



From the Worlds of *New York Times* Best-Selling Author

ALLY CARTER

Double Crossed

A SPIES AND THIEVES STORY

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A SPIES AND THIEVES STORY

Also by Ally Carter

THE GALLAGHER GIRLS SERIES

I'd Tell You I Love You, But Then I'd Have to Kill You

Cross My Heart and Hope to Spy

Don't Judge a Girl by Her Cover

Only the Good Spy Young

Out of Sight, Out of Time

THE HEIST SOCIETY SERIES

Heist Society

Uncommon Criminals

Perfect Scoundrels



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Double Crossed
A SPIES AND THIEVES STORY

Disney • Hyperion
New York

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ISBN 978-1-4231-8747-9

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Chapter 1

SITUATED ON THE UPPER EAST SIDE with a glorious view of the park, the Athenia Hotel was supposed to be some kind of Olympus, high in the clouds above the mere mortals, a place for playing and drinking and dancing like gods. But as Macey followed her father and mother out of the gleaming elevator and into the towering ballroom, she wasn't exactly in the mood.

Sure, the Calloway Ball was supposed to be the charity event of the season, but before Macey had even entered the ballroom, she already knew precisely what she was going to find.

She saw the same food and the same band. The same old men flirting with the same young women. The same stories and canapés and people pretending they were there for charity and not just for a picture in the gossip columns on Page Six.

So Macey decided not to look at the room as the daughter of a senator and a cosmetics heiress. Macey found herself looking at it as a Gallagher Girl. She heard her Covert Operations instructor's voice in her ear as she counted the exits in the ballroom (five) and the armed security professionals there to watch over VIPs (three). She mentally noted the best ways to block the cameras, and she eavesdropped on ten different conversations in four different languages. But still, Macey McHenry couldn't help herself.

Macey McHenry was bored.

She was just starting to consider her escape (the fire exit near the kitchen seemed especially promising) when, at last, Macey saw something that she absolutely was not expecting.

A boy.

Oh, there were always plenty of young men at these parties. They went by names like Scooter and Mitchell and Beau and were frequently juniors or seconds or thirds. They went to schools like Colgan and Exeter and had hobbies that varied from polo to yachting, womanizing to rehab. But walking through the door right then was one boy who seemed, in a word, *different* from the others.

When Macey walked by in high heels and a strapless red dress with a slit high on her thigh, he didn't stare. When she tucked her glossy black hair behind her ear, he didn't notice. And when she allowed her blue eyes to linger a moment too long in his direction, he gave a small smile of indifference and turned and started across the crowded room.

For a moment, Macey studied him—the one puzzle in the room the Gallagher Academy hadn't taught her how to break. She racked her brain, trying to remember if she'd met him at any of the many schools she had attended before the Gallagher Academy took her in, but the boy remained a very handsome enigma.

It was something of a game to her after that. He was tall, with broad shoulders and careless hair, in a designer tuxedo that he wore as if it was simply what he'd found on the floor by his bed that morning. With his roguish smile and cool indifference, that boy looked how Macey McHenry always felt—like he'd been born into a world of privilege and had spent his whole life not really caring whether or not it spat him out.

She watched him stop to pat the mayor on the back. He stumbled a little in the crowd, and his left hand disappeared ever so briefly inside the mayor's tuxedo pocket. It was over in a flash, a blink, a second. And Macey was quite certain she was the only person in the entire room to have seen it,

but that was just as well. At last, Macey had seen enough. And at last, the boy made sense.

Carefully, she walked through the crowd until she found him standing out on the hotel balcony, eating a jumbo shrimp with one big bite.

“You might want to put that back,” she told him. She leaned against the ledge, her hands at the small of her back. From there, she could look up at his square jaw and bright eyes. When he smiled down at her, despite her training, she might have swooned a little.

“Now what would that be?” He cocked his head.

“The mayor’s cell phone,” she told him. “It was so rude of you to slip it out of his pocket when he was distracted.”

The boy feigned offense. “Would I do that?”

“You know you did.”

“I don’t have a cell phone.” He held his hands out wide. “Go ahead. Frisk me.” He leaned a little closer and winked when he said, “You know you want to.”

“Nice try,” Macey said, totally immune to the flirting. “And it might work if I hadn’t seen you steal it a minute and a half ago.”

“Yes, but evidently you didn’t see me *put it back* forty-five seconds ago.” Then, as if on cue, a phone started to ring. “See,” the boy said, pointing at the mayor, who was searching his tuxedo jacket, finally finding the device not exactly where he’d left it.

And for the first time that evening, Macey was impressed. “Oh, you’re good.”

“Well, if Macey McHenry says so...” The boy turned from the railing and stepped back toward the ballroom, and again she felt the pang that something in this boy was familiar.

“I seem to be at a disadvantage,” she told him.

“Don’t feel bad.” He grinned. “Most people are.”

“I mean...” she said pointedly, “what’s your name?”

“You’d be surprised how many times I get asked that question,” he said; then he looked at Macey anew. “My friends call me Hale.”

“Hale? As in...*a* Hale?” she asked, but he only smiled in response. “Why are you stealing cell phones? Doesn’t Hale Industries own a cell phone company?”

“Only a little one,” Hale said, exasperated, then added to himself, “Why are girls always getting that wrong?”

“How disappointing,” Macey said. “I was starting to think you were some high-society thief, determined to pilfer our pearls and steal our Rolexes. The party just got boring again.”

“I could be a thief.” He sounded almost insulted.

“The grandson of one of the wealthiest women in the world?” Macey asked. “Somehow I doubt it.”

“Would it make you feel any better if I told you that serial numbers make Rolexes almost impossible to fence? But pearls, on the other hand...” He leaned a little closer, studied her a little harder. But then, just that quickly, the sparkle faded. He seemed almost serious when he said, “I’m sorry if I’m not flirting with you. I’m kind of spoken for.”

“I’m sorry if I’m not disappointed. I kind of don’t care.”

“A year ago your father was running for vice president. That’s how I knew your name.”

“*I* was America’s sweetheart,” Macey said, a little too much saccharin in her voice.

He gave her a smile. “America could do worse.”

The music was louder than Macey remembered when she walked with Hale back to the ball. And for one brief moment, he looked like a code she really wanted to break, a language she couldn’t quite understand.

“I suppose I could try to pull some high-class heist,” he told her. “You know...just to spice up your evening.”

“Really? Well, I’m pretty sure Lady Darlington was wearing emerald earrings when she got here.”

The boy looked impressed. “Yes. But Her Ladyship put her earrings in her handbag ten minutes ago.” He shrugged. “Besides, I have a bad history with emeralds.”

“What about canaries?” Macey scanned the crowd and pointed to the one jewel that stood out from all the others as it dangled around the neck of the woman of the hour.

“The Calloway Canary? Oh, very tempting...” He looked longingly at the necklace that seemed to catch every bit of light in the room. “Twenty carats if the rumors are true. A perfect canary diamond surrounded by flawless white stones...Nope. Sorry.” Hale shook his head and pulled another shrimp from a passing tray. “Besides, it’s a fake,” he told her with his mouth full.

“No, it’s not,” Macey said. “I assure you, old lady Calloway is rich enough to buy any diamond she wants. There’s no reason for *her* to have a fake.”

“Oh, I’m sure the Calloway Canary is very real,” Hale told her. He grabbed another shrimp and pointed with it across the room. “I’m just saying that’s not it.”

Was he lying? Maybe. But then again, Macey realized, maybe not.

“So are you the Hale who was institutionalized or the one who burned down the planetarium at Colgan?”

The boy shrugged and smiled, looked at her with that thousand-watt grin. “Who says they can’t be one and the same?”

“Seriously.” Macey felt herself growing impatient. “Where do you go to school?”

“Knightsbury. Why? Where do you go?”

“It’s a girls’ school,” Macey told him.

“So? I know lots of girls.”

“Not like these,” Macey said with a shake of her head. “Why don’t I know you?”

“Does anyone ever *really* know someone else?”

“You think you’re cute,” she told him.

“You think you’re gorgeous. But I’m the one guy here who knows better.”

“So I’m *not* gorgeous?” Macey challenged.

“Of course you are.” He started away, turned back at the last minute. “But I’m the guy who figured out that’s not all you are.”

Chapter 2

FROM THAT POINT FORWARD, W. W. Hale V knew two things for certain.

First, the party was far more interesting than he'd been expecting. But the second (and more important) thing was that he should not talk to Macey again. Since the day a little over two years before when he had crawled out his window and out of his world, Hale had lived with the fear that someday someone in his old life might find out about his new one, and he couldn't shake the feeling that Macey was very much up to the challenge.

She wasn't a thief; of that much Hale was almost sure. But she wasn't your typical society girl either. Her steps had too much purpose; her blue eyes moved around the room with too much precision. She reminded him far more of the girls in the world he'd chosen than the girls in the world he'd been born to, and that was why he knew that he shouldn't let her study him too closely. That maybe she might see a little too much.

It didn't matter anyway, Hale realized. He wasn't going to stick around to find out. He looked down at his watch: 9:45. Then a man in a dark gray suit caught Hale's eye and started his way.

"Yes, sir?" Marcus asked. Hale had often wondered how Marcus read him so well. He was supposed to have a good poker face, after all. But it didn't matter how good an inside man Hale was supposed to be; Marcus was a far superior butler.

"I think I'm in the mood to leave, Marcus," Hale said, scanning the room. He saw his father chatting up a business associate by the bar; his

mother was busy looking over an antique clock that was a part of the silent auction. He wondered exactly how long it would be before they realized he was gone. If they'd ever realize...

"What's our exit strategy?" Hale asked.

"I believe the stairs by the balcony are mostly vacant," Marcus told him.

"Perfect," Hale said, and without another word he started toward the other side of the room. When his phone rang, he had to dig through his pocket to find it, and his fingers brushed against a pair of tiny earbuds he and Kat had last used in Monte Carlo. Hale smiled a little, realizing he hadn't worn the tux in ages. It was just one of many ways his life had changed in the years since a girl named Katarina Bishop crawled into his window and into his life.

"You're late," Kat said as soon as Hale put the phone to his ear. She wasn't the kind of girl to wait for *hello*.

"What can I say? Macey McHenry has been throwing herself at me...."

"See, that's the kind of thing that would make me jealous if she weren't way out of your league."

"You know, if I had feelings, that might have hurt them."

"Sorry," she said. "Now come on down. There's a Raphael in Rome that has our name on it."

"I don't know..." Hale started. "It might be hard to get away from Macey. It looks like she works out. And you know how crazy I drive the ladies."

"Crazy is an understatement." Kat took a deep breath. "Am I going to have to come up there? Because I will. I have no objection to stealing people, you know."

Hale started to laugh. He wanted to tease. But right then he saw something that seemed a little out of place in the elaborately decorated

ballroom. Behind the stage, covered in canvas, lay a device, a piece of metal sticking out at such an angle that only Hale could really see it.

Kat talked on, but Hale was no longer listening as he crept closer to the narrow gap between wall and stage, looking. Thinking.

“Hale?” Kat’s voice sounded in his ear. “Hale, are you listening to me?”

That was when Hale noticed a hotel employee standing beneath the security camera that was trained on the dance floor, an odd bag draped across his arm. On the other side of the room, a sign that read that the elevators were temporarily out of service made Hale’s mind come to a terrifying stop.

When Hale saw a man lingering near the elevators, he had a sudden sense of déjà vu, remembering a particularly intricate operation in Denmark.

Another man, in an ill-fitting waiter’s uniform, was moving to the stairs by the veranda, and Hale thought about a long night spent near a garbage chute in Belize.

“That settles it.” Kat sounded annoyed by Hale’s silence. “I’m coming up.”

“No, Kat!” Hale shouted, but she was already gone. “Marcus, I need you to go downstairs. Now. Stop Kat.”

“Of course, sir.”

“And, Marcus,” Hale called after him. “Just...tell her I have these.” Hale reached into his pocket and found the long-forgotten earbuds.

It is a testament to both Marcus’s demeanor and the oddities of Hale’s new life that the butler didn’t say another word. He didn’t ask a single question. And Hale was left with one other thing to do.

“There you are,” Hale told his mother when he found her.

“Oh, darling, do you know Michael Calloway? His mother is the event chair. We’ve just been arguing over whether he is going to let me outbid him for this gorgeous antique clock,” Mrs. Hale said, but her son didn’t care.

“Sorry,” Hale told the man in the tux with the small bits of sweat gathering at his brow. “I need her,” he said, pulling his mother from the table and toward the bank of elevators on the far side of the room, the ones that appeared to still be operational.

“Mom, I need you to come with me.”

“But, darling,” the woman protested, “it’s Swiss!”

The elevator dinged and Hale pushed her inside it. “Sorry. Dad will meet you downstairs.”

The doors were just starting to close when someone yelled, “Hold it!” and Hale turned to see Macey McHenry dragging her own mother behind her. “She’s going down,” Macey said, and pushed the button for the lobby. Before anyone else could protest, the doors slid smoothly closed.

Behind Hale, another elevator opened, and Macey pointed to it. “After you,” she said.

“No.” Hale let the word stretch out. “After you.”

“No,” Macey said. She grabbed his arm and pushed.

“Hey, I bruise,” Hale said. “Also, you are freakishly strong.”

Macey McHenry was sidling up to him. She looked like a bored society girl who was in the mood to grab the nearest guy and leave the party. But if there was anything that W. W. Hale V truly understood, it was that looks could often be deceiving.

As soon as she was close, she whispered, “You’ve got to get out of here.”

“No. You’ve got to get out of here,” he told her. “Go downstairs. Go now.”

“No,” she countered. “You go.”

“Why?” he asked.

“You tell me first.”

But before they could say another word, the last elevator slid slowly open and two men in masks rushed out. From the opposite side of the ballroom, shots rang out, rapid-fire, piercing the ceiling, plaster falling onto the dance floor like snow.

And then Hale and Macey whispered in unison, “Because of that.”

Chapter 3

PERHAPS IT WAS TOO LATE—the crowd too tipsy—but it seemed to take a moment for the partygoers to realize exactly what was happening. Their exits were blocked. And the finest of New York society had no choice but to huddle together, watching a series of masked men run into the ballroom through the fog of falling plaster.

They were not a group accustomed to being told what to do, even when one of the men jumped onto the stage. He carried a machine gun and wore a plastic mask over his face, the kind popular at Halloween with people who just want to put on a suit and pretend to be a president.

This man had chosen Ronald Reagan.

“Stay where you are,” he ordered. He kept his gun at his hip, pointed into the air, the butt resting against his side in a way that made him look more like an old-time gangster than a Navy SEAL.

Macey could have told him he was doing it wrong, but she had a feeling he wasn’t the type to take orders. He was the type to give them.

“I assure you, ladies and gentlemen, that we mean you no harm.” He walked slowly down the stage. A member of the band had dropped a violin and he kicked it, daring anything or anyone to stand in his way. “But that doesn’t mean we won’t hurt you. Do not fight us. Do not doubt us. And *do not* do anything stupid.”

Macey couldn’t help herself; she looked at the boy beside her, thought of how casually he’d pulled the phone from the mayor’s pocket, and

wondered if maybe stupid was what he did best.

“Now, with the formalities out of the way,” Reagan said, “I’m so glad you could join us.”

A rush of cold air filled the room and Macey turned to see another gunman (Jimmy Carter) coming in from the balcony, pushing a small group of about a dozen partygoers in front of him. One woman was crying. A man looked indignant. They all carried themselves with hurried, nervous strides until they examined the larger scene—the masks and the guns and the fact that there was absolutely no way out.

