the page and saw that the handwriting changed. My father's lazy scrawl was gone - replaced with the precise penmanship that I'd seen scribbled across the sublevel blackboards for the past year and a half.

Day 5,869

Cutout made contact today with word that Operative Morgan did not appear at their meeting. Cutout will follow backup protocols again until Operative Morgan shows.

Day 5,878

Operative Solomon arrived at Operative Morgan's safe house in Athens, but it appears he never made it this far. Will begin backtracking immediately.

Day 5,892

CIA has been contacted. Full force of The Agency is now involved in the search for Operative Morgan.

Day 5,900

Three weeks of looking and trail has gone cold.

He's gone.

He's just gone.

Someone has to tell Rachel.

**Chapter Thirty-Three**

THINGS THAT WOULD NEVER BE

THE SAME, NEVER, EVER AGAIN

(A list my Cameron Morgan)

•Macey's pajama pants: because grass stains and air shaft dirt never come out.

•Agent Townsend's reputation: because if word ever got out that the four of us had done what he'd been trying to do for months, I'm pretty sure they'd take away his double-0 status (If Tina was even right that he had one).

•Liz: because the Pigeon Code had opened up a whole new world of cryptography (and she was already pretty obsessed with the old one).

•Bex: because her parents had been right.

•Bex: because her parents had been wrong.

•Me: just because.

\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

The next night I walked toward my mother's office carrying my father's journal and my teacher's secret. I had no idea which one was heavier.

"It wasn't Sodium Pentothal, was it?"

I spun at the sound and saw Agent Townsend standing in the Hall of History, staring at me through the protective glow of Gilly's - I mean Cavan's - sword.

"In the apple?" he clarified.

"I don't know what you're -" I tried to push past him and into my mother's office, but his hand was on my arm. His breath was warm in my ear.

"You can try ot lie to me, but I wouldn't recommend it."

My father's journal was in my backpack, and it felt like a talisman, giving me strength. "Get your hand off me." Townsend eyed me but didn't move, and I tried to twist free. "Teachers can't manhandle students and make wild accusation. The trustees would never -"

"Oh, but the trustees have been employing a famous double agent for almost two years. They're very eager to help."

"I'm still a student at this school and -"

"Now, now, Ms. Morgan. Wither you're a trained operative I'm supposed to distrust and respect, or a sixteen-year-old girl -"

"Just turned seventeen," I corrected him.

" - I'm supposed to go east on. You can't have it both ways." He released my arm and steeped away. "I would have thought your precious Mr. Solomon would have taught you better than that."

"He's not my Mr. Solomon."

"Sure he is. Isn't that why you and your little friends tried to hack into my records? Stake out my office? Put some nasty concoction inside the apple of an unsuspecting teacher?"

I didn't say a thing.

"That's good; don't dent it. Denying the undeniable just makes you sound like a fool as well as a liar. In this profession, you can be one - sometimes the other. But never both.

He moved through the Hall of History, eyeing our most prized possessions as if they were trinkets at a fair.

He didn't face me as he asked, "You believed him, didn't you? Thought he was a good guy? Well, that's your mistake. No one - and I do mean no one - in this line of work is ever truly a good guy. It we were, we'd be doing something bloody well different form this."

He didn't know what he was talking about. He didn't know . . . anything. I started toward my mother's office, needing her more than ever, desperate to shoe her - to prove that we weren't fools.

"She's not in there," he called across the empty hall. I felt my blood turn cold.

Parte inferior do formulário

"Where is she?"

He smiled slightly. "Gone."

"What did you do to her?"

"Me?" he laughed. Yes, actual laughage. "Allow me to clear some things up for you, Ms. Morgan." He stepped closer. "I'm not a member of the Circle. I've never even seen Blackthorne. Of course, we probably had something like it - couldn't rule it out." He shook his head. "But I was never a part of that."

"A part of what?"

"I am the bloody good guy."

