

Copyright © 2026 by Ariana Tosado

All rights reserved. This text or any portion thereof may not be reproduced or used in any manner whatsoever without the express written permission of the author.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, businesses, places, events, locales, and incidents are either the products of the author's imagination or used in a fictitious manner. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events is purely coincidental.

The “before” picture—
the original *My Heart and My School* (2013):

CHAPTER ONE

“Please, I’m begging you, DON’T wear that!” I screamed at my best friend.

“Carmie, come on. It’s my 34th date with him, he likes whatever I wear,” Stephanie protested, but seriously, wearing a pink spaghetti strap flouncy dress was not a good one to wear on a date. ESPECIALLY on your 34th.

“I know, but still. I just can’t see you in it. Why can’t you wear your white one instead? Yeah, it’s strapless, but it’s still beautiful, and fits you better.” I couldn’t believe she wasn’t listening to me.

“Whatever, I’m wearing this dress. Let’s shut up about my date, what are you doing tonight? We have free basic access to town, don’t tell me you’re spending it inside here.”

At the Aleger Academy, we always get one night off of school grounds. Otherwise, it’s just campus 24/7. You may ask what do we do on Saturdays and Sundays, and the answer that pairs with that is, hang out with each other. Simple, but when you go to a school for spies, “hanging out” means something completely different than what you think.

“I have plans. I’m going to just walk around town, and see what needs me to be there to kick it up a notch.” I was joking, but Stephanie gave me an okay-

maybe-you-shouldn't-go-after-all look. "Okay... I'll just hope you're safe."

"Please, if you're in Whiteville, North Carolina, you're always safe," I scoffed, rolling my eyes.

"Carmie, if you're a spy, no matter what city you're in something dangerous might always be lurking around."

"We haven't graduated yet, Stephanie," I reminded, my voice sounding impatient, "And since we've stayed in the manor for so long, nothing evil is after us, all of that happens when we're older."

"Whatever, I think I might be breaking up with Ethan tonight, anyway. There's some drama for you," Stephanie told me, and my eyes immediately widened.

"Why on earth would you do that?!" I cried, and Stephanie looked at me as if I was crazy.

"Because he doesn't go to a spy school, let alone knows that *I* do," she replied, making it sound like a question. "It's my choice, and I choose to do what I think is right."

"But, you never do what is right," I argued, and it was true. Stephanie White was kind of a rule-breaker.

"I said what I *think*, not what is... Though, I guess this *is* the right thing, considering that it might blow our cover if I'm not careful..."

“EXACTLY,” I settled for her, even though I didn’t agree that she should do a break-up with Ethan in the first place.

“Whatever, now shoo!” Stephanie motioned her hands as if she was shooing away a dog or cat sitting on the couch. I laughed and stood up from my bed and walked out of the room.

I *did* walk into town that night. The sun was just setting and all the street lights were on, which makes a gorgeous scenery for our small town. When you see the couples strolling under the street lights on the sidewalks, you can’t help but smile; you could say Whiteville is like the mini version of Paris, just without all the glamour. But I’m okay with that, because I’m not exactly the kind of girl who wants to be in a big city. I blend in, it’s what I’m good at. They call me, “Invisible”.

I walked into the mall to just browse, but someone must have thought I was “suspicious”.

“Hey,” a male voice behind me said. I turned around to find a tall, tan, dark brown haired boy, about my age.

“Uh, hi.” I stammered the words just a smidge. “Did you need something?”

“No. I saw your coat, though. My mom would want something just like it. Where did you get it?”

My coat? He wanted to know where I got my *coat*. He was just as suspicious as he must have thought I was.

“Uh, this... This was a gift. I got it last Christmas.”

“Oh.” The boy sounded disappointed, though I have no idea why.

“I’m sorry. I hope you enjoy the rest of your evening.” I turned around and started to walk away, but to only find the boy following me.

“Where are you going?” he asked. I turned around.

“Oh, uh just to the upper floor.”

“I’m coming with you.”

“No, you’re not.” My words weren’t hurtful, just inspecting who he was.

“I’m not a bad guy,” he protested. My stomach growled extremely loudly just then, and even though I didn’t know him, it still made me embarrassed in front of the boy.

“Are you hungry?” he asked me.

“Just-just a little bit.” I did NOT want him to take me out to dinner, I’ll clear up that much.

“Here.” He pulled out a Twix bar. “I was saving it for when I wanted a snack, but you need it more.” He handed it to me.

“No thank you. I don’t really need anything right now.”

The boy put the candy bar back into his pocket. “Okay, then.”