“Good. We’re all here,” Reagan went on. “Now let’s get comfortable.” He spun and pointed his gun at one of the armed men Macey had spotted earlier. “Not you. Bill, why don’t you help Rambo here get comfy?”

A man in a Clinton mask walked toward the private security professional.

“Hands up,” Clinton said with a fake southern accent.

Slowly, the guard raised his hands, and Clinton pulled the man’s own gun from the holster at his side. Clinton slipped a pair of zip ties around his wrists and pulled them tight. But the guard didn’t try to stop him.

“You too.” Reagan pointed at the other private guards, the two men who hadn’t seen the signs, who hadn’t noticed the subtle shifts in the room that had seemed so obvious to Macey.

She looked at the boy beside her. *And to Hale.*

“Okay, ladies and gentlemen,” Reagan said with a little flourish, like part of him was putting on a show. “If you could move to the edges of the dance floor...” he said calmly, but no one moved. “Do it!” Another burst of bullets filled the air.

People screamed. Some fell to the floor with their hands over their heads, but almost everyone was frozen.

“Now move to the edge of the dance floor,” Reagan said again very slowly, and this time the people did as they were told. “Hands where we can see them, ladies and gentlemen. In fact, ladies, why don’t you toss your handbags into the center of the room? No use hanging on to those now.”

A handful of women “tossed” their ten-thousand-dollar evening bags onto the hardwood floor, and Macey was glad no one was in the mood to protest.

“Gentlemen,” Reagan said with renewed flair, “we will now be moving through the crowd to collect your cell phones. No use hiding them. We have our ways.”

When one of the masked men (George H. W. Bush) came toward them, Macey watched Hale slip a cell phone out of the interior pocket of his jacket and put it into the bag Bush Senior was carrying.

“I thought you didn’t have a cell phone,” Macey whispered.

“I lied,” Hale said, and Macey realized how good he was at doing exactly that.

“Now, who still has a phone?” Reagan asked like a kindergarten teacher giving a child once last chance to confess to leaving the lids off the markers. “Come on now.” He walked down the stage, and when no one said a thing he shot another blaze of bullets into the air. And suddenly, a handful of cell phones were on the floor, sliding toward the pile of handbags in the center of the room.

Quietly, Macey went through her options. Even though the masked men were asking for cell phones, the gunmen were making so much noise that she was sure someone had already called 911. The obvious exits were blocked, and the elevators had no doubt been disabled. The men moved with confidence and order, but they weren’t trying to be quiet. There was nothing covert at all about this operation.

Unlike the boy beside her.

From the corner of her eye she saw him reach for his coat pocket.

“Don’t,” she whispered.

“What?” he asked with a shrug. He looked and sounded almost bored.

“Don’t do whatever you’re doing.”

When Hale’s hand disappeared inside his tuxedo jacket, Macey wasn’t exactly sure what he’d find inside that pocket. It could have been another phone or a breath mint. Really, nothing would have surprised her. Well... nothing except...

“Is that an earbud?” she whispered. He smiled. “Are you on comms?”

“Shhh,” he told her softly.

Macey saw one of the men, Carter, over Hale’s shoulder, walking slowly around the group, standing guard, and she lowered her voice even more.

“Why do you have a comms unit?”

Hale smirked. “You’re cute when you’re annoyed.”

“Don’t,” she warned, but it was too late; he was already placing the tiny device in his ear.

Macey couldn’t decide whether to be intrigued that Hale was walking around with a state-of-the-art covert communications device or jealous because she’d been caught without one of her own.

“Now, ladies and gentlemen,” Reagan said from the stage. He bowed a little. “Why don’t you all have a seat?”



“What is it?” When Kat’s voice finally came into Hale’s ear, it was cold and steady and even. All tease was gone. If she was angry at him for standing her up, she didn’t show it. She just said, “Tell me what’s going on.”

“Party crashers,” Hale whispered. He watched Macey watching him. “Five, and they brought toys.”

“Guns?” Kat guessed.

“Big ones,” Hale said.

“You know this is what you get for doing a favor for your mother.”

“I know,” Hale admitted.

“What are they after?” Kat asked.

“Hard to say,” Hale said; again, he eyed the room.

“Who is that?” Macey asked.

“The reason I wasn’t flirting with you,” Hale told her.

“Ladies,” Reagan was saying, “if you would be so kind as to remove your jewelry. Gentlemen, that goes for you too. Watches. Cuff links. Let’s have them.”

“It...it’s my wedding ring,” one woman protested.

“Sweetheart...” Clinton jammed the end of his gun into the woman’s husband’s chest. “He can buy you another one.”

Hale watched the men systematically make their way down the line of people sitting in a circle, dropping millions of dollars in jewels into their outstretched bags, but the masked men didn’t hurry. And when the bag finally made its way to the Calloway Canary the whole room seemed to sigh. What a pity.

“What are they doing now?” Kat asked.

“Jewelry and wallets,” Hale said. But something didn’t quite make sense. “They’re too slow.”

Hale looked at Macey, who added, “Seven minutes since shots fired.”

“Kat, what’s the emergency response time in Midtown Manhattan?”

“Not long enough if they want a clean exit,” she told him.

Macey hadn’t heard Kat’s words, but she looked at Hale like she’d read his mind.

“They aren’t trying to beat the cops out of here,” she said.

“I know.”

She shifted on the floor and leaned closer. Her mouth was only inches from his ear. He placed an arm around her, and to anyone watching, it probably looked like a boy comforting a girl, offering a shoulder and maybe laying groundwork to make a move, but Hale knew better.

“Okay, Hale’s mystery lady,” Macey whispered, “listen up. If you want to help, you need to call 212-555-9898. You’ll get a recording. Tell it the Peacock is caged.”

Hale laughed. “Tell it what?”

“Someone will be here within an hour,” Macey went on. “They probably already know, but...Do you need the number again?”

“Look, Macey,” Hale said. “Thanks for the offer, but we’ve got it. Now just keep your head down and try—”

“You don’t get it, do you? Those are AK-47s. They can fire six hundred bullets per minute and can reload in less than three seconds. And in case you didn’t notice, there are five of them.” She drew a deep breath. “Now does your friend need the number again?”

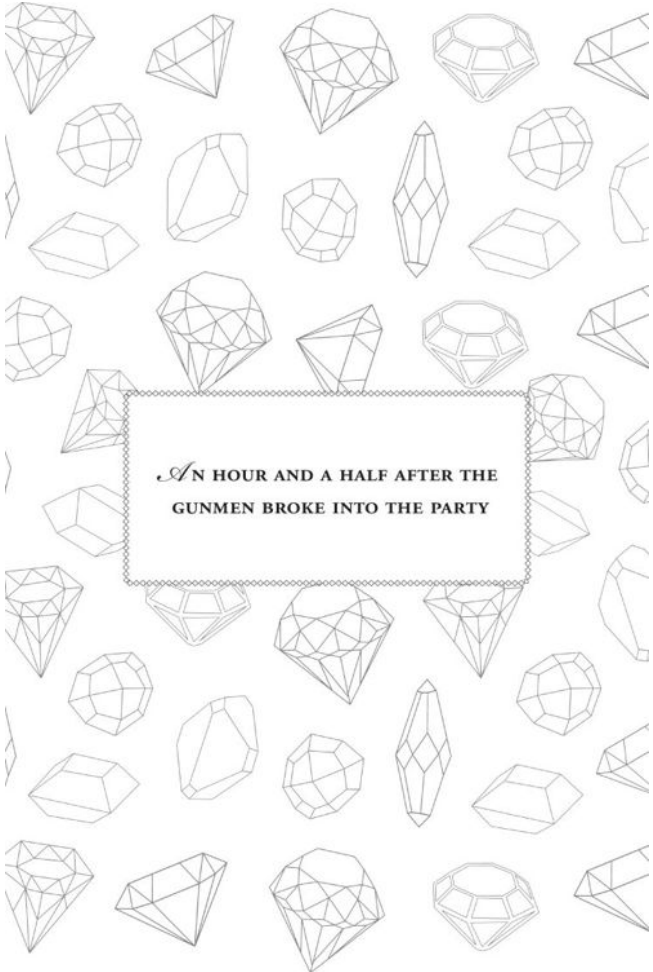
“She’s got it,” Hale said with a nod. “Now, why don’t you tell me exactly why she should waste her time doing your errands,” Hale said, but Macey said nothing. “You’re not a normal girl, are you?”

He looked and sounded like someone who was already certain of the answer.

“That’s cool.” Hale nodded, unfazed. “But just so you know, that”—he pointed to the piece of metal peeking out from behind the stage—“is a Hurst 5,000 PSI hydraulic spreader-cutter, more commonly known as the Jaws of Life.”

“So?”

“So I’m not a normal boy.”



An HOUR AND A HALF AFTER THE
GUNMEN BROKE INTO THE PARTY

Chapter 4

AS WORD SPREAD—AND WORD ALWAYS DID—the streets outside the hotel eventually became clogged with police cars and fire trucks. News vans lined the barricades while uniformed men tried to keep the curious at bay. But *try* was all they could manage.

It was New York City, after all, and word that the mayor, a senator, a district court judge, and the most popular players in the Manhattan social scene were currently being held at gunpoint at the charity event of the season was sweeping through the city like a fire.

The SWAT teams shouted at the NYPD; the NYPD argued with the FBI; and the FBI demanded in the loudest voices possible, “Who let this happen?”

Only a smaller-than-average teenage girl stayed quiet in the dark, right on the edge of the barricade. Occasionally, a man in a gray suit would appear, place a cup of hot chocolate in her hands, a heavier coat around her shoulders, but it was as if the girl herself didn’t realize she was freezing. She just stood looking up at the high-rise as if wondering whether or not she should try scaling the walls herself, stealing her way inside.

“Are you Katarina Bishop?” Kat jerked her head away from the Athenia in time to see a woman walking toward her. She was tall and thin, with shiny black hair that blew behind her in the wind. And even in that crowd of chaos, there was something about the woman that demanded attention.

“You’re Kat Bishop?” the woman asked again, studying Kat, who wasn’t sure whether or not she should say yes. But answering, it turned out, was optional, because the woman raised the yellow tape and said, “Come with me.”

On the other side of the barrier, Kat struggled to keep up with the woman’s long legs and quick stride. And when a man with a walkie-talkie stepped in front of Kat, blocking her way, the woman flashed a badge Kat couldn’t read and ordered, “She’s with me.” No one asked the question again. The two of them walked undisturbed all the way to the opposite side of the street.

“So...I got your message,” the woman said once they were alone in that crowd of people. “Now I need you to tell me everything you know about Macey McHenry.”

It was then that Kat realized two things. First, this was the woman whom Macey had needed Kat to call. The second was that even though Kat hadn’t left her name or given her number, this woman had picked Kat out of the crowd as easily as if they’d met a dozen times before. Kat didn’t know whether to be scared or impressed, so she just focused on the only thing that mattered in that moment.

All up and down the sidewalks, uniformed officials shouted and spat and spewed. But this woman just kept her eyes glued to the Athenia’s balcony high overhead as if she, like Kat, were tempted to scale the walls and burst inside.

And that was why Kat said, “*You know her.*” It was more realization than whisper. She watched the way the woman stared up at the towering hotel. “You know Macey McHenry. And you love her—there’s someone you love in there. Well”—Kat drew a breath—“you’re not the only one.”

Before the woman could say a word, Kat pulled an extra earbud out of her pocket and held it out.

“Here you go,” Kat said. “You can talk to my friend on the inside. Well, technically, he’s more than a friend, but...” Kat remembered almost too late that she was talking to a woman with a badge. “Anyhow, you can talk to him. He’s with Macey.”

When the woman took the earbud, she didn’t ask another question. She was a woman on a mission as she placed the tiny device in her ear and said, “This is Special Agent Abby Cameron. Let me talk to Macey McHenry.”



There was only one gunman in the ballroom.

Macey watched the man walk around the people who sat in a huge circle on the floor, like a conga line that had gone terribly, terribly wrong. And she thought about what it meant.

There was only one gunman in the ballroom.

Wordlessly, she slipped off her shoes. Gently, she placed a palm on the floor, shifted to stand, but that was when Macey felt another hand pressing down on hers. Hard. Too hard.

“Just what do you think you’re doing?” Hale hissed in her ear. His fingers burned into her skin. And Macey knew that if she was going to take out the gunman, she was first going to have to neutralize the boy beside her.

“Why don’t you let me go, and I’ll show you,” she said with only a modicum of flirt in her voice.

“Why don’t you put your fancy shoes back on and sit there like a good little girl?”

“First of all, I’m *good* at a lot of things. Taking orders from bored billionaires isn’t one of them. Second of all, he’s alone, and I can take him,” Macey said.

“No!” Hale said. “You don’t know anything about this guy.”

“I know he’s left-handed and has an old injury to his right knee—probably a torn ACL at some point but the details don’t matter. And the way he keeps his finger purposefully away from the safety of that gun means he’s never fired it. And he doesn’t want to.”

“You’re kinda scary.”

Macey leveled him with a glare. “My school offers a self-defense class. A good one.”

“How nice for you. Now I want you to promise me that if I move my hand, you won’t do something stupid.” Macey was just starting to protest when Hale stopped and brought his hand to his ear. “Besides, there’s someone who wants to talk to you.” He held out the extra earbud, whispering softly in the too-quiet room. “It goes in your ear and—”

But before he could finish, Macey rolled her eyes and placed the bud in her ear. “This is Peacock,” she whispered.

She watched Hale’s eyes go wide as she heard a very familiar voice say, “You’re not getting extra credit for this. Now”—Macey’s teacher took a long, easy breath—“what’s going on in there?”

“Five gunmen. Automatic weapons. Very organized. They’ve got all the hostages in the main ballroom. Looks like the gunmen have split up. I’m thinking I can pick them off one at a time.”

“No, Macey. Bad idea,” Abby said just as Hale gave her an *I told you so* grin. “We’ve got to protect your cover. There haven’t been any ransom demands yet, but when there are...”

“They’re not looking for ransom,” Hale said, interjecting himself into a conversation that was far above his clearance level. “They might ask for one, but it will be a distraction. That’s not why they’re here.”

Macey rolled her eyes again and told him, “Half the power players in the city are sitting on this ballroom floor.”

“Yes,” Hale agreed with a little too much vigor for Macey’s liking. “And as you pointed out, four out of five gunmen aren’t *in* the ballroom.

So,” Hale said slowly, “whatever they want, it isn’t in here.”

Macey was just starting to argue when Abby asked, “What can you tell me about the gunmen?”

“They’re amateurs,” Hale said at the exact time Macey told her teacher, “They’re pros.”

Hale shook his head. “Just because you do something professionally doesn’t mean you’re a professional. And, trust me, these guys are just the type to get someone hurt.”

Abby was talking in Macey’s ear, going on about emergency extractions and contingency plans. She’d warned Macey to sit tight, not to blow her cover. But the clock inside Macey’s head was ticking, Hale’s words washing over her.

And she was tired of sitting on the floor, doing absolutely nothing about it.

Macey would have given anything to have her best friends with her, but Cammie and Bex were in London on not-so-official CIA business and Liz was... Well, Macey reconsidered. Perhaps having the most accident-prone girl in the history of the Gallagher Academy for Exceptional Young Women far, far away from the men with the assault rifles was a good thing.

“What about lover boy up there?” Abby asked. “He’s walking around with a pair of comms units in his pocket—could he be useful?”

Macey looked Hale slowly up and down, then whispered, “I highly doubt it.”

Hale huffed and mouthed the words *I can hear you*.

Macey just eyed him. “But I guess he’ll have to do.”