I stood silent, watching him walk away, until . . .

"You're wrong!" I yelled, the words echoing down the empty hall. "You're wrong about everything!"

Agent Townsend stopped and turned slowly.

"Nine hours ago, a CIA transport team was ambushed outside of Langley. Three guards were killed and Joe Solomon was taken." He stared at me down the long corridor. "Your innocent man is back with the Circle tonight, Ms. Morgan. They have him. He's free."

That night I had the strangest dream. I was standing at the top of the Grand Staircase in a long beautiful dress. I heard the sounds of the Virginia reel come sweeping toward me, and below me, people crowed the foyer floor. But the strangest thing of all was that my father was standing at the bottom of the staircase, waiting.

I descended the stairs and took his arm, and together we made our way through the crowd that filled the Grand Hall. There was dancing and drinking. It was a party, but the feeling in the room was that there was no reason at all to celebrate.

And then suddenly, a man appeared, holding a sword.

I knew I had to stop him - I had to make it stop - but the man moved faster toward where I stood. His eyes pulled closer in the dim ballroom, and I stared at a face I knew.

A face I've kissed.

"No." I might have said the word, but I hand was over my mouth. Strong arms were holding me down while I kicked at the covers wrapped tightly around my legs.

Then I heard a deep voice whisper my name. "Cammie, wake up."

"No," I mumbled, still fighting and half asleep.

"It's okay, Gallagher Girl. It's okay. Wake up."

**Chapter Thirty-Four**

There are many ways a self respecting (not to mention sane) teenage girl might react to having a teenage boy suddenly appear in her bedroom in the middle of the night.

Hit.

Panic.

Flail.

Freeze.

But I didn't do any of them. Not right then, because I was lying tangled in the sheets and Zach's arms. Tears streamed down my face as I thought of my father and Mr. Solomon and Gilly - for a split second I knew what it felt like to be Gilly.

"It's okay, Gallagher Girl." He smoothed my hair. "It was just a bad -"

"What are you doing here?" I whispered.

Two feet away, Liz shivered and rolled over. In the corner, Bex was starting to snore. Macey lay perfectly still on her back, her dark hair splayed across her pillow like Sleeping Beauty. I jerked my head in their direction.

"Tell me why I shouldn't wake them?" I whispered. "Tell me why I shouldn't push that?" I pointed to the panic button on the wall.

He smiled. "Now, where would be the fun in that?"

"Zach," I hissed, and let my hand creep closer to the button.

"Okay," he said, reaching out to gently take that very hand. "I'm here because we need to take a walk."

When we were in the tenth grade, Zach went to my school for an entire semester. We'd shared the hall as classmates. As equals. But walking into Madame Dabney's empty tearoom, the playful look he'd had in his eyes that semester was completely gone. I'm not sure what kind of look I had in my eyes, because I totally avoiding my own reflection in the gilt-framed mirrors. (Now was not the time to be worried about pillow-cheek wrinkles and middle-of-the-night crazy hair.) instead, I studied him.

"Do I want to know how you got in here?" I asked.

He shook his head. "I only broke a few laws." He held his fingers a half inch apart. "Little ones"

Dim chandeliers hung from an ornate ceiling. Our feet were quiet against the polished parquet floors. Almost a year ago we'd stood in this very spot while Madame Dabney ordered us to dance, but Zach didn't reach for me this time. I didn't feel like swaying anymore.

"Does the Circle really have him?" I asked.

"Yes." Zach's voice was flat as he ran his hand through his hair and dropped onto one of Madame Dabney's silk-covered fainting couches. He looked entirely out of place.

"Why? I mean, if he isn't working with them -"

Parte superior do formulário

Parte inferior do formulário

"They weren't exactly doing him a favor. A cozy little CIA prison is probably looking pretty good to him right about now."

I walked to the tall windows and stared out over the grounds. Zach's reflection stared back at me in the dark window. Somehow it was easier not to face him.