He followed me into the elevator, and let me just say, it was such an awkward moment. “Your shirt...” he stated. “The Alleterie Academy?” he asked.

“It’s Aleger,” I corrected, immediately regretting it, since we most definitely WERE NOT supposed to give out our school’s real name.

“Well then, Mysterious Jacket Girl, nice to meet you.”

“It’s Carm-“I began, but then the elevator door opened and he walked out. “Where are you going?” I asked, surprising myself because I didn’t know I really wanted to know that...

“Oh,” he said, “Just the upper floor.”

CHAPTER TWO

“Wow... so I had a date, which I broke up with Ethan by the way, and you had a last-minute one at the mall? That’s cool! Sort of.” Stephanie’s words made me feel completely irritated.

“Stephanie! It was NOT a date! He followed me around the mall and... I don’t know, *stalked* me,” I argued, sitting next to my other two best friends.

“If I were you, Carm, I would go back in town to see if he goes there every Wednesday,” Courtney recommended.

“Guys, he *stalked* me, he didn’t *date* me. Let’s forget about it, and be excited for our next free night in two weeks at the end of the month. We’ll spend it together.” And that ended the conversation.

The next morning was a donut breakfast. Chocolate chip pancakes, donuts, muffins, decaf French vanilla coffee, ham and cheese with onions and olives omelets, and bacon. Since sweet, delicious, amazing foods were on the table, we call it a donut breakfast, and that’s why my plate was stuffed with everything on the buffet.

“Guys, did you study for the test today?” Blaire asked us as we stuffed our faces.

“We all have photographic memories, why

wouldn't you study?" Stephanie wondered.

"I don't know! It was just I was so busy with last night, having fun! I didn't have time to study!"

See, this is one of the tests at the Aleger Academy. You get one night off, but you also have work to do. With studying for these tests in classes, it takes you more than it should to read the book for it. The school tests us on how we can work around our free night.

"If you look at the first paragraph on page 218, you can see that 1912 to the 1930's was a very tough time for people. First the *Titanic*, *Britannic*, World Wars I and II, and the *Olympic*. Many sad times happened in those years," my history teacher, Mrs. Trover, explained, just as I heard a voice saying my name next to me. Very quietly.

"CARMIE!" the voice whispered. I turned my head to see Blaire trying to pass me a note.

Carmie, I hope you know how to deal with a stranger...

"What?" I whispered back. She pointed to the window to our left, and out there was a person, but not a "stranger".

My mother.

"Blair, that's not a stranger," I whispered.

"I know," Blaire stated, "I needed to get your attention. Look." I looked towards my mother. She was

motioning for me to come outside in the halls with her.

“Uh, excuse me, Mrs. Trover, my mother needs me,” I called from my seat as Mrs. Trover looked toward my direction and saw my mother. “Okay, Carmela. You can go.”

I walked out the door and mother pushed me into her office.

“Mom, what’s wrong?” I wondered.

“Who said something was wrong?” she asked.

“Never mind,” I ended. “Why did you call me in here?” I questioned.

“Carmie, your... well...”

“What?” I asked.

“Your ex-boyfriend is coming back to Whiteville.”

Seriously? Gabe was coming back to Whiteville? But... he couldn’t! My cover could be discovered by my ex-boyfriend! Sure, he was the sweetest boy on Earth, but I didn’t know if he would expose me or not. The biggest thing I had to look out for was the Aleger Academy. He couldn’t know about me or the school.

I told all this to my mom, and of course she knew.

“Exactly, how long did you say he was coming over for?” I had to know this, it couldn’t be too long. Two days would have to be the most.

“I’m afraid for three months until his vacation is over.”

I almost passed out as I realized I was breathing extremely hard. I had to rest on my mother's shoulder, and my mother got me some cocoa. I sipped it slowly and kept thinking about her words, *Three months...*

"Sweetie, you can go back to class when you feel better."

"Mom, its lunch. Can I go to the Dining Hall, now, instead?"

The Aleger Academy is a grand manor over 150-years old. We have the Main Staircase leading to most of the rooms and classes here. The Dining Hall is where we breakfast, lunch, and dinner (our desserts are the best!).

"What did you mom want?" Stephanie asked me as soon as I sat down at our table.

"She told me something that I was definitely not expecting to hear, and all I know is that for the next here months, they will be the hardest, secretive, most dangerous months I have ever lived."

"What was it?" Stephanie pondered, and I sat there, telling my three best friends in the whole world, the horrible news about Gabe coming to Whiteville off of his vacation for three months.