The man in the Bush mask looked bored, or as bored as anyone with his face covered could possibly look. He kept his weapon on his hip and

walked around the wide circle, staring down at the captives.

This man wasn't the brains, Hale knew. He held no authority, made no decisions. He was there to wear a mask and hold a gun. And hopefully, Hale thought, make a key mistake.

"You should get us away from the windows," Hale said when the man walked by.

"Shut up," he ordered, his voice husky and deep and vaguely European.

"They're gonna have snipers out there," Hale said. "I watch movies. I know how this ends. We need to get away from the windows. Look, that one door is even open."

"I said shut up."

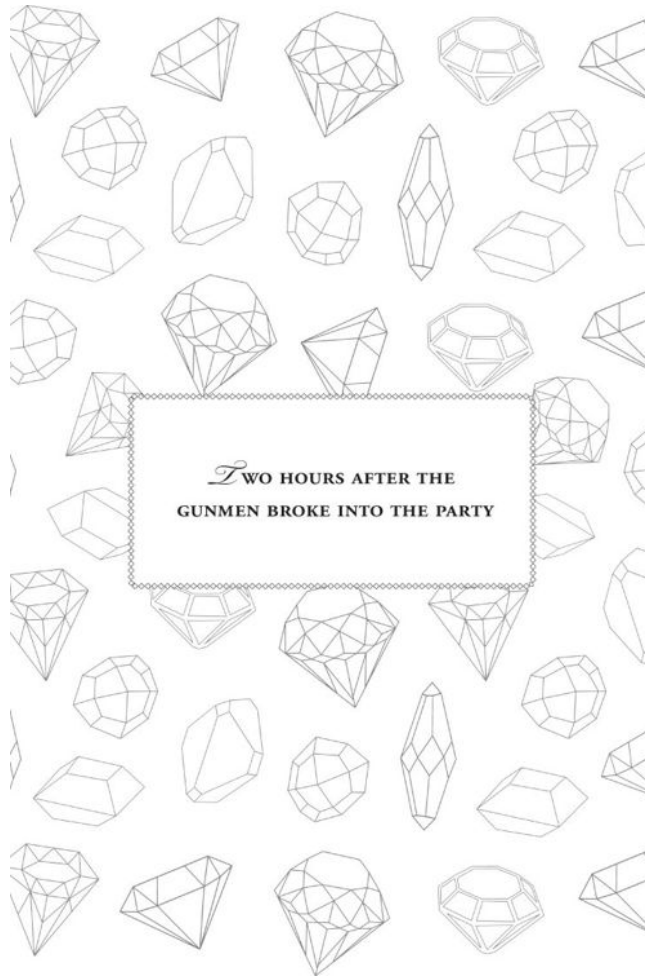
"Okay." Macey took up the argument. "If you want to get shot coming over here to check on us, fine, but my debutante ball is this spring and I can't show up with scars and stuff." She cast a weary glance toward the massive wall of windows and French doors. "Besides, I'm cold. The least you can do is close that door."

Hale watched the man consider this. His posture changed. His feet shifted. And when he turned and started for the window, Hale dared to whisper, "Kat, you hearing this?"

He didn't get a reply, but as soon as the gunman reached the open door, a bullet burst through the glass, shattering it into a million pieces, spraying it across the floor.

It missed the gunman, though. It was supposed to. And what followed was chaos. Hostages bolted to their feet and ran. Others crawled across the floor, over stray bits of glass, struggling to free themselves from that place and that terror.

And when the dust and the panic settled, nobody even noticed that the boy and the girl who had mentioned the windows in the first place were gone.



*T*WO HOURS AFTER THE
GUNMEN BROKE INTO THE PARTY

Chapter 5

WALKING DOWN THE ABANDONED HALL, Hale went through the list of all they had to do.

“First, we have to find out where they’re going and what they want. And keep your eyes peeled,” Hale ordered. “If we find a way of sneaking out some hostages, we should do it. And, Macey,” he said, stopping to catch her full attention, “don’t get caught.”

It was good enough advice, but Macey McHenry seemed to have other things on her mind.

“You’d better not be planning on looking up my dress.”

“I won’t look up your dress.”

“Because if you look up my dress, I will hurt you.”

“Yeah.” Hale laughed a little. “You can try and—”

But before Hale could finish Macey spun, knocking him against the wall. She had her fingers around his neck and his head poised to snap. It was all he could do to choke out the words “I won’t look up your dress.”

“Good boy,” she said, and let him go.

Without another word, the two of them eased down the narrow hallway that ran along the back side of the ballroom. Carts of food sat, abandoned. Bucketsful of ice were melting.

It felt to Hale like they were walking through a ghost town. And Hale couldn’t help himself—he worried. The whole job felt wrong. Too overt.

Too obvious. Too physical and dangerous and risky. Whatever it was that had brought the men in the masks there, he didn't like it.

"What are you thinking?" Macey tilted her head and studied him.

"It's not a Gab and Grab—they've been here too long and they've gotten too entrenched. They're big and they're organized, but they aren't set up for the Queen of Sheba."

Macey looked at him oddly, so Hale added, "To run that con you need a set of triplets and a goat." Then he shook his head and talked on. "They've got hardware and hostages, and that means..."

"What does it mean, Mr. Bored Billionaire—slash—Amateur Thief Guy?"

"I don't know. I'm usually the *heister*—not the *heistee*. And I don't work this way." He walked a little faster. "You take hostages at a bank—someplace with lots of cash and lots of exits. And you only do it after you mess up and don't get out. Seriously, no one in their right mind *intends* to take hostages. Unless..."

"Unless what?"

"Unless they intend to *use* them."

The words washed over both of them, neither of them moving. Neither of them spoke until Hale glanced up at the air vent that opened overhead, and held out his hands in the universal signal for *let me give you a boost*. "Now I promise I won't look up your dress."



Macey wasn't the type of girl to have regrets, but as she crawled through the dirty air vents that ran along the top of the Athenia's highest floor, there were a number of things she would have changed about that particular evening if given the opportunity. First, she would have gone with the black gown instead of the red. (In those situations, you really need a

dress with straps.) She absolutely would have brought one of the little travel-sized tear gas canisters her roommate Liz had perfected the previous semester. And perhaps most importantly, she would have done more than a little reconnaissance on W. W. Hale V before the evening took its covert turn.

Macey risked a look at the boy behind her. She couldn't shake the feeling that he was at home there, but nervous. Like a veteran athlete who has been asked to play a new position. He seemed a little off his game.

"Cammie's going to be mad she missed this," Macey said to fill the silence.

"Excuse me?" Hale asked.

"Nothing." She shook her head. "I just...I have a friend who *really* likes air vents. And dumbwaiter shafts. And laundry chutes. Of course, the last time I was in a laundry chute, Cammie and I fell about a dozen stories...."

"Well, that sounds like fun."

"It was either that or get kidnapped by terrorists, so I guess we got off easy."

Macey glanced back to see Hale's flirty grin. "Somehow I find that very— Wait!" Hale snapped, and grabbed her ankle, held her in place so that she couldn't move another inch.

Macey jerked her head around and saw why Hale had stopped her. Narrow red beams crisscrossed the empty shaft, shining in the darkness.

"Lasers," Hale sighed.

"Lasers," Macey repeated.

They eased away from the red flickering beams that covered the shaft and blocked their way, inching backward until they heard voices below. Through a grate in the ceiling they could see the masked men lingering near

a closed door, leaning against an antique table and smoking European cigarettes as if they had all day.

“Okay, so clearly they don’t have access to the target, which means—” Hale started, and Macey cut him off with a “Shh!” She leaned closer to the vent and listened to the foreign words that filled the hallway beneath them.

“What is that?” Hale asked, leaning close to the vents. “Russian?”

“Albanian,” Macey said, and again, motioned for him to be quiet.

“Now I suppose you’re going to tell me they teach Albanian at your school.”

“Only for extra credit.” Macey leaned even closer, listened harder. “It’s a job for hire,” she translated. “They don’t know how to get past the security system.”

Hale wasn’t impressed. “Of course they can’t get past the security system. You see that sticker by the door. That unit is protected by the new Sterling system. *I* can’t even get past that.”

Macey rolled her eyes and kept her ear trained on the men in the hall. “The boss—I guess that is whoever hired them—he said the system would be off, but it’s not.”

Below, the men talked on. Their frustration grew. “What are they saying now?” Hale asked.

“Cusswords.” Macey cut her eyes at him. “Bad ones.”

“What are they waiting on?” Hale asked almost like he wasn’t expecting an answer. But then, as if on cue, the air vent was plunged into darkness.

In the hallway beneath Hale and Macey, only the emergency exit signs emitted any light, and the hall was covered in an eerie red haze as Clinton shattered the IN CASE OF FIRE glass and pulled an axe from the compartment inside. With two long strides he walked to the door and swung. A minute later the men in the masks were walking inside.

The red laser beams disappeared and Macey glanced back at Hale and said, “Come on.”



Even with the power off, the air shafts were hot in the middle of winter, and sweat beaded on Macey’s brow and ran down the side of her face as she crawled along ahead of Hale, past the point where the lasers had previously blocked their way.

Inching along, she glanced down through the grates into the room below. It was gorgeous and luxurious with a silk-covered fainting couch and a balcony overlooking the park. But even for the Athenia, it was too nice to be a regular room.

“It’s an apartment,” Hale said. “Did you know the Athenia had residences?”

Macey nodded. “They do for a few select clients.” But then something caught her attention. “Is that...” Macey started. She was staring at a painting on the wall.

“A Klimt?” Hale filled in, then sighed. “Oh yeah. But don’t get your hopes up. It’s a copy.”

“And you know this because...” Macey drew out the last word and looked at Hale even more skeptically than before.

“I saw the original at the Louvre last summer,” he said with a shrug.

“Oh,” she said, deflated.

The masked men were right below them, unloading gear and going to work on the opposite side of the opulent room, so Macey and Hale spoke in hushed whispers, pressed together in the tiny space. But Macey didn’t feel a charge, a spark. Handsome though he was, there was no doubt that W. W. Hale was otherwise engaged.

When the man in the Reagan mask pulled the Klimt from the wall, she felt Hale go cold and rigid as he studied the space behind where the print had been.

“Oh boy,” Hale whispered almost to himself.

“What?” Macey asked.

“The safe,” Hale said.

Macey looked back at the room, at the big metal box around which the masked men were gathered. “What about it?”

“It’s...good,” Hale admitted.

“Surely it’s not too much for a world-class art thief such as yourself?” Macey tried to tease, but Hale was already backing slowly away.

“No, Macey. It’s too good.” He shook his head. “Come on. We’ve got to find whoever lives here and figure out what these guys are after.”

“Don’t bother,” Macey said.

“Why...”

She looked at an oil painting that hung over the fireplace, a woman in a canary diamond necklace that was even more famous than she was. “Because she’s in the ballroom right now.”

Macey spoke slowly. “So if you were right and the necklace Mrs. Calloway wore to the ball was a fake...”

Hale nodded. “One guess where she’s keeping the real one.”

Macey peered through the vent at the place where the men were working. They were methodical as they unloaded their equipment, laying it all out on the coffee table like a surgical team preparing their tools.

There were a half dozen devices Macey hadn’t seen before but one small packet that was far too familiar.

“C4,” she whispered, and froze, staring down at the tiny but powerful explosive. “What will they do if they can’t crack the safe?”

“You don’t get it, Macey. They can’t crack that safe.”

“And what will they do?”

“Try to pry it open,” he said.

“And will that work?” she asked.

He shook his head and said, “No.”

“Can you blast into that safe, Hale?”

“What? Why are you asking?”

“Because I think we have bigger problems.”

“What kind of problems?” Hale asked, but Macey just pointed to the fireplace under the painting.

The gas-powered fireplace.

“The kind that go *boom*.”



Katarina Bishop had been many things in her young life. The daughter of a con man, the niece of a thief. (And once, during a particularly delicate operation in Hungary, the heir to an American ketchup dynasty.) But on that evening, she was something she had never, ever been before: helpless.

Needless to say, she didn't like it.

“Kat,” Abby called, strolling in her direction. “Tell me about your boyfriend.”

“Well...I don't know that he's my boyfriend. I mean...he's a boy. And he's my friend. And there's recently been the addition of kissing. But does that make us friends with benefits or—”

“Kat,” Abby snapped.

“Sorry,” Kat said. “What were you asking?”

“What is his training?”

“Oh...” And then, for an excellent liar, Kat had absolutely no idea what to say.

Abby seemed to read her face, because she inched closer and lowered her voice. “Look, I’m not a cop. And I’m not Interpol. I’m just someone who took an oath a long time ago to keep Macey McHenry safe, so whatever you can tell me...”

“He’s a con man. An inside man. He’s pretty good at short cons and street work. Picking pockets, sleight of hand—stuff like that—but what he does best is...lie.”

“Can he handle a safe?” Abby asked.

“What kind of safe?” Kat asked.

“A Scribner 9000,” Abby told her, and Kat couldn’t help herself—she laughed.

“I’m sorry,” she said, righting herself. “But that safe is drill-proof, hack-proof, and has an internal gyroscope with titanium shafts that bolt into place if anyone even breathes on it funny. Seriously. They don’t even install them in California because of earthquakes.” Kat watched the way Abby gaped at her. “Maybe I don’t know much about boys....” Kat shook her head. “Doesn’t mean I don’t know about safes.”

“Can you pry your way into it?”

“You mean like with the Jaws of Life?” Kat thought about what Hale had seen hidden in the ballroom. “You can try, but it won’t work. Or... well...it didn’t work at the Israeli Diamond Exchange in 2009.” Kat thought about what she’d said, then quickly added, “*Allegedly*. There are only two ways into a Scribner nine series. Either you hire one of the half dozen or so safecrackers in the world who can work the tumblers or...” Kat cut her eyes up at Abby, who was totally not liking the answer. “You get someone to give you the combination.” Kat drew a deep breath. “Why?”

“I think we might have a problem.” Abby looked up at the high-rise. “What do you know about the new whole-house system from Sterling Security?”

“The new one?” Kat raised her eyebrows, impressed. “It’s good. I mean...really good. A friend of mine’s dad designed it, and there’s really no way around it unless...” Kat let her voice trail off, and Abby must have read her mind.

“Somebody cuts the power,” Abby said, and Kat looked up at the too-dark building. “The authorities turned off all electricity to the building five minutes ago.”

“What about—” Kat started, but Abby was already shaking her head.

“Backup generators too.”

“That’s why they needed the hostages,” Kat said, and in spite of herself she had to smile. “That’s why they weren’t in a hurry. This had to be big and public and scary enough to get the cops to black out the whole building. It’s genius.” She suddenly remembered who she was speaking to. “I mean it’s awful. But it’s also kind of genius.”

Suddenly, the hostages made sense. It wasn’t a holdup, Kat realized. It was a diversion. It had a purpose. And purposes made Kat happy.

Abby smiled and never asked how a fifteen-year-old girl could be so good at doing very bad things. “They’re past the security system, Kat. And now they’re working on the safe.”

“Whose safe is it?”

“Have you ever heard of the Calloway Canary?”

“Is Mrs. Calloway in there?”

“She’s in the ballroom now,” Abby said. “With a fake necklace that our gunmen evidently knew was a fake, because they went straight for the safe.”

“So someone is slipping them inside information,” Kat said, and Abby nodded. “What do you know about the gunmen?”

“Not much. According to our source—”

“You mean Macey?” Kat asked, but Abby didn’t answer.

“They’re Eastern European, probably muscle for hire,” Abby said. “There’s some big boss we haven’t identified yet. Someone’s calling the shots, but these guys are just here to do a job.”