"People don't leave the Circle easily, Gallagher Girl."

"I know."

"Anyone who knows how they work or where they work - anyone who knows anything . . ." As he trailed off, there was something new in his voice. He sounded tired in a way that had nothing to do with the hour.

"I know."

"They're tying up loose ends."

I tried to focus my eyes on the forest outside, the way the sun was just starting to color the sky. "Is that what I am?"

Zach stood and moved to my side at the window. Tears stung my eyes, and I kept my gaze on anything but him.

"Gallagher Girl," he said softly, reaching for me. "I don't know. But I promise we will find out."

A feeling swept through me when I thought back on the last year: Zach on a train racing through the Pennsylvania countryside; Zach lying beneath the bleachers in Ohio. And finally Zach gripping my hand, leading me away from a white van on a dark street in Washington, D.C. Zach standing between me and an attacker's gun, the attacker looking at the boy beside me and saying, "You?"

"You should be dead, Zach." I looked down and saw the way my shadow stretch across the floor between us. "That night - in D.C. - he had a clear shot. I should be gone and you should be dead."

"Gallagher Girl . . ."

"Why didn't he shoot you?"

"Everything that night happened so fast, Gallagher Girl."

"My name is Cammie!" I didn't think about all the people I could have woken, all the alarms that might have gone off. I just snapped, "How did you know about Boston? Why are you working with Mr. Solomon now? Are you my friend or are you my enemy, Zach? Or, wait, let me guess, you can't tell me."

"I don't know why they want you. And for the rest . . . it's better if you don't know."

Need-to-know basis is a real thing. It exists for real reasons. But that doesn't mean I have to like it - and, coming from Zach, it sounded a whole lot different than it did coming from my mother.

"Why do you get to know?"

"What's the matter, Gallagher Girl? Jealous?"

"Yeah," I yelled, even though I'm pretty sure he'd be kidding. "I am."

"Cammie -"

"Time's up, Zach," I said. "Tell me when you know or -"

"Or what?" he reached for me. "You're not going to hurt me."

"I won't," I said, then risked a glance toward the door at the three angriest Gallagher Girls I had ever seen. "But they might."

Parte inferior do formulário

**Chapter Thirty-Five**

PROS AND CONS OF HAVING REALLY CUTE

BOYS SNEAK INTO YOUR SCHOOL TO SEE YOU

CON: it's a little creepy.

PRO: When someone else sneaks in, you get a lot more sleep than when you have to sneak out.

CON: Impromptu visits by boys significantly increase the chance that they'll see you in your least cute pajamas.

PRO: Almost everyone looks good in moonlight.

CON: Five hours of very deep sleep is almost guaranteed to do very unfortunate things to your hair.

PRO: Waking up in the middle of the night means . . . well . . . waking up.

CON: Eventually, whether you like it or not, your roommates are going to find out about it.

\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

"Hello, Zachary," Macey said, striding in. "You're looking well."

"Hey, Macey." Zach turned to the shortest and blondest of us and tipped an imaginary hat. "Liz." And then finally, he looked back at Bex. "Rebecca."

If the use of Bex's full name was supposed to make her angry, it was entirely too late. She stood by the door, leaning against the frame with her arms crossed. Someone who didn't know her might have thought she was still tired, but I knew better. She was guarding the exit.

"We were talking about Mr. Solomon, I said.

Macey raised her eyebrows. "Oh, is that what you were doing?"

Bex kept her eyes on Zach. "What have you heard?" She asked.

Zach shook his head. "Not much more than you have. The Circle broke him out. The CIA is saying its because he's with the Circle, but really -"

"It's because he's against them," Bex finished.

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Zach nodded. "In almost two hundred years no one has come closer to bringing down the Circle than Mr. Solomon." Zach cut his eyes at me. "And your dad." He waited, as if I might burst into tears or something, but I didn't. "The Circle needs to know what Joe knows, and what he's told others."