"Are you kidding?! No, ARE YOU CRAZY?!" Courtney screamed. "Gabe can't come to Whiteville! He can NOT discover the Aleger Academy!"

"And he won't!" I promised. "As long as I keep him in town and where he's staying, busy with me, everything will be fine."

But I didn't think everything *would* be fine.

"If you take one squared x divided by b then adding the total amount for two squared seven times thirty-six, what would your two variables equal?" My math teacher, Mr. Broad, asked. Of course I knew the answer to this, since math is in my genes, but I couldn't concentrate. If Gabe was coming to Whiteville, then I needed to know *facts*. I needed to know *details*. I needed to know *reasons* and *answers*. Most importantly, I needed to know *when he was coming*. If Gabe all of a sudden popped up from nowhere I would not be prepared, he would find the school, and all Aleger Girl's covers would be blown to the world, and spies wouldn't catch the bad guys!

"Teresa," Mr. Broad called. "What was your answer?"

"Two and five," Teresa proudly said. (Duh, the answer was two and four!)

"I'm sorry, Teresa, I was looking for two and four."

(Told you.)

"So, when is Gabe coming?" Courtney asked in our room that night. We were all sitting down in a circle, a big pile of candy in one spot, and a tiny pile of candy wrappers in the other.

"I don't know. I want to find out how my mother

found out,” I answered, stating the obvious.

“Gabe’s mom probably called,” Stephanie suggested, though something told me that wasn’t the case. Spies don’t figure out things just by getting “calls”, spies *spy*. Calling was just too easy for a spy’s case.

I told this to Stephanie and then she blabbered on a million other possibilities (not really possible), that could have made my mother spontaneously find out.

“Maybe your mother snuck into Gabe’s house one day because she wanted to know the Academy really *was* safe, but then she overheard that the family was going back to Whiteville to see Carmie! OR your mother built this machine to track anyone, read their mind, and find out what they’re doing! OR!”

“Stephanie!” I scolded. “Didn’t happen, and isn’t going to, either!”

“Stephanie, you are way too into this,” Blaire teased.

“Excuse me for trying to protect the Aleger Academy for young women!” Stephanie complained.

That night, it was so confusing, and a sleepless one, too. I kept on trying to think how I would keep Gabe busy, most importantly how I was going to find him. Whiteville was a small town, so it shouldn’t be that hard. But then, (and I have no idea why), I started thinking about the guy in the mall. *Who was he? Why was he being so nice? Why was he following me? How did he know where I was? Why did he pick me to stalk?*

Too many questions and thoughts and plans kept roaming through my mind, I couldn't sleep. But yet I still tried.

It was officially Friday. *Why can't it be Saturday?* I asked myself, because then I could sleep in, get the rest I needed, and get good grades again! (Yes I said "again")

"Carm, you look... horrible!" Courtney pointed out that morning.

"That was very nice, Court!" I said sarcastically. "I couldn't get any sleep last night. Everything was... GAH!!" I screamed. I couldn't take all this drama. Usually at the Aleger Academy, everything is... normal. I knew exactly why today wasn't the same. Or was ever going to be.

The day was finally over. I was praising the Lord when we had no tests that day, and I could finally go to my mother's office and then go to my room to talk to my girls, then go to bed. I was SO happy I could sleep in!

"Hey, Carm. What's up?" my mother greeted when she saw me standing in her doorway.

"Everything, Mom. I keep on trying to-"

"Figure out things with Gabe?" my mother finished for me.

"Yeah... That..."

"Sweetie, Gabe will understand if he *does* find out about the school. He's very sweet."

“But I’m not sure if he can keep this secret!” I blurted out. “Mom, do I need to move on? Do I need a new boyfriend, or do I go back to Gabe? It wouldn’t make sense, since *I* had to break up with *him*, yes, but still! I don’t know what to do!” I cried.

My mother sat me down on her white leather sofa in the room and let me cry on her shoulder.

“Honey, it’s okay. I think I might have something to cheer you up,” she said, looking at me with a big, hopeful smile.

“Come in, Jak!” my mother signaled, and there at the doorway, came in the same boy I saw at the mall. The one who stalked me.

And then he looked at me with a big, warm smile, and said, “Hi again, Carmie Jordan.”

CHAPTER THREE

“Mom, I need some time alone with ‘Jak’,” I announced, and my mother walked out of the room.

“What are you doing here?” I snapped, looking into his big, brown eyes.

“Well, it’s nice to see you, too, Carmie Jordan,” he teased with a tiny chuckle, and I didn’t bother to ask him HOW IN THE WORLD HE KNEW MY FULL NAME.

