
GIRLS
GALLAGHER

STARBOARD

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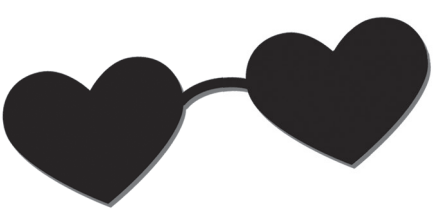
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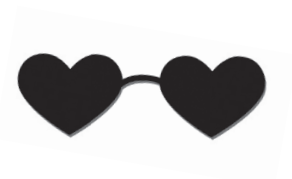
ALLY CARTER

GALLAGHER GIRLS

I'd Tell You I Love You, but then I'd Have to Kill You



STAR BOARD



Chapter 1

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 summarise 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 school last September. I watched from a window seat on the third floor of the mansion as the cars materialised 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 corridors 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 savour 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 tour of the school grounds 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 alcoves 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 story to match the international exploits of my classmates,

seventy per cent 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 trousers 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 swear 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 6.30 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 towards the door in the centre 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 ball, 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 onto 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 candyfloss, 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 flavour 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 the sopomore 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 easy-peasy.

"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 rumour." 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 semi-retirement 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 maths.

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. Rumour 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.

The teachers took their seats, but *the chair* stayed empty as my mom took her place at the podium in the centre 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. Honour 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, pupils," 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 pupils, 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.

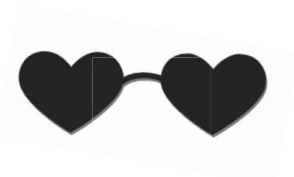
His presence was so unprecedented, so surreal, that I didn't even realise Bex had squeezed onto the bench between Liz and Anna, and I had to do a double take when I saw her, and remembered that five seconds before she'd been MIA.

"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 2

Bex had spent six hours on a private jet, but her dark brown skin was glowing, and she looked as if she'd just walked out of a skincare 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-US 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 bread 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 lift 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 rumour 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 7 am, 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.

BS (Before Solomon), a breakfast of waffles and bagels would have won out for sure. But today, Professor Smith had a lot of eyelined 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 realisation that woman cannot live on cherry-flavoured 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 mouth-to-mouth resuscitation.

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 bottom 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 realised 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 pimples 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 (synchronised) 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 John F Kennedy (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 someM&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

mother writes a gossip column in a major 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 knickers, 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 realise 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 maths, because, as she likes to remind us, maths *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 rumours 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 colour 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 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 realise 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 towards 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 mom'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 paralysing anger but more probably because I feared, somewhere inside me, that Mr Solomon was right and I didn't want my mom 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 recognise 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 towards a desk in the back of the room. "Your classmates were just leaving."

We all looked at our recently synchronised 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, towards 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 OK?" 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 mom (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!"