"Like me?" I guessed.

Zach nodded slowly. "I'm willing to bet they're going to have a lot of questions about you."

"Good," Bex said. "That means they'll keep him alive."

I turned back to the window, stood staring out at the shadowy grounds. They need him alive.

"We're going to get him back. We have to get him back." I felt my roommates looking at me like was crazy, but I turned to Zach. "Where would they take him?"

"I don't know."

"Don't lie to me, Zach. Don't tell me you don't know things, because you do. Now where would they take him?"

"I don't know! Do you think I'd be here if I knew?"

I've seen Zach in a lot of lights, but in the early morning haze, I saw him as he really was: a scared, parentless boy with absolutely no place to turn.

"What about the man the CIA has in custody - the one who shot Abby?" Macey asked. "He might know."

But Bex was shaking her head. "He's compromised. No way the Circle is using anything he ever knew about."

"So that's just . . . it?" Liz asked. I could see it weighing on her. There were no databases to crack, no satellites to hack into. I thought about Mr. Solomon and his insistence that technology is a crutch, and a real spy should always be able to walk without it.

"Mr. Solomon would know," I admitted softly. "I wish we could ask him."

The room was quiet in the gray light of early morning. The school still slept. No one was jogging across the grounds. We were alone when Zach whispered, "Maybe we can."

\* \* \*

"What do you mean there is a second journal?" Bex asked ten minutes later. She was looking at Zach, and Zach was looking afraid.

"The one Mr. Solomon hid in Sublevel Two was your dad's Cammie. If anything ever happened . . . it was supposed to go to you. It was your dad's, so now it's yours. But Joe kept one too. It goes all the way back to his time with Circle - all the way back to Blackthorne."

Zach stood at the windows, squinting against the slowly rising sun.

"No one had ever known more about the Circle than Joe. He started writing everything down as soon as they recruited him. And then when he realized what they were, he kept writing because . . . well . . . he knew something like this would happen eventually. He said if I ever needed it, I should go get it."

"Go where?" Macey asked.

Zach looked at the four of us for a long time before taking a deep breath. "Blackthorne."

I know it will sound crazy. I know you won't believe me. But I that split second I ran through every scenario I knew - calculated all the odds. It was an informed decision that made me say, "We'll go get it - right now. Before everyone is up. "We'll -"

"We?" Bex cut me off. "You think we should . . . what? Jump into Liz's van, drive all night, break into a top secret facility, and, oh yeah, take you away from the safest place in the world?"

"Think about this, Cam," Liz said. "We don't have to go anywhere. All we have to do is tell your mom, and she'll call the CIA and -"

"My mom's not here, remember? And you read Dad's reports - you know the Circle has people at every level of the CIA. Mr. Solomon knew he couldn't trust just anyone with this, and neither can we."

Bex shook her head. "No. It's too risky."

"It's not that risky. We drive up, get the journal, and see if it has any clues about where Mr. Solomon is. It's not like we're going to break him out by ours -"

"What?" Bex and I snapped at the exact same time, turning to stare at Zach, who was giving us the oddest look.

"Nothing." He crossed his arms and shrugged. "I was just wondering when the two of you switched bodies is all."

It was true. Bex was not supposed to be the cautious one, the careful one. But then again, a lot of things had changed on that bridge.

"I have to do this for him, Bex. I have to do something."

The sun was coming up over Roseville. I'd never seen it from that window, but it was especially beautiful with the early morning rays reflected in Madame Dabney's finest crystal. In that moment and that place, almost anything seemed to lie within our grasp. And maybe that's why Bex smiled. "Well, I have always wanted to see Blackthorne."

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I looked at Liz. "I just tweaked the van to incorporate solar technology. It really needs a road test for statistical significance, you know."

"Us versus Blackthorne?" Macey said with a smile. "Yeah, I'm all for that."

I don't know how to explain it, but right then, things seemed okay. Our mission was clear.