“Are you here to stalk me again? Why did my mother even bring you here? How did my mother even find you?” So many questions wanted to be answered, I was almost out of patience.

“One, no. But nice guess,” he teased again with his smile. “Two, a couple of students from my spy school, Redstripe, is coming to the Aleger Academy to study how you girls learn to ‘spy’, we want to see our schools compared. And three,” he paused for a second, studying me, “Your mom contacted my school, then my teacher announced we were going to yours. That answers your questions, right?” He said with another chuckle and smile. I stared at him so confused, and his gaze never left my eyes. I scoffed and rushed out of the room, but he took my hand and passed me something, but then he walked into the other room inside the office.

I felt something in my hand, opened it, and found a note:

So, Carmie Jordan, I hear you girls have one night off

for free twice every month. You want to go to the movies that night?

“You’re kidding! He asked you OUT?!” Blaire exclaimed when I told the girls about the note at breakfast. “You’re going to accept, right?!”

“I don’t know, it’s a long shot. I don’t even know him, Blaire!” I shared.

“I know, but you guys have seen each other! It’s not like you guys are COMPLETE strangers and he’s a murderer. You have to accept!”

I took another bite of my ham and cheese hot pocket and savored the flavor in my mouth. I thought about my answer for a while, before saying, “Okay... Fine. I’m going.”

That night came quickly, but I didn’t want to go out with Jak. I really did not want to go anywhere with him. I didn’t even want to be seen with him. I had to go, though, I promised my friends, and I had said yes to him. There was one thing I could still do, though, it was a classic: fake being sick.

I know it’s wrong, but spies lie for good reasons. Though I wasn’t sure if this was a good reason. But... I just had to do it, even if it made my heart burn with guilt.

I ran to my room, dressed in my pajamas, and made it seem like I had a fever. Five minutes later, Jak walked into the room.

“Hey, Carmie Jordan. Are you okay?” he sweetly asked, which only made me seem to regret my lie more.

“Sorry, Jak, I caught something. I can’t make it tonight,” I claimed.

“That’s too bad. I guess I’m going to have to take care of you, then.”

“Uh, no, you’re not. I have my friends and my mother,” I appealed.

“Carmie Jordan, it’s no trouble,” Jak argued.

“You don’t have to call me by my full name, Jak. It’s just Carmie.”

“I know. Let me get you some soup.”

“No! I don’t need you to get me-“

But I couldn’t even finish my sentence, because Jak was already gone.

He came back three minutes later with some split pea soup, and, I have to admit, it was really good. But that didn’t mean I liked having Jak fake-take care of me.

“Hey, Carmie Jordan, how’s that fever doing? Let me get you a cold rag,” Jak offered, but let me tell you, I was getting extremely annoyed.

“No, I’m fine, I don’t need a rag.”

“Of course you do. You need a cold rag for a hot forehead. Don’t you?” Something was wrong here... He said “Don’t you”, cocking his head, and sounded...

“Wait a minute... You’re testing me! You know I’m not really sick, don’t you, Jak?”

“It took you long enough.” He smiled and laughed. “Now come on, Carmie Jordan. Let’s get to that movie.”

“No, I said immediately after he spoke. “I’m not going, Jak.” The words sounded right, but hurtful at the same time, and it was as if the words were being spoken to *my* face.

“Don’t you want to see a movie? Eat a bunch of candy, some popcorn, with nachos and hot dogs with smoothies and stuff?” he offered. “Unless, you’re too sick.”

He was doing it. He was trying to tempt me into going with him, testing me, lecturing me. But then, I came up with the perfect question that might delay our date (did I seriously just say “date”?).

“And exactly who’s going to pay for all that?”

“Of course, me,” he insisted.

“Really?” I asked. He nodded. “You have \$100 in your wallet?”

“Well, Carmie Jordan. It wouldn’t cost 100. Maybe 50 or so,” he corrected. “But to answer your question, I have more than enough.”

“But, I-” I started, but Jak just stared at me and I

couldn't resist any longer.

We both walked off the school grounds at 8:30. By the time we reached the theater I saw my three friends standing next to the door, and I was actually surprised when they showed up at the theater before me.

"Jak, you go ahead, I'll meet you at the line," I turned to him and instructed. He walked in the theater while I walked toward my friends.

"What exactly are you three doing here?" I snapped, irritated.

"Duh, to see you on your first date since... uh, yeah!" Courtney exclaimed.

"I don't want it to be a date! I want it to be a movie with an acquaintance to get to know each other. Now go!"