But Kat was shaking her head. “There isn’t any honor among thieves, Abby. Not among that kind, at least. And right now they’re trying to get into a safe they can’t crack while holding on to over a hundred people they no longer need.” Kat watched the woman’s eyes, her worried posture and hasty glances toward an empty balcony.

“What is it?” Kat asked. “What aren’t you telling me?”

“Kat, can you blast your way into that safe?”

“Technically, yes,” Kat started slowly. “But in a private residence with close quarters and utilities you’d have to be crazy to try.”

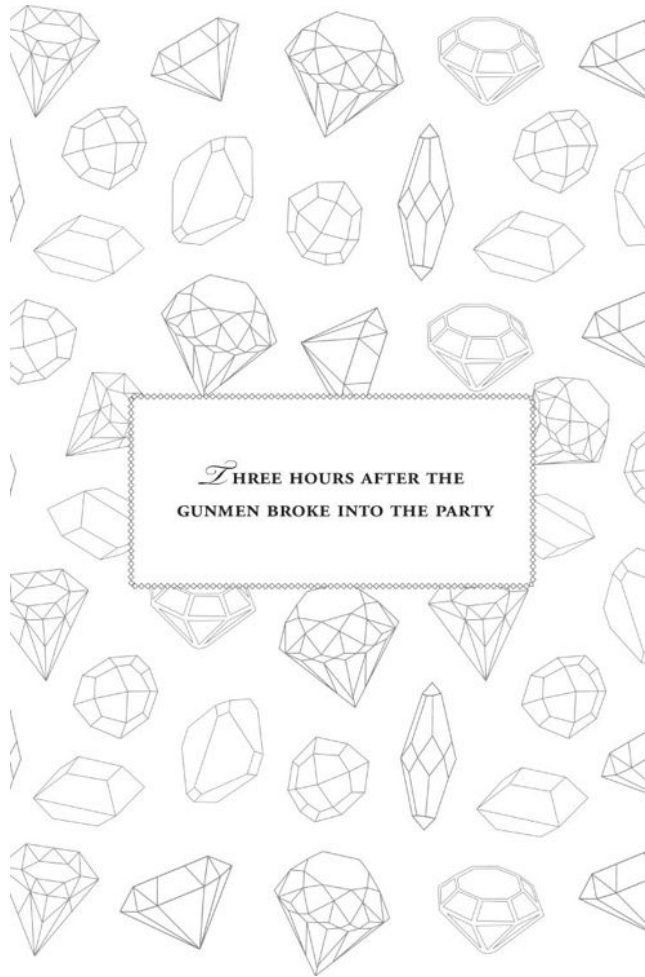
“So we can’t let them try.”

“No.” Kat shook her head. “We can’t.”

Then Abby seemed to remember that she was the adult and Kat was the teen, the civilian, because she patted the younger girl on the back and said, “You don’t need to worry about it, Kat. You’ve done enough.” She turned away.

But there was something inside of Kat that was alive, thinking, planning, knowing that it wasn’t over and it wasn’t okay—that there were codes to her world and her life and anyone who would pick up an automatic weapon and take a hundred hostages wasn’t going to live by them.

Whoever these men were, they were not members of the family, and that more than anything made Kat yell through the darkness, “Abby!” The woman turned, studying her, as Kat said, “There’s something else that I can do.”



THREE HOURS AFTER THE
GUNMEN BROKE INTO THE PARTY

Chapter 6

“STOP PACING,” Hale said in the manner of someone who was used to giving orders. Sadly, Macey wasn’t used to taking them.

“No thank you,” she said, and kept on walking. Too bad there was no real place to walk to. The storage closet they’d found was small and crowded with dirty laundry and old housekeeping carts. But it was also private and far away from the eyes and ears of the men in the masks.

“Macey, calm down. We don’t know why they brought the C4,” Hale said.

“Well, we do know that there is a gas line running behind the Calloway safe. The bad guys with the big explosives don’t seem to care that there’s a gas line. Let me do the math for you. Gas plus explosions equals boom!”

“Don’t look at me. I would be more than happy to offer a short course on How to Conduct a Proper Apartment Heist, but I doubt these guys are going to take my advice.”

“Abby,” Macey said, trying her earbud again. “Abby, do you hear me? How’s it going trying to cut the gas to the building? Did you do it? Is it done?”

“And what about the gas that’s already in the lines?” Hale asked. “Never mind.” He shook his head. There was no doubt he already knew the answer.

“Guys.” Abby’s voice came through their earbuds. “Just sit tight. We’re working on a Plan B.”

“What kind of Plan B?” Hale asked.

He was almost holding his breath when a voice answered, “My kind.”

Macey tried to read the look on his face then, but it was gone in a flash. It had been a simple moment of peace and joy and pure happiness. That voice made Hale happy. It kept him calm. It was his backup and his conscience. Macey couldn’t help herself; she envied him.

Then Macey asked, “Okay, Abby. What do you have in mind?”

When the plan was set and the mission in motion, Macey had to admit she felt slightly better about the situation.

There are few problems a Gallagher Girl can face that cannot be improved by a job. A task. A target. So there was a new spring in Macey McHenry’s steps as she led the way back down the corridor that lined the ballroom. The carts were still abandoned. Trays of shrimp still lay carelessly tossed aside and they were starting to smell.

Macey walked through it all, feeling in her bones that it was over. She turned and looked at Hale. “Smile, thief boy. It’s a—”

But before Macey could finish she felt something—someone—run around the corner and into her side, knocking her against an ice machine and sending her spinning around.

The man in the Clinton mask seemed completely shocked to find he wasn’t alone. But shock quickly faded as Hale rushed forward, and the man shifted his weight and sent the slightly lighter boy flying too hard into the wall. Then the man turned his sights on Macey.

“Abby,” Macey whispered to her teacher, “I think we might need a Plan C now.”

And then she picked up one of the heavy platters of shrimp.

And swung.



Chapter 7

THE LIGHTS WERE OFF INSIDE THE BALLROOM. So Macey stumbled inside through the glow of the candles that still burned on the tables. At first there was a hiss and then a whisper. It was like the people on the floor didn't know if she was shadow or ghost as she hobbled on a bruised leg and broken heel, slowly making her way through the flickering light.

"Macey?" a voice cried through the room.

"Daddy?" Macey called, but the man in the Clinton mask yelled, "Stop right there!"

And for maybe the first time in her life, Macey did as she was told.

She thought of the masked man's gun and the rapid burst of bullets.

She thought of Hale lying on the floor.

She thought of the mission she hadn't had the time to finish.

And Macey yelled louder, "Daddy?" Her voice cracked. Macey saw the senator moving her way, through the ballroom.

"What was that shooting?" the senator demanded. "What have you done to my daughter?"

The masked man whirled and sent the beam of his flashlight across the crowd until it shone on the tall man in the back of the room.

But Clinton just pointed his gun at Macey's head and said, "Stay where you are."

The man in the Bush mask was coming toward them. “Reagan needs you in the other room,” Bush said, but Clinton shook his head.

“Found this one out in the hall,” Clinton told Bush. “Her and her little friend. I handled them, though. Didn’t I, sweetheart?” He ran a finger down the side of Macey’s cheek and she shivered but didn’t fight.

It wasn’t the time, Macey told herself. It wasn’t the place. She’d have her chance later, but right then all Macey wanted to do was run into her father’s arms. She tried to push past Bush, clawed against his arms and his sides, but he held her in place, not moving.

“Please,” she said. “Please. I won’t try to sneak out again. I promise.”

“No,” Clinton snapped, and pulled Macey away. “You think we’re gonna trust you?” His drawl was obviously fake and sickly sweet. He didn’t sound like a former president. He sounded like a psychopath.

“You think we’re gonna let you go back to your daddy after what you did?” The man fingered the side of his neck—a place that was still bleeding from an earlier blow.

“Please,” Macey said, but Clinton just grabbed her arm.

“Come here.”

“No!” the senator shouted.

“Bill,” Bush said, “Reagan needs you in the other room.”

“She’s coming with me,” Clinton yelled over his shoulder.

He marched Macey to the farthest, darkest corner of the room, where he made a great show of tying her to a chair, and the man in the Bush mask went back to walking slowly among the hostages and holding his weapon.

If he had felt the hand that reached into the messenger bag he kept strapped across his chest, he didn’t show it.

If he thought it strange that Clinton had made such a scene of securing his hostage himself, he didn’t question it.

And when Macey whispered, “Okay, Kat. You’re on,” the fake President Bush didn’t appear to hear a thing.

In fact, in the darkness, none of the hostages seemed to notice when the air vent at the back of the ballroom slid slowly up. In fact, not a soul appeared to see the small girl who dangled out of the opening, her black hair and clothes disappearing in the shadows of the room.

“We missed our flight for Rome,” the upside-down girl said.

The Clinton mask eased up and the boy behind it gave her a smile. “I own the jet, remember? It’ll wait.”

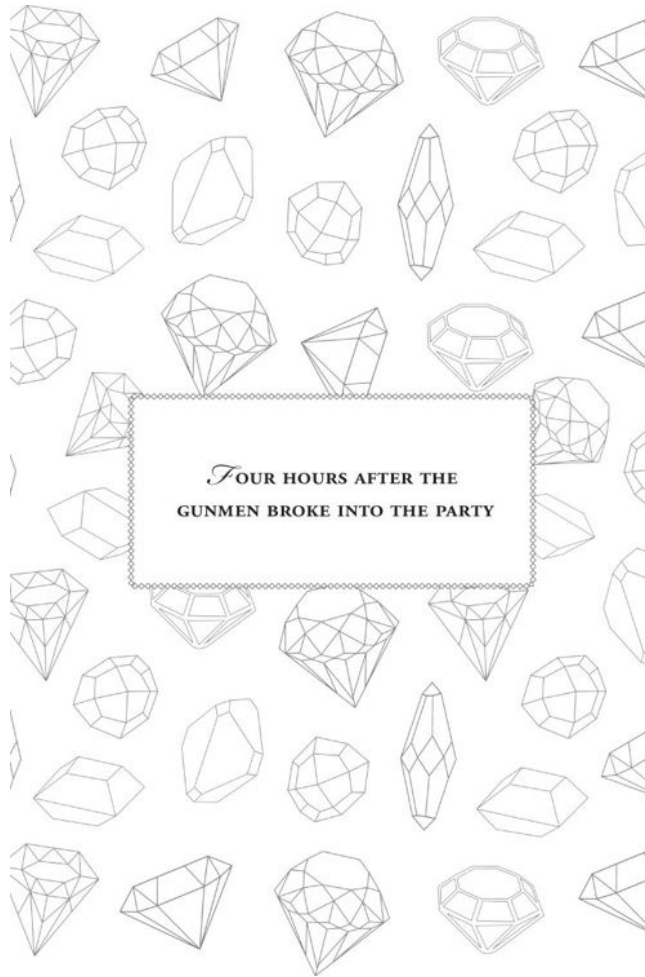
“Hi,” Kat said, shifting just a little to the girl at her boyfriend’s side.

“Macey”—Hale gave a very Hale-ish grin—“may I introduce Kat Bishop?”

“It’s nice to meet you,” Macey said.

The upside-down girl grinned and took a small package from Macey’s hand. A moment later she was gone, into the air vent and scurrying away, perfectly at home in the black.

Macey shook her head. “Someday I’ve got to introduce her to Cammie.”



FOUR HOURS AFTER THE
GUNMEN BROKE INTO THE PARTY

Chapter 8

NO ONE EVER KNEW WHO PULLED THE FIRE ALARM. No one ever really knew why. The men in the masks assumed it was either a glitch in the Athenia's system or the authorities trying to distract them, gain the upper hand. The authorities assumed the gunmen had tripped some kind of alarm, made a little mistake. But no matter who had caused it, the effects were still the same.

In the ballroom, the hostages huddled together a little tighter, grew a little more anxious. In the Calloway apartment, the men dropped the Jaws of Life and ran back to the ballroom to check with their superiors.

"Shut that off!" Reagan yelled to the others. But the men looked at each other, dumbfounded, until, just like magic, the piercing sirens stopped, leaving the hotel in a silence that was now entirely too loud.

"What did you do?" Reagan asked.

"Nothing," Bush said.

Reagan looked around the dimly lit ballroom. The hostages sat huddled on the floor, tuxedo jackets resting around the shoulders of a few of the women. The professional bodyguards were zip-tied to pillars, and everyone was away from the windows.

It looked like everything and everyone were exactly where they were supposed to be. But something in Reagan's posture was too rigid, like a man for whom time—or maybe just patience—was running out.

He shifted, scanning the ballroom until he was looking directly at the old woman with the white hair. To her credit, Mrs. Calloway didn't even blink when the man pointed a finger in her direction and said, "Get her."

"Let me try the drill again," Obama said.

"We don't have time. Now get her!" Reagan shouted loud enough for all the room to hear. And then Bush walked across the ballroom floor and pointed to the little old lady who owned the big yellow diamond.

"Mrs. Calloway," Bush said. "Come with me."

"No!" Mrs. Calloway's son shouted. He jumped to his feet and stood between the white-haired woman and the men. "Where are you taking my mother? You can't—"

But before he could finish, Reagan struck him across the face with the butt of his weapon. "We're not taking orders from you," Reagan snapped, and the son fell silent. No one said a word as the old woman was pulled from the ballroom.

They walked down the hall, Bush dragging the old woman beside him. "Where are you taking me?" Mrs. Calloway demanded. "What do you want?"

"No need to worry, ma'am," Reagan told her. "We just need to have a little conversation."

But a conversation about what, no one ever got to ask, because as soon as they turned the corner that led to the Calloway residence, they heard Obama running toward them.

"What is it?" Reagan snapped.

Obama came to a sudden stop and looked between the masked men and the old woman. His voice was soft, almost reverent, when he said, "It's open."

"What are you talking about?" Reagan snapped, pushing past Obama and into the Calloway apartment.

The tools were still on the coffee table. The Jaws of Life lay exactly where the men had placed it. Only one thing was different when the men returned to Mrs. Calloway's formal living room, and for that reason they never had to ask her a single question.

Because the safe on which they had been working for hours now sat with the door propped open, revealing the largest yellow diamond that any of them had ever seen.



In the ballroom, things were changing, though no one really knew what. Or how. But the air was no doubt different when Mrs. Calloway strolled in, unharmed but obviously confused. The men were gathering their bags of loot and moving around the room with renewed purpose, making sure they were leaving nothing important behind, their work finally finished.

"Looks like your girl delivered," Macey said through the unit in her ear. Across the room, she saw Hale shift toward her.

"She always does," he said, his mouth invisible behind the Clinton mask he kept pulled down.

But then Obama dropped a bag on the floor and shouted something in a language Hale didn't understand.

"What did he say?" Hale asked.

"It's time for Clinton to go check on the elevator," Macey translated.

Hale smiled. "Glad to."

But Macey was already slipping out of the ties Hale had never tightened around her wrists. She was already taking off her broken shoe.

"Where do you think you're going?" Hale asked. He stopped. He looked at her.

And even in the darkness there was a spark in Macey's eyes when she told him, "To end it."



The SWAT team was careful in coming up the stairs, slowly clearing corners and making their way in the dark. It was a good thing, it turned out, or else they might have tripped over the man in the Obama mask, who sat handcuffed to the railing of the emergency exit stairs.

When the team reached the Athenia's industrial-sized kitchen, they found the man who had started his evening in a Clinton mask bound and gagged and lying in a large walk-in refrigerator, right where Macey McHenry had left him.