We could go to Blackthorne.

We could get the journal.

Then we could find a way to bring Joe Solomon home.

Yes, in that moment everything was okay. But, of course, that moment could not last.

I remember the sound of the door as it swung open, the shocked, surprised look that crossed each of my roommates' faces as we turned to see the slim, dark silhouette that stood in the open doorway and said, "So when do we leave?"

My mother took two steps forward, then turned to stare at Zach. "Didn't I tell you to stay in my office?"

**Chapter Thirty-Six**

THINGS THAT REALLY, REALLY SURPRISED ME

ABOUT THAT PARTICUALR ROAD TRIP:

1.That it happened. At all.

2.That it happened with a boy.

3.That of all the people in the van, Bex spent the most time driving.

4.That after a whole day in a vehicle with nothing else to snack on, a person really can sick of Peanut M&M's.

5.That even while sleeping in a van, Macey McHenry's hair never gets messed up.

6.That no one mentioned Mr. Solomon's name, not even once.

7.That no one talked about where we were going.

8.That four Gallagher Girls were playing hooky and missing an entire day of class (even with our headmistress's permission).

That, if you drive all night and only stop for essential, the Blackthorne Institute for Boys is only ten hours away from the Gallagher Academy.

Somehow it had always felt much farther.

\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

"Are you still mad at me?" Zach whispered as we crossed the Pennsylvania border. His leg was pressing against mine, but I didn't think about how if felt, because my mother (who is a spy) was riding shotgun in the front seat, and my roommates (who are future spies) were surrounding us in the van. And besides, it doesn't take a lot of training to know that leg-pressing can seriously divert a girl from little things. Like trying not die.

So I didn't say a word.

"Ohh," Zach whispered. "The silent treatment."

"I'm not talking to you, Zach," I whispered, whirling on him, "because I know you're not going to really say anything anyway. Should I be asking you more questions you refuse to answer?"

As I turned and faced forward again, watched the yellow lines of the highway flying by, I expected more excuses. More lies. But instead, Zach just leaned across me and whispered to Liz, "She's cute when she's silent."

I didn't utter a single word.

Not when he ate the last of the M&M's.

Not when he put his head only shoulder and tried to take a nap.

Not when he and Liz thumb wrestled (despite that fact that I was sitting between them) for better part of the state of Pennsylvania.

Not when Liz and Macey finally fell asleep and he leaned close to me and whispered, "Are you sure you wanna do this, Gallagher Girl?"\

Nope. Not even then. I didn't have anything else to say.

At dusk, the silence broke as I heard my mother say, "Pull over here."

Bex pulled into the parking lot of an old gas station by the side of a narrow two-lane highway. Weeds grew up between abandoned pumps. Rusty machines bore the ancient logos of Coke and Pepsi.

We felt utterly alone, but in a split second, all that changed.

A dark car was approaching from the south, traveling way too fast. Tires screeched as it slid sideways into the gravel lot, coming to a stop three feet the bumper of Liz's van.

"Mom!" I shouted, bolting upright, blood pounding in my ears. But before I could fully process the worst-case scenario that was playing through my mind, my best friend sat up straighter too and yelled, "Mom?" a second later, Bex was throwing open the van door and running to her mother, who was climbing out of the other car.

"Hello, darling," Mrs. Baxter said, throwing her arms around her daughter. But I noticed her gaze never left my mother's eyes.

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"Anything, Grace?" Mom asked, climbing out of the van.

Bex's mother shook her head. "Nothing. You're clear."

At that moment a white pickup appeared on the deserted road, this time traveling from the north. It pulled into the abandoned station, and somehow I wasn't surprised at all to see Bex's father behind the wheel.

He hoped out of the truck. "All clear on my end, Rachel. You're free."

"Thanks, Abe." She sounded relieved, and to tell you the truth, id didn't like it. Because for there to relief, there had to have been fear. And fear . . . well . . . I didn't want to think about that.