But it wasn't until the team finally breached the corridor that ran along the back of the ballroom that they heard banging and found Carter, Bush, and Reagan in a freight elevator that had been (in the SWAT team's professional opinion) booby-trapped, locking the men inside, a simple note taped to the outer doors, reading "We were not the brains."

There was a satchel inside, filled with jewels and wallets, watches and the assorted valuables that the finest members of New York society had chosen to bring to the party. Only one thing was missing, it turned out. And that was the big yellow diamond. That, it seemed, was gone for good.

The hostages were interviewed. The room was searched. But despite the best efforts of the NYPD and the FBI, it seemed the Calloway Canary had flown out of the ballroom that night and into the cold winter air, never to be seen again.

The most beautiful ballroom in all of Manhattan was nothing but a maze of overturned chairs and broken dishes, a table full of European antiques and luxurious vacations that didn't seem quite as important or valuable as before, there at the end of the party.

No, in the end, all that really mattered were the questions.

“I’m very sorry to keep you here, Mrs. Calloway,” Abby said. She walked to where the older woman was sitting, patiently waiting to be set free, looking at the cops and federal officers that filled the room as if she’d just traded one set of gun-wielding captors for another. “We just have a few questions,” Abby said. “Routine things, really. Like was the necklace insured?”

“Of course.” Mrs. Calloway practically huffed at the notion that there could be any doubt. “In fact, the insurance people were the ones who insisted I have a fake made. They have rules about these things, you see.”

“And the fake is what you wore to the party?” Abby asked.

“It was. According to my policy, I either have to wear the fake or hire a guard whenever I wear it and that seemed like a lot of trouble. But when I saw those men and their guns...well, it was the first time I was ever grateful for insurance companies and their silly rules. But when those men pointed their guns at me and took me away...”

The woman’s face went whiter as she recounted the evening. “I didn’t know what to expect. I would have given them the safe combination.” She trembled slightly. “I would have given them anything. But when we reached the apartment, I saw my safe was already open....How was my safe open?”

“I understand that there are perhaps a half dozen safecrackers in the world who could break that particular model.” Abby smiled a little, let her gaze drift to Kat. “I suppose one of them must have been here tonight.”

“Yes.” Mrs. Calloway gripped the base of her throat, as if feeling for a necklace that was no longer there. “I was...It wasn’t what I was expecting. But I must admit I was grateful. I don’t know what they would have done to me.”

“I understand.” Abby reached to pat the old woman’s hand. “Just one more question. I wonder how the men knew the necklace you were wearing wasn’t the real Calloway diamond.”

“Well, I suppose they could just tell,” Mrs. Calloway said, but there was a new doubt in her voice. This was a question she hadn’t thought to ask.

“But they brought equipment to get into the safe, which makes me wonder if maybe someone might have told them that you wouldn’t be wearing the real necklace tonight?”

“I don’t know.” She shook her head and looked at her son. “Michael?”

“Really, Agent Cameron.” Michael Calloway placed an arm protectively around his mother’s shoulders. “We have been through quite an ordeal tonight and—”

“It wasn’t with them,” Abby said, cutting him off. “The Calloway Canary wasn’t with the men when we searched them.”

“Well, that doesn’t make any sense,” Mrs. Calloway said.

“I know, right?” Abby told her. “Why break in, go to all this trouble, only to leave the grand prize behind? Unless”—Abby lingered on the word —“leaving it behind was the plan all along.”

“I…” Mrs. Calloway started. “I don’t understand.”

Abby stood and walked around the room. She eyed everything—the tables strewn with forgotten plates of food and burned-out candles; the stage, which was still covered in instruments the band hadn’t yet returned to claim. And finally Abby’s gaze came to rest on the long table covered with clipboards and items up for silent auction.

“Ooh,” Abby said, looking down at one. “A week in a Tuscan villa? Jealous.” Abby giggled a little. She sounded more like a young woman than a government agent as she walked slowly down the table, fingering each item in turn.

“Oh, look,” she said, stopping. “You won this one, Mr. Calloway.” Abby picked up the antique clock that Hale’s mother had been examining earlier in the evening. She glanced back down at the clipboard. “Looks like you were very aggressive. You must have really wanted it.”

“Well, I did,” the son said proudly. “Eighteenth century. Not terribly valuable, but I’m a collector, so I couldn’t—”

“Oops,” Abby said as she dropped the clock and it shattered on the floor. “I’m such a klutz,” she said, but no one was listening to the words—they were too busy staring down at the pile of rubble on the floor with the yellow necklace lying in the center.

“Well,” Abby said, “I guess now we know why the gunmen didn’t have the necklace with them. It looks like the man who planned the heist was meant to take it home all along.”



There were protests and excuses, calls to attorneys and proclamations of innocence, but none of it really mattered at that point—not to Hale and not to Kat. Not even to Macey, who walked, barefooted, with her two new friends out of the elevator and into the palatial lobby of the Athenia Hotel.

As the NYPD officers led the handcuffed man outside, only the tall dark-haired woman in the very trim suit seemed to look the three teenagers’ way.

“Macey,” Abby Cameron said as she strolled in their direction, “your mother and father would like a word with you. They’d also like to give their thanks to Mr. Hale...” Abby eyed him skeptically. “Evidently, they are under the impression that he fought valiantly to save you. For the sake of your cover I would recommend you not correct them.”

“I never do,” Macey said, and started to saunter off. But at the last minute Macey stopped and turned.

“Thanks, Kat,” she said, then quickly added, “Just so you know, I’m not a hugger.”

“That’s okay, Macey. Neither am I.”

And then Macey McHenry flashed Kat a million-dollar smile. She looked like royalty as she asked, “What are you doing next?”

Kat shrugged. “I might go to Rome. There’s a Raphael there I kind of need to...*acquire*.”

“That’s funny,” Macey laughed. “There’s an ambassador’s son there I kind of need to kidnap. Maybe we’ll see each other around.”

“Yeah,” Kat said. “Maybe we will.”

But as Macey and Hale walked across the lobby, Kat was certain that no one was going to see Macey—the real Macey—on first glance. And Kat smiled at the fact. She totally knew the feeling.

“So, Kat,” Abby said slowly. She looked Kat squarely in the eyes and it was like the lobby went still. Abby had that effect on people and places, Kat had realized. Of her many secrets, one of them had to be that she had the power to make time stand still. “It was a pleasure working with you tonight.”

“You too,” Kat said. “Without you...”

“You would have been fine,” Abby said; then she seemed to realize the weight of the words. “I mean it.”

“Thanks. But we might not have gotten this.” Then Kat reached into the pocket of her jacket and pulled out a diamond necklace so bright and pure and brilliant that it seemed like the entire city of New York had to stop and watch it shimmer.

“Is that...” Abby started slowly. She seemed almost afraid to reach out for the stone.

“Oh,” Kat said. “This is the real thing, all right. Here.” She held the necklace out for Abby to take, dangling ten million dollars away from her like she was worried the temptation might be too much. “See that it gets back where it belongs, okay?”

“So you *did* swap it out for the fake?” Abby said as if part of her had been wondering.

“Of course,” Kat said. “Hale and Macey slipped me the fake and then I left that for Reagan and his crew just in case. Plan D,” Kat said by way of explanation.

“Tell you what, Kat, I’ll trade you,” Abby said, taking the necklace and slipping a piece of paper into Kat’s small hand. “It’s my card.”

““The Gallagher Academy for Exceptional Young Women...” Kat read. “It’s a school?”

“Part school.” Abby cocked her head, considering. “Part sisterhood.”

“And you’re a teacher?” Kat didn’t try to hide the skepticism in her voice, but Abby didn’t seem offended.

She just let her gaze drift across the room, a slow smile spreading across her face. “Something like that.”

Kat tried to read Abby’s expression, but like so many things about her, it was shrouded in secrets. Still, Kat was certain there was far more to the story. She glanced from Macey to Abby and back again. “Exactly what kind of school is the Gallagher Academy?” Kat asked.

“The kind that would welcome you in a heartbeat.”

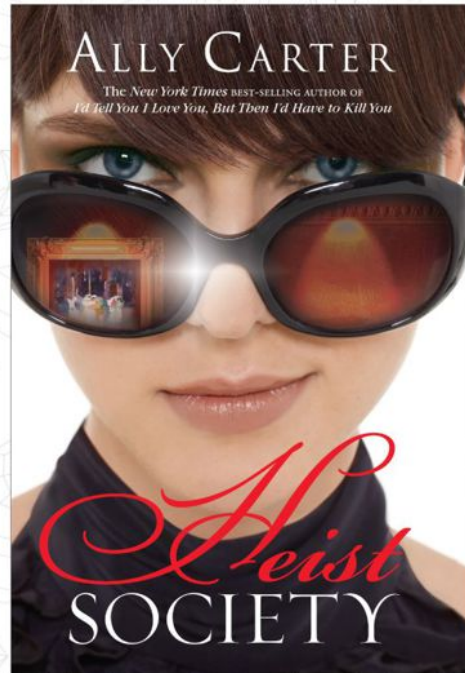
Abby folded Kat’s fingers over the card and turned to leave. Neither of them spoke again. Neither of them had to. There was a subtle understanding already coursing between them.

Maybe Macey was right and they would meet again. Then Kat thought about her new friends on the right side of the law and wondered whether that would be a good thing or a bad thing. But in the end she merely shrugged, knowing at the very least it would be interesting.

Knowing, in her gut, it might just be the beginning.

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Hale's world in the *New York Times* best seller



CHAPTER 1

No one knew for certain when the trouble started at the Colgan School. Some members of its alumni association blamed the decision to admit girls. Others cited newfangled liberal ideals and a general decline in the respect for elders worldwide. But no matter the theory, no one could deny that, recently, life at the Colgan School was different.

Oh, its grounds were still perfectly manicured. Three quarters of the senior class were already well on their way to being early-accepted into the Ivy League. Photos of presidents and senators and CEOs still lined the dark-paneled hallway outside the headmaster's office.

But in the old days, no one would ever have declined admission to Colgan on the day before classes started, forcing the administration to scramble to fill the slot. Historically, any vacancy would have been met with a waiting list a mile long, but this year, for some reason, there was only one applicant eager to enroll at that late date.

Most of all, there had been a time when honor meant something at the Colgan School, when school property was respected, when the faculty was revered—when the headmaster's mint-condition 1958 Porsche Speedster would *never* have been placed on top of the fountain in the quad with water shooting out of its headlights on an unusually warm evening in November.

There had been a time when the girl responsible—the very one who had lucked into that last-minute vacancy only a few months before—would have had the decency to admit what she'd done and quietly taken her leave of the school. But unfortunately, that era, much like the headmaster's car, was finished.

Two days after Porsche-gate, as the students had taken to calling it, the girl in question had the nerve to sit in the hallway of the administration building beneath the black-and-white stare of three senators, two presidents, and a Supreme Court justice, with her head held high, as if she'd done nothing wrong.

More students than usual filed down the corridor that day, going out of their way to steal a glance and whisper behind cupped hands.

“That's her.”

“She's the one I was telling you about.”

“How do you think she did it?”

Any other student might have flinched in that bright spotlight, but from the moment Katarina Bishop set foot on the Colgan campus, she'd been something of an enigma. Some said she'd gained her last-minute slot because she was the daughter of an incredibly wealthy European businessman who had made a very generous donation. Some looked at her perfect posture and cool demeanor, rolled her first name across their tongues, and assumed that she was Russian royalty—one of the last of the Romanovs.

Some called her a hero; others called her a freak.

Everyone had heard a different story, but no one knew the truth—that Kat really had grown up all over Europe, but she wasn't an heiress. That she did, in fact, have a Fabergé egg, but she wasn't a Romanov. Kat herself could have added a thousand rumors to the mill, but she stayed quiet, knowing that the only thing no one would believe was the truth.

“Katarina?” the headmaster’s secretary called. “The board will see you now.”

Kat rose calmly, but as she stepped toward the open door twenty feet from the headmaster’s office, she heard her shoes squeak; she felt her hands tingle. Every nerve in her body seemed to stand on end as she realized that somehow, in the last three months, she had become someone who wore squeaky shoes.

That, whether she liked it or not, they were going to hear her coming.

Kat was used to looking at a room and seeing all the angles, but she’d never seen a room quite like this before.

Though the hallway outside was long and straight, this room was round. Dark wood surrounded her; dim lights hung from a low ceiling. It felt to Kat almost like a cave, except for a tall, slim window where a narrow beam of sunlight came pouring in. Suddenly, Kat found herself reaching out, wanting to run her hands through the rays. But then someone cleared his throat, a pencil rolled across a desk, and Kat’s shoes squeaked again, bringing her back to the moment.

“You may sit down.”

The voice came from the back of the room, and at first Kat didn’t know who’d spoken. Like the voice, the faces before her were unfamiliar: the twelve on her right were wrinkle-free and fresh—students just like her (or as much like her as a Colgan student could possibly be). The twelve people on her left had hair that was a little thinner, or makeup that was a little heavier. But regardless of age, all the members of the Colgan School Honor Board were wearing identical black robes and impassive expressions as they watched Kat walk to the center of the circular room.

“Sit, Ms. Bishop,” Headmaster Franklin said from his place in the front row. He looked especially pale in his dark robe. His cheeks were too puffy, his hair too styled. He was the sort of man, Kat realized, who probably wished he were as fast and sporty as his car. And then, despite everything,

Kat grinned a little, imagining the headmaster himself propped up in the middle of the quad, squirting water.

As Kat took her seat, the senior boy beside the headmaster rose and announced, “The Colgan School Honor Board shall come to order.” His voice echoed around the room. “All who wish to speak shall be heard. All who wish to follow the light shall see. All who wish to seek justice shall find the truth. Honor for one,” the boy finished, and before Kat could really process what she’d heard, twenty-four voices chorused, “Honor for all.”

The boy sat and ruffled through the pages of an old leather-bound book until the headmaster prodded, “Jason...”

“Oh. Yeah.” Jason picked up the heavy book. “The Colgan School Honor Board will hear the case of Katarina Bishop, sophomore. The committee will hear testimony that on the tenth of November, Ms. Bishop did willfully...um...*steal* personal property.” Jason chose his words carefully, while a girl in the second row stifled a laugh.

“That by committing this act at two a.m., she was also in violation of the school curfew. And that Ms. Bishop willfully destroyed school artifacts.” Jason lowered the book and paused—a little more dramatically than necessary, Kat thought—before he added, “According to the Colgan Code of Honor, these charges are punishable by expulsion. Do you understand the charges as they have been read to you?”

Kat took a moment to make sure the board really did want her to respond before she said, “I didn’t do it.”

“The charges.” Headmaster Franklin leaned forward. “The question, Ms. Bishop, was whether you *understood* the charges.”

“I do.” Kat felt her heartbeat change rhythm. “I just don’t agree with them.”

“I—” the headmaster started again, but a woman to his right touched his arm lightly.

She smiled at Kat as she said, “Headmaster, I seem to remember that in matters such as this, it’s customary to take the student’s full academic history into account. Perhaps we should begin with a review of Ms. Bishop’s record?”

“Oh.” The headmaster seemed to deflate a bit. “Well, that’s quite right, Ms. Connors, but since Ms. Bishop has only been with us a few months, she has no record to speak of.”

“But surely this is not the first school the young woman has attended?” Ms. Connors asked, and Kat bit back a nervous laugh.

“Well, yes,” the headmaster admitted grudgingly. “Of course. And we tried to contact those schools, but there was a fire at Trinity that destroyed the entire admissions office and most of their records. And the Bern Institute experienced a terrible computer crash last summer, so we’ve had a very difficult time finding...things.”

The headmaster looked at Kat as if disasters must follow wherever she went. Ms. Connors, on the other hand, looked impressed. “Those are two of the finest schools in Europe.”

“Yes, ma’am. My father, he...does a lot of work there.”

“What *do* your parents do?”

As Kat searched the second row for the girl who’d posed the question, she started to ask exactly why her parents’ occupations mattered. But then she remembered that Colgan was the kind of place where who your parents were and what they did always seemed to matter.

“My mother died when I was six.”

A few people gave a slight sigh at this, but Headmaster Franklin pressed on. “And your father?” he asked, unwilling to let a conveniently deceased mother swing any sympathy votes Kat’s way. “What does *he* do?”

“Art,” Kat said simply, carefully. “He does a lot of things, but he specializes in art.”

At this, the head of the fine arts department perked up. “Collecting?” the man asked.

Again Kat had to fight back a smile. “More like...*distribution*.”

“Interesting though this may be,” Headmaster Franklin interrupted, “it does not pertain to...the matter at hand.” Kat could have sworn he’d stopped himself from saying *to my convertible*.

No one responded. The only motion in the room was the dust that still danced in the narrow beam of falling light. Finally, Headmaster Franklin leaned forward and narrowed his eyes. Kat had seen lasers with less focus as the headmaster snapped: “Ms. Bishop, where were you on the night of November tenth?”

“In my room. Studying.”

“On a Friday night? You were studying?” The headmaster glanced at his colleagues as if that were the most outrageous lie any Colgan student had ever dared to utter.

“Well, Colgan *is* an exceptionally difficult institution. I have to study.”

“And you didn’t see anyone?” Jason asked.

“No, I—”

“Oh, but someone saw *you*, didn’t they, Ms. Bishop?” Headmaster Franklin’s voice was cold and sharp. “We have cameras monitoring the grounds. Or didn’t you know?” he asked with a chuckle.

But of course Kat knew about the cameras. She suspected she knew more about every aspect of Colgan security than the headmaster did, but she didn’t think this was the appropriate time to say so. There were too many witnesses. Too much was at stake. And, besides, the headmaster was already smiling triumphantly and dimming the lights with a remote control. Kat had to twist in her chair to see a section of the round wall sliding aside, revealing a large TV.

“This young woman bears a striking resemblance to you, does she not, Ms. Bishop?” As Kat watched the grainy black-and-white video, she recognized the quad, of course, but she had never seen the person who was running across it wearing a black hooded sweatshirt.

“That’s not me.”

“But the dormitory doors were only opened once that night—at 2:27 a.m.—using a student identification card. *This* card.” Kat’s stomach flipped as the single-worst picture she had ever taken appeared on the screen. “This is your Colgan student I.D., is it not, Ms. Bishop?”

“Yes, but—”

“And this”—Headmaster Franklin reached beneath his seat—“was found during a search of your belongings.” The personalized license plate—COLGAN-1—seemed to glow as he held it above his head.

It felt to Kat as though all the air had left the dim room as a strange feeling swept over her. After all, *accused* she could handle; *wrongly accused* was entirely new territory.

“Katarina?” Ms. Connors asked, as if begging Kat to prove them wrong.

“I know that *seems* like a lot of very convincing evidence,” Kat said, her mind working, gears spinning. “Maybe too much evidence? I mean, would I really use my own I.D. if I’d done it?”

“So since there is evidence that you *did* it, that should prove that you *didn’t* do it?” Even Ms. Connors sounded skeptical.

“Well,” Kat said, “I’m not stupid.”

The headmaster laughed. “Oh, well, how would *you* have done it?” He was mocking her—baiting her—yet Kat couldn’t help but think about the answer:

There was a shortcut behind Warren Hall that was closer and darker and completely void of cameras....

The doors wouldn't need an I.D. to open if you had enough Bubblicious to cover the sensor on your way out....

If you're going to pull a prank of that nature, you don't do it the night before a morning when the maintenance staff will be awake long before the students....

Headmaster Franklin smiled smugly, relishing her silence, as if he were so smart.

But Kat had already learned that people at Colgan were frequently wrong—like when her Italian teacher had said that Kat's accent would always make her stand out on the streets of Rome (even though Kat had already passed for a Franciscan nun during a particularly difficult job in Vatican City). She thought about how silly her History of Art teacher had sounded when she'd waxed poetic about seeing the *Mona Lisa* (when Kat knew for a fact that the Louvre's original had been replaced with a fake in 1862).

Kat had learned quite a lot of things before enrolling at the Colgan School—but the thing that she knew best was that this was the kind of place where she could never share them.

"I don't know about Trinity or Bern or any of those *European* schools, young lady, but at the Colgan School we follow the rules." The headmaster's fist banged the table. "We respect the property of others. We adhere to the honor code of this institution and the laws of this country."

But Kat already knew about honor. She'd grown up with her own set of rules. And the first rule of Katarina Bishop's family was simple: Don't get caught.

"Katarina," Ms. Connors said, "do you have anything to add that might explain this?"

Kat could have said, *That's not me* or *There must be some kind of mistake*. The great irony was that if this had been an ordinary con, she could

have lied her way through it without a second thought. But the truth? That, she wasn't so good at.

Her I.D. badge had been duplicated. The license plate had been planted in her room. Someone had dressed like her and made sure they were caught on camera.

She'd been framed. And Kat didn't dare say what she was thinking: that whoever had done it, they were very, very good.

Kat's bags were packed in twenty minutes. She might have lingered, saying her good-byes, but there were no good-byes to say. And so, after three months at Colgan, Kat couldn't help but wonder if the day she got expelled from boarding school might become the proudest moment of her family's long and colorful past. She imagined everyone sitting around Uncle Eddie's kitchen table years from now, telling about the time little Katarina stole a whole other life and then walked away without a trace.

Well, almost, Kat thought as she carried her bags past the once-perfect lawn. Ruts still tracked to and from the mangled fountain in the center of the quad: a muddy reminder that would no doubt last until spring.

She heard laughter coming from behind her, and turned. A group of eighth grade boys was standing together, whispering, until one bravely broke away from the pack.

"Uh..." he started, then glanced back at his friends, summoning courage. "We were wondering...um. How'd you do it?"

A stretch limo pulled through the ornate gates and up to the curb. The trunk popped open. As the driver started for her bags, Kat looked at the boys and then back at Colgan one final time. "*That* is an excellent question."

The bells chimed. Students hurried between classes, across the quad. And as Kat crawled into the backseat of the limo, she couldn't help feeling slightly sad, or as sad as anyone could feel about losing something that

wasn't rightfully theirs to begin with. She leaned back and sighed, "Well, I guess that's over."

And it would have been...if another voice hadn't said, "Actually, it's just beginning."

CHAPTER 2

Kat jumped. In the dim light, she hadn't noticed the figure sitting at the other end of the limo's bench, smiling back at her.

"Hale?" she asked as if the boy might be an imposter. But then a very different question crossed her mind. "Hale, what are you doing here?"

"I thought you might need a ride."

"The headmaster's office called me a car."

He shrugged, indifferent but amused. "And here I am in a submarine."

As the limo pulled out of the school's circular driveway, Hale turned and looked out the window. Kat watched him take in the grounds, a faint smile on his lips as if there were no place on earth he really had to be. Kat sometimes wondered if that kind of self-assurance was something only very old money could buy. Then she wondered if it was something you could steal.

Hale waved as the gates of the Colgan School faded into the distance. "Good-bye, Colgan!" He turned to her. "Hello, Kitty Kat."

"Hale, how did you know I was..."

But Kat didn't finish. Suddenly, she wasn't in the back of a limo—she was sitting on a hard chair, staring at the black-and-white surveillance footage of someone in a hooded sweatshirt running across the quad. She

was looking at the image of her own student I.D. magnified on a TV screen. She was watching Headmaster Franklin hold a crumpled vanity plate above his head for all to see.

“Hale,” Kat sighed. “The headmaster’s car? Really? That’s not too clichéd for you?”

“What can I say?” He shrugged. “I’m an old-fashioned guy. Besides, it’s a classic for a reason.” He leaned against the window. “It’s good to see you, Kat.”

Kat didn’t know what to say. It’s good to see you too? Thanks for getting me kicked out? Is it possible you’ve gotten even hotter? I think I might have missed you?

So instead she settled on, “Did my father put you up to this?”

Hale exhaled a quick laugh and shook his head. “He hasn’t returned my calls since Barcelona.” He leaned closer and whispered, “I think he might still be mad at me.”

“Yeah, well, that makes two of us.”

“Hey,” Hale snapped. “We all agreed that that monkey seemed perfectly well trained at the time.”

Kat simply shook her head. “You got me kicked out, Hale.”

He grinned and gave a slow bow. “You’re welcome.”

“You trashed the headmaster’s car.”

“W. W. Hale the Fourth bought that car *for* Headmaster Franklin, or didn’t they mention that? Granted, it was to make up for a fire that W. W. Hale the Fifth *allegedly* started in the eighth grade—before they suggested that all current and future W. W. Hales continue their educations elsewhere—which worked out just as well since I’m at the Knightsbury Institute now.”

“I’ve never heard of it.”

“My father got a letter just last week telling him that I have become a model student.”

“Congratulations,” Kat said, doubting it.

“Yeah, well, I’m the only student.” He grinned a very Hale-like grin. “Of course, the downside of attending a fictional school is that our lacrosse team sucks. Anyway, if the Colgan School wanted to be technical about it, I trashed *my* car.”

She studied W. W. Hale the Fifth. He looked older than sixteen, with messy light brown hair and golden skin, and a first name that, despite two years of effort, Kat had never learned.

“I doubt they’d see it that way, *Wesley*?” she guessed.

Hale smiled. “Not. Even. Close.”

So far Kat had been through all the Wa’s she could think of, but Hale hadn’t admitted to being Walter or Ward or Washington. He’d firmly denied both Warren and Waverly. Watson had prompted him to do a very bad Sherlock Holmes impersonation throughout a good portion of a train ride to Edinburgh, Scotland. And Wayne seemed so wrong that she hadn’t even tried.

Hale was Hale. And not knowing what the W’s stood for had become a constant reminder to Kat that, in life, there are some things that can be given but never stolen.

Of course, that didn’t stop her from trying.

“So, how long before you broke into the student records office?” Hale asked. “A week?” Kat felt her cheeks go red. “But you didn’t find anything on me, did you?” He raised an eyebrow. “Kat,” he sighed her name. “That is so sweet. And innocent. Naive looks good on you.”

“Don’t get used to it.”

He shook his head. “Oh, I won’t.”

The whisperlike purr of the engine filled the car as it snaked through the countryside.

“Why’d you do it, Hale?”

“You don’t belong in that place.”

“Why’d you do it?” she asked again, her patience wearing thin. “I’m not joking, Hale.”

“Neither am I, Kat.”

“You’ve got—”

“A job for you,” Hale said. “And *only* you,” he added before she could protest.

The hills were growing steeper. Leaves scattered in the wind, and in the distance, the sun glistened off a lake. But Kat didn’t take her eyes off Hale as she said, “I don’t *want* a job.”

“You’ll want this one.”

“I’m out of the family business. Or haven’t you heard?”

“Fine.” Hale crossed his arms and sank deeper into the seat. He leaned his head back and closed his eyes. Kat could have sworn he was already half asleep when he asked, “But are you out of the family?”

CHAPTER 3

Of all the houses the Hale family owned, W. W. Hale the Fifth's favorite wasn't the penthouse on Park Avenue (too pretentious), or the flat in Hong Kong (too noisy), or even the mansion on Martha's Vineyard (entirely too much sand). No, the youngest Hale was only truly fond of the old, six-hundred-acre estate in rural New York. At least, that was the only place where Kat had ever heard him say...

"We're home."

The foyer was two stories tall and stretched in front of them for at least thirty feet. Hale walked ahead of her, hurrying past the Monet in the hall as if that would keep her from noticing it—or stealing it. He gestured toward the stairs. "Marcus put you in the blue room. You can go upstairs if you want. Or we can go out to the veranda and have Marcus bring you something to eat. Are you hungry? I didn't even ask. Do you want—"

"I want you to tell me what's going on."

After hours of watching the New England countryside roll by, and listening to Hale snore, Kat was finished with plotting and strategizing how to get her boarding school life back. She was out of options, so she called upon every thief's oldest and most trusted method for getting what she wants: Ask nicely.

"Please, Hale."

But he didn't answer. He was too busy walking down the main hall, guiding Kat into a dim room that she had never seen before. Moonlight cascaded through the windows that lined one wall. There were bookshelves and leather sofas, brandy decanters and the stale smell of old cigars and even older money. There was no doubt in Kat's mind that it was an important room. For important men. And yet Kat brushed past Hale without a second thought...until she saw the painting.

Stepping toward it was like approaching a window into another country, another century. She studied the rich colors and strong brushstrokes. "It's beautiful," she whispered, staring at the work of an Old Master in the moonlight.

"It's Vermeer."

Kat turned to the boy who lingered in the doorway. "It's stolen."

"What can I say?" Hale eased behind her and studied the painting over her shoulder. "I met a very nice man who bet me that he had the best security system in Istanbul." His breath was warm on the back of her neck. "He was mistaken."

Kat stayed perfectly still as Hale walked to the desk in the far corner of the massive room, picked up a telephone and said, "Marcus, we're home. Could you get some—Yeah. The library." He held his hand over the receiver. "Do you like corned beef?" Kat glared at him, but he only smiled. "She loves it!" he exclaimed. He hung up and collapsed onto one of the leather sofas as if he owned the place, which, Kat had to remind herself, he did.

"So," Hale said with a slow, easy grin, "did you miss me?"

A good thief is always a great liar. It's part of the skill set, the tools, the craft. And at that moment, Kat thought it was probably a very good thing she'd walked away from the life, because when she said, "No," Hale just smiled wider.

"It really is good to see you, Kat."

“You might want to remember who I am before you try to con me.”

“No.” Hale shook his head. “*You* might want to remember who you are. You want to go back to Colgan, is that it? After I saved you from that place?”

“Colgan wasn’t so bad. I could have been normal at Colgan.”

Hale laughed. “Trust me: *you* would never have been normal at Colgan.”

“I could have been *happy* at Colgan.”

“They kicked you out, Kat.”

“Because *you* framed me!”

Hale shrugged. “Fair enough.” He stretched his arms over the back of the couch. “I sprung you because I’ve got a message for you.”

“Doesn’t your family own a cell phone company?”

“Only a little one.” He held his fingers an inch apart to illustrate his point. “Besides, it’s more of a face-to-face kind of message.”

“I thought my dad wasn’t speaking to...” She trailed off. Hale shook his head. And suddenly Kat understood everything a little better. She dropped onto the couch opposite him and asked, “So how is Uncle Eddie?”

“He’s good.” Hale nodded. “He sends his love. He says the Colgan School will rob you of your soul.” She started to protest, but Hale stopped her. “But that’s not the message.”

“Hale,” Kat exhaled, growing weary.

“Kat,” Hale mimicked. “Do you want to hear Uncle Eddie’s message or not?”

“Yes.”

“He says he’s got to give them back.”

“What?” Kat was sure she hadn’t heard correctly. “Uncle Eddie’s got to give what—”

“No. That *is* the message. And I quote. ‘He’s got to give them back.’”

Kat shook her head. “I don’t understand.”

“There was a job, Kat. A week ago. In Italy.”

“I haven’t heard about any jobs,” Kat insisted before remembering that she’d been out of the world. The loop. The life. She knew what the Colgan cafeteria was serving every day this month, but this...