Liz poked me. "These are Bex's parents!"

I looked at my mother, who shrugged. "You didn't expect me not to recruit at least a little grown-up back up, did you?"

Macey stood on my other side and exclaimed, "We're going on a mission with Bex's parents!" as if wondering whether or not we were ready for Baxters to the power of three.

But my mother was shaking her head. "Actually, girls, for unsanctioned ops, it's best to minimize the exposure of official agents."

It's rule as old as espionage itself: Don't do yourself what you can get someone else to do for you. There are a million harmless reasons why a bunch of Gallagher Girls might break into Blackthorne (jokes, dares, pranks, etc.). For a bunch of grown-ups, not so much.

Bex knew all this - I know she did - and yet she was looking from my mother hers and then back again. "So why are you . . ." she started, then trailed off.

"They're not here to help us." My voice was flat against the wind. "They're here to guard me." A look passed across my roommates' faces as if no time at all had passed since November - as if we were still standing on a dark street in D.C.

"Do you have the journal?" Grace asked.

"No." Mom shook her head, then pointed to my roommates and me. "They beat me to it."

And that was when things got really weird.

I mean, my mom had broken into Sublevel Two!

My mom had been after my dad's journal.

My mom had been person hot on our heels, creeping through the darkness in the depths of our school, which meant, I guess, that Agent Townsend hadn't been.

I was still shaking my head, trying to wrap my mind around that - around everything - when another car appeared on the highway, and Macey cried, "Abby?"

It almost sounded like a question, and with one glance at my aunt I saw why. Her glossy hair had lost its shine. And when she walked towards us, the bounce that I had come to know in her step was gone.

"Hey, Squirt," she said, but it sounded forced. "Playing hooky, I see."

I shrugged. "Maybe this is a CoveOps field exercise?"

She raised an eyebrow. "I know Agent Townsend, Cams."

"Oh," Bex said.

""Which is why I am more than willing to take part in this little extracurricular assignment." She looked at her sister. "Well . . . one of the reasons."

My mom turned to Mr. Baxter. "What are our friends at Six saying, Abe?"

"Same story, different accent. No one has a bloody clue where they've taken him. No one seems to bloody care."

"I care."

Zach stood on the side of the dusty road, hands in his pockets. When Mrs. Baxter saw him, she smiled a little too wide.

"Hello, Zachary," she said. "It's very nice to meet you. Rachel has told us . . . It's very nice to meet you."

Zach mumbled something that sounded like "You too." ( I guess Blackthorne doesn't have a Madame Dabney.)

And then the time for pleasantries must have been over because Mrs. Baxter turned to my mom. "Ready?"

It seemed like at the perfect question at the time. After all, I was getting ready to break into Blackthorne. I was out of the mansion. I was getting ready to go on a mission. A real mission. With Zach.

And my mom.

Words could not describe the nerves. Or the weirdness.

It occurred to me that I should have been taking notes, savoring every moment. But there was no time.

Mrs. Baxter started for the truck, climbing in beside her husband as she tossed my mother the keys to the sedan with the dark windows. Abby was already crawling into the SUV as Liz and Macey started for Liz's van, but my mother waved them away.

"It stays here," she said with a shake of her head. "We can't take the risk that someone might trace it back to you and the school."

When my mother turned to me and asked, "Do you have everything?" she sounded like she was dropping me off at school or at a friend's house. She sounded almost like a normal mom.

Parte inferior do formulário

When I said, "Yeah, we're ready," I sounded almost like a normal girl.

But as I watched my bodyguards pull onto the highway to monitor the perimeter of the school, normal felt completely overrated.

A moment later, my mother left us in a cloud of dust in the middle of nowhere, beside a gas station that had no gas, a van we couldn't drive, and a boy that some of the best spies in the world were hesitant to trust.

"And what are we supposed to do?" Macey asked.

Zach smiled. "We walk."