“Private collection,” Hale continued. “Very high-end paintings. Very high security. *Very high risk*. Two—maybe three—crews in the world could have done it, and—”

“My dad’s at the top of the list?”

Hale shook his head. “There *is* no list. There’s just—”

“Dad.” Kat sat for a moment, thinking, then sighed. “So?” she asked. Suddenly it all seemed preposterous. “So what? This is what he does, Hale. This is what we all do. What makes this time any different?”

She stood and started for the door, but in a flash, Hale was standing; his hand was around her wrist.

“It’s different because it’s different, Kat. This guy—this guy with the paintings—he’s a *bad* guy.”

“I’m Bobby Bishop’s daughter, Hale. I know a lot of bad guys.”

She tried to pull away, but Hale’s chest was pressed against hers. His hands were warm against her skin. There was a new urgency in his voice as he whispered, “Listen to me, Kat. He’s not a bad guy like your dad and Uncle Eddie are bad guys.” He took a deep breath. “Like *I’m* a bad guy. This guy? His name’s Arturo Taccone, and he’s a whole different kind of bad.”

In the two years since she’d met him, Kat had seen Hale wear a lot of expressions: playful, intrigued, bored. But she had never seen him scared before, and that, more than anything, made her shiver.

“He wants his paintings back.” Hale’s voice was softer now. The hard edge had left him, and something else had settled in its place. “If he doesn’t have them in two weeks, then...” Hale obviously didn’t want to say what came next, which was just as well. Kat didn’t want to hear it.

As she dropped back onto the sofa, Kat couldn’t remember the last time she’d been speechless. Then again, she also couldn’t remember the last time she’d been framed for a crime she didn’t commit, kicked out of a boarding school that it had taken her three whole months to con her way into, and then, technically, kidnapped by a guy who could buy a Monet and yet couldn’t resist stealing a Vermeer. Speechless seemed okay under the circumstances.

“My dad used to be more careful than this,” she said softly.

“Your dad used to have you.”

Kat ate her corned beef sandwich. She drank some lemonade. She was aware, faintly, of Hale watching her, but that was only because he was Hale, and the part of Kat that made her a girl wouldn’t let her forget that he was in the room. Otherwise, she was as quiet as a church mouse. She would have made her family proud.

An hour later Marcus was leading Kat up the sweeping staircase, and Kat was staring, trying to guess whether the silver-haired man was closer in age to fifty or eighty. She was listening, trying to determine whether his accent was more Scottish than Welsh. But most of all, Kat was wondering why Marcus was the only servant she had ever seen orbiting around Planet Hale.

“I’ve taken the liberty of putting you in Mrs. Hale’s room, miss.”

Marcus opened a wide set of double doors, and Kat started to protest—the mansion had fourteen bedrooms, after all. But then Marcus switched on the lights, and Kat breathed in the stale air of a room that was clean but neglected. It had a king-size bed, a chaise lounge, and at least twenty silk-

covered pillows, all in varying shades of blue. It was beautiful but sad, Kat thought. It needed to feel a beating heart.

“If there is anything you need, miss,” Marcus told her from the door, “I’m number seven on the house phone.”

“No,” Kat mumbled. “I mean, yes. I mean...I don’t need anything. Thank you.”

“Very well, miss,” he said, reaching for the doors.

“Marcus?” She stopped him. “Have Hale’s parents...I mean Mr. and Mrs. Hale...How long will they be away?” Kat asked, wondering which was sadder: having parents who’ve died or ones who’ve simply floated away.

“The lady of the house will not be needing the room, miss.”

“Are you ever going to call me Kat, Marcus?”

“Not today, miss.” He repeated softly, “Not today.”

He closed the door, and Kat listened to his footsteps receding down the long hallway. She lay down on Hale’s mother’s empty bed, the duvet cover cold against her skin. She felt very much alone in that big room, thinking about her dad and Uncle Eddie, about Porsche Speedsters and Monet.

Hours passed. Her thoughts blended together until they were like an Impressionist painting, and Kat knew she was too close to see anything plainly. She thought about crime, as she so often had in her fifteen years—ever since the day her father had told her he’d buy her ice cream if she would scream, and keep screaming until one of the guards outside the Tower of London left his post to see what was wrong.

She heard Hale’s words: *He used to have you.*

Kat jumped from the bed and rifled through her bags until she found her passport. She flipped it open and saw the name Melanie O’Hara beside a picture of herself in a red wig. She dug again, flipped open another cover: Erica Sampson, a slender blonde. Three more tries yielded three more memories, until Kat found...herself.

She tucked those other girls away. For now. Then she picked up the phone and dialed. “Marcus?”

“Yes, miss,” he replied, seeming too alert for four a.m.

“I think I may need to leave.”

“Of course, miss. If you’ll look by the phone, you’ll see I’ve already taken the liberty....”

Then Kat saw it—an envelope. A plane ticket. Eight a.m. first class to Paris.

Read on

for a peek at the book that started
it all for the Gallagher Girls.



Chapter One

I suppose a lot of teenage girls feel invisible sometimes, like they just disappear. Well, that's me—Cammie the Chameleon. But I'm luckier than most because, at my school, that's considered cool.

I go to a school for spies.

Of course, technically, the Gallagher Academy for Exceptional Young Women is a school for *geniuses*—not *spies*—and we're free to pursue any career that befits our exceptional educations. But when a school tells you that, and then teaches you things like advanced encryption and fourteen different languages, it's kind of like big tobacco telling kids not to smoke; so all of us Gallagher Girls know lip service when we hear it. Even my mom rolls her eyes but doesn't correct me when I call it spy school, and *she's* the headmistress. Of course, she's also a retired CIA operative, and it was her idea for me to write this, my first Covert Operations Report, to summarize what happened last semester. She's always telling us that the worst part of the spy life isn't the danger—it's the paperwork. After all, when you're on a plane home from Istanbul with a nuclear warhead in a hatbox, the last thing you want to do is write a report about it. So that's why I'm writing this—for the practice.

If you've got a Level Four clearance or higher, you probably know all about us Gallagher Girls, since we've been around for more than a hundred

years (the school, not me—I'll turn sixteen next month!). But if you don't have that kind of clearance, then you probably think we're just an urban spy myth—like jet packs and invisibility suits—and you drive by our ivy-covered walls, look at our gorgeous mansion and manicured grounds, and assume, like everyone else, that the Gallagher Academy for Exceptional Young Women is just a snooty boarding school for bored heiresses with no place else to go.

Well, to tell you the truth, we're totally fine with that—it's one of the reasons no one in the town of Roseville, Virginia, thought twice about the long line of limousines that brought my classmates back to campus last September. I watched from a window seat on the third floor of the mansion as the cars materialized out of the blankets of green foliage and turned through the towering wrought-iron gates. The half-mile-long driveway curved through the hills, looking as harmless as Dorothy's yellow brick road, not giving a clue that it's equipped with laser beams that read tire treads and sensors that check for explosives, and one entire section that can open up and swallow a truck whole. (If you think that's dangerous, don't even get me started about the pond!)

I wrapped my arms around my knees and stared through the window's wavy glass. The red velvet curtains were drawn around the tiny alcove, and I was enveloped by an odd sense of peace, knowing that in twenty minutes, the halls were going to be crowded; music was going to be blaring; and I was going to go from being an only child to one of a hundred sisters, so I knew to savor the silence while it lasted. Then, as if to prove my point, a loud blast and the smell of burning hair came floating up the main stairs from the second-floor Hall of History, followed by Professor Buckingham's distinguished voice crying, "Girls! I told you not to touch that!" The smell got worse, and one of the seventh graders was probably still on fire, because Professor Buckingham yelled, "Stand still. Stand still, I say!"

Then Professor Buckingham said some French swear words that the seventh graders probably wouldn't understand for three semesters, and I

remembered how every year during new student orientation one of the newbies will get cocky and try to show off by grabbing the sword Gillian Gallagher used to slay the guy who was going to kill Abraham Lincoln—the first guy, that is. The one you never hear about.

But what the newbies aren't told on their campus tour is that Gilly's sword is charged with enough electricity to...well...light your hair on fire.

I just love the start of school.

I think our room used to be an attic, once upon a time. It has these cool dormers and oddly shaped windows and lots of little nooks and crannies, where a girl can sit with her back against the wall and listen to the thundering feet and squeals of hello that are probably pretty standard at boarding schools everywhere on the first day after summer break (but they probably stop being standard when they take place in Portuguese and Farsi). Out in the hall, Kim Lee was talking about her summer in Singapore; and Tina Walters was declaring that “Cairo was super cool. Johannesburg—not so much,” which is exactly what my mom had said when I'd complained about how Tina's parents were taking her to Africa over the summer whereas *I* was going to have to visit my dad's parents on their ranch in Nebraska—an experience I'm fairly sure will never help me break out of an enemy interrogation facility or disarm a dirty bomb.

“Hey, where's Cammie?” Tina asked, but I wasn't about to leave my room until I could come up with a fish story to match the international exploits of my classmates, seventy percent of whom are the daughters of current or former government operatives—aka spies. Even Courtney Bauer had spent a week in Paris, and *her* parents are both optometrists, so you can see why I wasn't especially eager to admit that I'd spent three months plopped down right in the middle of North America, cleaning fish.

I'd finally decided to tell them about the time I was experimenting with average household items that can be used as weapons and accidentally decapitated a scarecrow (who knew knitting needles could do that kind of

damage?), when I heard the distinctive thud of luggage crashing into a wall and a soft, Southern, “Oh, Cammie...come out, come out, wherever you are.”

I peered around the corner and saw Liz posing in the doorway, trying to look like Miss Alabama, but bearing a greater resemblance to a toothpick in capri pants and flip-flops. A very *red* toothpick.

She smiled and said, “Did you miss me?”

Well, I *did* miss her, but I was totally afraid to hug her.

“What happened to you?”

Liz rolled her eyes and just said, “Don’t fall asleep by a pool in Alabama,” as if she should have known better—which she totally should have. I mean, we’re all technically geniuses and everything, but at age nine, Liz had the highest score on the third-grade achievement tests *ever*. The government keeps track of that kind of thing, so the summer before seventh grade, her parents got a visit from some big guys in dark suits and three months later, Liz was a Gallagher Girl—just not the kill-a-man-with-her-bare-hands variety. If I’m ever on a mission, I want Bex beside me and Liz far, far away, with about a dozen computers and a chessboard—a fact I couldn’t help but remember when Liz tried to fling her suitcase onto the bed, but missed and ended up knocking over a bookcase, demolishing my stereo and flattening a perfectly-scaled replica of DNA that I’d made out of papier-mâché in eighth grade.

“Oopsy daisy,” Liz said, throwing her hand to her mouth.

Sure, she knows cuss words in fourteen different languages, but when faced with a minor catastrophe, Liz says *oopsy daisy*. At that point I didn’t care how sunburned she was—I had to hug my friend.

At six thirty exactly, we were in our uniforms, sliding our hands over the smooth mahogany banisters, and descending down the staircases that spiral gracefully to the foyer floor. Everyone was laughing (turns out my knitting

needle story was a big hit), but Liz and I kept looking toward the door in the center of the atrium below.

“Maybe there was trouble with the plane?” Liz whispered. “Or customs? Or...I’m sure she’s just late.”

I nodded and continued glancing down at the foyer as if, on cue, Bex was going to burst through the doors. But they stayed closed, and Liz’s voice got squeakier as she asked, “Did you hear from her? I didn’t hear from her. Why didn’t we hear from her?”

Well, I would have been surprised if we *had* heard from her, to tell you the truth. As soon as Bex had told us that both her mom and her dad were taking a leave of absence to spend the summer with her, I knew she wasn’t going to be much of a pen pal. Leave it to Liz to come to a completely different conclusion.

“Oh my gosh, what if she dropped out?” Liz cranked up the worry in her voice. “Did she get *kicked* out?”

“Why would you think that?”

“Well...” she said, stumbling over the obvious, “Bex always has been kind of *rules-optional*.” Liz shrugged, and, sadly, I couldn’t disagree. “And why else would she be late? Gallagher Girls are never late! Cammie, you know something, don’t you? You’ve got to know *something*!”

Times like this are when it’s no fun being the headmistress’s daughter, because A) it’s totally annoying when people think I’m in a loop I’m not in, and B) people always assume I’m in partnership with the staff, which really I’m not. Sure, I have private dinners with my mom on Sunday nights, and *sometimes* she leaves me alone in her office for five seconds, but that’s it. Whenever school is in session, I’m just another Gallagher Girl (except for being the girl to whom the aforementioned A and B apply).

I looked back down at the front doors, then turned to Liz. “I bet she’s just late,” I said, praying that there would be a pop quiz over supper (nothing distracts Liz faster than a pop quiz).

As we approached the massive, open doors of the Grand Hall, where Gilly Gallagher supposedly poisoned a man at her own cotillion, I involuntarily glanced up at the electronic screen that read “English—American” even though I knew we always talk in our own language and accents for the welcome-back dinner. Our mealtime conversations wouldn’t be taking place in “Chinese—Mandarin” for at least a week, I hoped.

We settled at our usual table in the Grand Hall, and I finally felt at home. Of course, I’d actually been back for three weeks, but my only company had been the newbies and the staff. The only thing worse than being the only upperclassman in a mansion full of seventh graders is hanging out in the teachers’ lounge watching your Ancient Languages professor put drops in the ears of the world’s foremost authority on data encryption while he swears he’ll never go scuba diving again. (Ew, mental picture of Mr. Mosckowitz in a wet suit! Gross!)

Since a girl can only read so many back issues of *Espionage Today*, I usually spent those pre-semester days wandering around the mansion, discovering hidden compartments and secret passageways that are at least a hundred years old and haven’t seen a good dusting in about that long. Mostly, I tried to spend time with my mom, but she’d been super busy and totally distracted. Remembering this now, I thought about Bex’s mysterious absence and suddenly began to worry that maybe Liz had been on to something. Then Anna Fetterman squeezed onto the bench next to Liz and asked, “Have you seen it? Did you look?”

Anna was holding a blue slip of paper that instantly dissolves when you put it in your mouth. (Even though it *looks* like it will taste like cotton candy, it doesn’t—trust me!) I don’t know why they always put our class schedules on Evapopaper—probably so we can use up our stash of the bad-tasting kind and move on to the good stuff, like mint chocolate chip.

But Anna wasn’t thinking about the Evapopaper flavor when she yelled, “We have Covert Operations!” She sounded absolutely terrified, and I remembered that she was probably the only Gallagher Girl that Liz could

take in a fistfight. I looked at Liz, and even *she* rolled her eyes at Anna's hysterics. After all, everyone knows sophomore year is the first time we get to do anything that even approaches actual fieldwork. It's our first exposure to *real* spy stuff, but Anna seemed to be forgetting that the class itself was, sadly, kind of a cakewalk.

"I'm pretty sure we can handle it," Liz soothed, prying the paper from Anna's frail hands. "All Buckingham does is tell horror stories about all the stuff she saw in World War Two and show slides, remember? Ever since she broke her hip she's—"

"But Buckingham is out!" Anna exclaimed, and *this* got my attention.

I'm sure I stared at her for a second or two before saying, "Professor Buckingham is still here, Anna," not adding that I'd spent half the morning coaxing Onyx, her cat, down from the top shelf of the staff library. "That's got to be just a start-of-school rumor." There were always plenty of those—like how some girl got kidnapped by terrorists, or one of the staff members won a hundred grand on *Wheel of Fortune*. (Though, now that I think of it, that one was actually true.)

"No," Anna said. "You don't understand. Buckingham's doing some kind of semiretirement thing. She's gonna do orientation and acclimation for the newbies—but that's it. She's not teaching anymore."

Wordlessly, our heads turned, and we counted seats at the staff table. Sure enough, there was an extra chair.

"Then who's teaching CoveOps?" I asked.

Just then a loud murmur rippled through the enormous room as my mom strolled through the doors at the back of the hall, followed by all the usual suspects—the twenty teachers I'd been looking at and learning from for the past three years. Twenty teachers. Twenty-one chairs. I know I'm the genius, but you do the math.

Liz, Anna, and I all looked at each other, then back at the staff table as we ran through the faces, trying to comprehend that extra chair.

One face *was* new, but we were expecting that, because Professor Smith always returns from summer vacation with a whole new look—literally. His nose was larger, his ears more prominent, and a small mole had been added to his left temple, disguising what he claimed was the most wanted face on three continents. Rumor has it he’s wanted by gun smugglers in the Middle East, ex-KGB hit men in Eastern Europe, and a very upset ex-wife somewhere in Brazil. Sure, all this experience makes him a great Countries of the World (COW) professor, but the best thing Professor Smith brings to the Gallagher Academy is the annual anticipation of guessing what face he will assume in order to enjoy his summer break. He hasn’t come back as a woman yet, but it’s probably just a matter of time.

The teachers took their seats, but *the chair* stayed empty as my mother took her place at the podium in the center of the long head table.

“Women of the Gallagher Academy, who comes here?” she asked.

Just then, every girl at every table (even the newbies) stood and said in unison, “We are the sisters of Gillian.”

“Why do you come?” my mother asked.

“To learn her skills. Honor her sword. And keep her secrets.”

“To what end do you work?”

“To the cause of justice and light.”

“How long will you strive?”

“For all the days of our lives.” We finished, and I felt a little like a character on one of my grandma’s soap operas.

We sat down, but Mom remained standing. “Welcome back, students,” she said, beaming. “This is going to be a wonderful year here at the Gallagher Academy. For our newest members”—she turned to the table of seventh graders, who seemed to shiver under her intense gaze— “welcome. You are about to begin the most challenging year of your young lives. Rest assured that you would not have been given this challenge were you not up to it. To our returning students, this year *will* mark many changes.” She

glanced at her colleagues and seemed to ponder something before turning back to face us. “We have come to a time when—” But before she could finish, the doors flew open, and not even three years of training at spy school prepared me for what I saw.

Before I say any more, I should probably remind you that I GO TO A GIRLS’ SCHOOL—that’s *all* girls, *all* the time, with a few ear-drop-needing, plastic-surgery-getting male faculty members thrown in for good measure. But when we turned around, we saw a man walking in our midst who would have made James Bond feel insecure. Indiana Jones would have looked like a momma’s boy compared to the man in the leather jacket with two days’ growth of beard who walked to where my mother stood and then—horror of horrors—winked at her.

“Sorry I’m late,” he said as he slid into the empty chair.

His presence was so unprecedented, so surreal, that I didn’t even realize Bex had squeezed onto the bench between Liz and Anna, and I had to do a double take when I saw her, and remembered that five seconds before she’d been MIA.

“Trouble, ladies?” she asked.

“Where have you been?” Liz demanded.

“Forget that,” Anna cut in. “Who is *he*?”

But Bex was a natural-born spy. She just raised her eyebrows and said, “You’ll see.”

Chapter

Bex had spent six hours on a private jet, but her cappuccino-colored skin was glowing, and she looked as if she'd just walked out of a Noxzema commercial, so I really wanted to be petty and point out that the sign in the foyer said we were supposed to be speaking English with *American* accents during the Welcome Back Dinner. But as the only non-U.S. citizen Gallagher Girl in history, Bex was used to being an exception. My mom had bent some serious rules when her old friends from England's MI6 called and asked if their daughter could be a Gallagher Girl. Admitting Bex had been Mom's first controversial act as headmistress (but *not* her last).

"You have a good holiday, then?" Throughout the hall, girls were beginning to eat, but Bex just blew a bubble with her gum and grinned, daring us to ask her for the story.

"Bex, if you know something, you've got to tell us," Liz demanded, even though it was totally pointless. *No one* can make Bex do *anything* she doesn't want to do. I may be a chameleon, and Liz may be the next Einstein, but when it comes to general stubbornness, Bex is the best spy ever!

She smirked, and I knew she'd probably been planning this scene since she was halfway over the Atlantic Ocean (in addition to being stubborn, Bex is also quite theatrical). She waited until all eyes were on her—holding the silence until Liz was about to explode, then she took a warm roll from the

basket on the table and nonchalantly said, “New teacher.” She tore the bread in half and slowly buttered it. “We gave him a ride from London this morning. He’s an old pal of my father’s.”

“Name?” Liz asked, probably already planning how she was going to hack into the CIA headquarters at Langley for details as soon as we were free to go back to our rooms.

“Solomon,” Bex said, eyeing us. “Joe Solomon.” She sounded eerily like the black, teenage, female James Bond.

We all turned to look at Joe Solomon. He had the scruffy beard and restless hands of an agent fresh off a mission. Around me, the hall filled with whispers and giggles—fuel that would have the rumor mill running on high by midnight—and I remembered that, even though the Gallagher Academy is a school for girl geniuses, sometimes the emphasis should be kept on the *girl*.

The next morning was torture. Absolute torture! And that’s *not* a word I use lightly, considering the family business. So maybe I should rephrase: the first day of classes was *challenging*.

We didn’t exactly go to bed early...or even a little late...or even at all, unless you count lying on the faux-fur rug in the common room with the entire sophomore class sprawled around me as the basis for a good night’s sleep. When Liz woke us up at seven, we decided we could either primp for an hour and skip breakfast, or throw on our uniforms and eat like queens, before Professor Smith’s 8:05 COW lecture.

B.S. (Before Solomon), waffles and bagels would have won out for sure. But today, Professor Smith had a lot of eye-lined and lip-glossed girls with growling stomachs listening to him talk about civil unrest in the Baltic States when 8:30 rolled around. I looked at my watch, the ultimate pointless gesture at the Gallagher Academy, because classes run precisely on time, but I had to see how many seconds were standing between me and lunch. (11,705, just in case you’re curious.)

When COW was over, we ran up two flights of stairs to the fourth floor for Madame Dabney's Culture and Assimilation lessons which, sadly, that day did not include tea. Then it was time for third period.

I had a pain in my neck from sleeping funny, at least five hours' worth of homework, and a newfound realization that woman cannot live on cherry-flavored lip gloss alone. I dug in the bottom of my bag and found a very questionable breath mint, and figured that if I was going to die of starvation, I should at least have minty-fresh breath for the benefit of whatever classmate or faculty member would be forced to give me CPR.

Liz had to go by Mr. Mosckowitz's office to drop off an extra-credit essay she'd written over the summer (yeah, she's *that* girl), so I was alone with Bex when we reached the base of the grand staircase and turned into the small corridor that was one of three ways to the Subs, or subfloors, where we'd never been allowed before.

Standing in front of the full-length mirror, we tried hard not to blink or do anything that might confuse the optical scanner that was going to verify that we were, in fact, sophomores and not freshmen trying to sneak down to the Subs on a dare. I studied our reflections and realized that I, Cameron Morgan, the headmistress's daughter, who knew more about the school than any Gallagher Girl since Gilly herself, was getting ready to go deeper into the vault of Gallagher secrets. Judging from the goose bumps on Bex's arm, I wasn't the only one who got chills at the thought of it.

A green light flashed in the eyes of a painting behind us. The mirror slid aside, revealing a small elevator that would take us one floor beneath the basement to the Covert Operations classroom and—if you want to be dramatic about it—our destinies.

"Cammie," Bex said slowly, "we're in."

We were sitting calmly, checking our (synchronized) watches, and all thinking the exact same thing: something is definitely different.

The Gallagher mansion is made of stone and wood. It has carved banisters and towering fireplaces a girl can curl up in front of on snowy days and read all about who killed JFK (the *real* story), but somehow that elevator had brought us into a space that didn't belong in the same century, much less the same building, as the rest of the mansion. The walls were frosted glass. The tables were stainless steel. But the absolute weirdest thing about the Covert Operations classroom was that our teacher wasn't in it.

Joe Solomon was late—so late, I was beginning to get a little resentful that I hadn't taken the time to go steal some M&M's from my mom's desk, because, frankly, a two-year-old Tic Tac simply doesn't satisfy the hunger of a growing girl.

We sat quietly as the seconds ticked away, but I guess the silence became too much for Tina Walters, because she leaned across the aisle and said, "Cammie, what do you know about him?"

Well, *I* only knew what Bex had told me, but Tina's mom writes a gossip column in a major metropolitan newspaper that shall remain nameless (since that's her cover and all), so there was no way Tina wasn't going to try to get to the bottom of this story. Soon I was trapped under an avalanche of questions like, "Where's he from?" and "Does he have a girlfriend?" and "Is it true he killed a Turkish ambassador with a thong?" I wasn't sure if she was talking about the sandals or the panties, but in any case, I didn't have the answer.

"Come on," Tina said, "I heard Madame Dabney telling Chef Louis that your mom was working on him all summer to get him to take the job. You had to hear something!"

So Tina's interrogation did have one benefit: I finally understood the hushed phone calls and locked doors that had kept my mother distracted for weeks. I was just starting to process what it meant, when Joe Solomon strolled into class—five minutes late.

His hair was slightly damp, his white shirt neatly pressed—and it's either a tribute to his dreaminess or our education that it took me two full minutes to realize he was speaking in Japanese.

“What is the capital of Brunei?”

“Bandar Seri Begawan,” we replied.

“The square root of 97,969 is...” he asked in Swahili.

“Three hundred and thirteen,” Liz answered in math, because, as she likes to remind us, math *is* the universal language.

“A Dominican dictator was assassinated in 1961,” he said in Portuguese. “What was his name?”

In unison, we all said “Rafael Trujillo.”

(An act, I would like to point out, that was *not* committed by a Gallagher Girl, despite rumors to the contrary.)

I was just starting to get into the rhythm of our little game, when Mr. Solomon said, “Close your eyes,” in Arabic.

We did as we were told.

“What color are my shoes?” This time he spoke in English and, amazingly, thirteen Gallagher Girls sat there quietly without an answer.

“Am I right-handed or left-handed?” he asked, but didn't pause for a response. “Since I walked into this room I have left fingerprints in five different places. Name them!” he demanded, but was met with empty silence.

“Open your eyes,” he said, and when I did, I saw him sitting on the corner of his desk, one foot on the floor and the other hanging loosely off the side. “Yep,” he said. “You girls are pretty smart. But you're also kind of stupid.”

If we hadn't known for a scientific fact that the earth simply can't stop moving, we all would have sworn it had just happened.

“Welcome to Covert Operations. I’m Joe Solomon. I’ve never taught before, but I’ve been doing this stuff for eighteen years, and I’m still breathing, so that means I know what I’m talking about. This is *not* going to be like your other classes.”

My stomach growled, and Liz, who had opted for a full breakfast and a ponytail, said, “Shhh,” as if I could make it stop.

“Ladies, I’m going to get you ready for what goes on.” He paused and pointed upward. “Out there. It’s not for everyone, and that’s why I’m going to make this hard on you. Damn hard. Impress me, and next year those elevators might take you one floor lower. But if I have even the slightest suspicion that you are not supremely gifted in the area of fieldwork, then I’m going to save your life right now and put you on the Operations and Research track.”

He stood and placed his hands in his pockets. “Everyone starts in this business looking for adventure, but I don’t care what your fantasies look like, ladies. If you can’t get out from behind those desks and show me something other than book smarts, then none of you will ever see Sublevel Two.”

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Mick Morrison following his every word, almost salivating at the sound of it, because Mick had been wanting to hurt someone for years. Unsurprisingly, her beefy hand flew into the air. “Does that mean you’ll be teaching us firearms, sir?” she shouted as if a drill sergeant might make her drop and do push-ups.

But Mr. Solomon only walked around the desk and said, “In this business, if you need a gun, then it’s probably too late for one to do any good.” Some of the air seemed to go out of Mick’s well-toned body. “But on the bright side,” he told her, “maybe they’ll bury you with it—that’s assuming you get to be buried.”

My skin burned red. Tears filled my eyes. Before I even knew what was happening, my throat was so tight I could barely breathe as Joe Solomon

stared at me. Then, as soon as my eyes locked with his, he glanced away.

“The lucky ones come home, even if it *is* in a box.”

Although he hadn’t mentioned me by name, I felt my classmates watching me. They all know what happened to my dad—that he went on a mission, that he didn’t come home. I’ll probably never know any more than those two simple facts, but that those two facts were all that mattered. People call me The Chameleon here—if you go to spy school, I guess that’s a pretty good nickname. I wonder sometimes what made me that way, what keeps me still and quiet when Liz is jabbering and Bex is, well, *Bexing*. Am I good at going unnoticed because of my spy genetics or because I’ve always been shy? Or am I just the girl people would rather not see—lest they realize how easily it could happen to them.

Mr. Solomon took another step, and my classmates pulled their gazes away just that quickly—everyone but Bex, that is. She was inching toward the edge of her chair, ready to keep me from tearing out the gorgeous green eyes of our new hot teacher as he said, “Get good, ladies. Or get dead.”

A part of me wanted to run straight to my mother’s office and tell her what he’d said, that he was talking about Dad, implying that it had been his fault—that he wasn’t *good enough*. But I stayed seated, possibly out of paralyzing anger but more probably because I feared, somewhere inside me, that Mr. Solomon was right and I didn’t want my mother to say so.

Just then, Anna Fetterman pushed through the frosted-glass doors and stood panting in front of the class. “I’m sorry,” she said to Mr. Solomon, still gasping for breath. “The stupid scanners didn’t recognize me, so the elevator locked me in, and I had to listen to a five-minute prerecorded lecture about trying to sneak out of bounds, and...” Her voice trailed off as she studied the teacher and his very unimpressed expression, which I thought was a little hypocritical coming from a man who had been five minutes late himself.

“Don’t bother taking a seat,” Mr. Solomon said as Anna started toward a desk in the back of the room. “Your classmates were just leaving.”

We all looked at our recently synchronized watches, which showed the exact same thing—we had forty-five minutes of class time left. Forty-five valuable and never-wasted minutes. After what seemed like forever, Liz’s hand shot into the air.

“Yes?” Joe Solomon sounded like someone with far better things to do.

“Is there any homework?” she asked, and the class turned instantly from shocked to irritated. (Never ask *that* question in a room full of girls who are all black belts in karate.)

“Yes,” Solomon said, holding the door in the universal signal for *get out*. “Notice things.”

As I headed down the slick white hallway to the elevator that had brought me there, I heard my classmates walking in the opposite direction, toward the elevator closest to our rooms. After what had just happened, I was glad to hear their footsteps going the other way. I wasn’t surprised when Bex came to stand beside me.

“You okay?” she asked, because that’s a best friend’s job.

“Yes,” I lied, because that’s what spies do.

We rode the elevator to the narrow first-floor hallway, and as the doors slid open, I was seriously considering going to see my mother (and not just for the M&M’s), when I stepped into the dim corridor and heard a voice cry, “Cameron Morgan!”

Professor Buckingham was rushing down the hall, and I couldn’t imagine what would make the genteel British lady speak in such a way, when, above us, a red light began to whirl, and a screaming buzzer pierced our ears so that we could barely hear the cries of the electronic voice that pulsed with the light, “CODE RED. CODE RED. CODE RED.”

“Cameron Morgan!” Buckingham bellowed again, grabbing Bex and me by our arms. “Your mother needs you. NOW!”



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