"We're not leaving unless you come, or we stay," Stephanie threatened, which made me give an expression that read, "You did *not* just disrespect me."

"Excuse me?" I asked.

"Either you come with us, or we stay here with the movie, under cover."

"Guys, that's crazy! I'm not ditching Jak. I said yes, and he wants to spend a lot of money on me. He's waiting for me inside, I have to go," I pleaded.

"Fine, then we're coming with you," Blaire insisted.

“No!” I screamed.

There was no way out of this. It was either they come with me, or I leave Jak in the theater, all alone, leaving \$50 wasted just because I went home.

I did not know what to do. What was so bad if Stephanie, Courtney, and Blaire listened to me and Jak at a movie? Nothing, that’s right.

“Fine, but you guys are sitting three rows ahead of us.”

“But, then we wouldn’t be able to hear you guys!” Stephanie cried.

“Exactly, that’s the point! Now let’s go!”

I met Jak inside and we bought our snacks.

“See? Less than 50 bucks,” Jak said when we reached our movie room.

“Yeah, you were right, Jak. Let’s just watch...” I looked at the label above the door. “‘A Wedding for 4’?” I questioned.

“Yeah. Come on, Carmie Jordan. Let’s go.”

We walked into the theater, up to the top seating. Commercials came on for about five minutes, but feeling like it was twenty, Jak’s gaze, once again, never left me eyes. At that moment the whole world was frozen, and Jak and I were the only two people there. I had no idea why I felt this way. But I also felt grateful when loud music started and so did the movie.

He continued to stare at me, but when I heard talking I turned away. He finally did too, a little disappointed.

“Hey, Romance Girl,” I heard Blaire call me through a... earpiece?

I felt my ear for something, and sure enough, an earpiece was there. Pushing the button, I quietly whispered back, “You guys snuck an earpiece in me?! How did you even put it on?!”

“Hello, spy’s right here!” I heard Courtney claim.

“Don’t call me romance girl, now be quiet!” I demanded, and shut the thing off.

During the movie Jak offered me some chocolate covered raisins and it was a little awkward to accept. I smiled and he did too, but my smile was a “thank you”. His smile was something different. When I looked back to the screen I noticed someone sat beside me and when I looked over I saw Stephanie White, Courtney Mornet, and Blaire Sydney.

“What are you doing here?!” I almost shouted in a half voice, half whisper sort of way. I was now *really* annoyed.

Jak noticed my scream and looked over my shoulder. There, he saw my three friends.

“Carmie Jordan, who are these young ladies?” he asked, as if my friends were fifth-graders lost and I was supposed to be taking care of them.

“These are my friends who were SUPPOSED to stay

three rows ahead of us, so they wouldn't invade our privacy. Now, they've broken that, and I think I would like to leave now!" I said angrily, as I started to take one step out of my seat.

Jak took my arm before I could walk past him. "No, Carmie Jordan," he said. "Please stay, the movie's getting good."

"I'm sorry, but my three friends just ruined it," I claimed again, as Blaire, scared, started to walk back to her original seat.

"Carmie, we're so sorry. We'll go back," Courtney apologized.

I decided to take her proposal, but inside my head I only thought instead of a *wedding* for four, it was more like an *almost ruined friendship of four*.

By the time the movie was over, Jak and I finished everything we bought, mostly because we *had* to (no bringing in fast or theater food in the manor).

"Hey, Carmie Jordan," he said as we were walking out. "I had a really great time tonight."

"I can't believe it, but I did, too."

"Thank you, for the evening."

"No, thank *you*, for taking me out and feeding me so much food."

We both laughed at this.

“I’ll see you at the manor,” I stated, then waved good-bye to him, as I started to walk back to the school.

The evening was actually pleasant. And I really liked it. But for some reason, I still didn’t really like Jak, even though I knew I should have, and he deserved my gratitude.

That morning wasn’t a good one. It was Sunday and this time, I actually *wasn’t* feeling good.

“Guys, after this meal, I’m going back to bed,” I proclaimed at breakfast, setting down my donut.

“What’s wrong?” Stephanie asked.

“Well first, about last night...” I started. I didn’t know how much I should apologize to my best friends. “I am so, so, so, so, so sorry about what happened.” (Okay, five times) “You guys are such great friends, and I love you. I wish I didn’t say what I said.”

“Awe, it’s okay!” Blaire said. “We know you didn’t really mean it. Besides, we know someone who likes you!”

“What are you guys talking about?” I asked, as Blaire handed me a note:

Carmie Jordan, I had a great time last night. You’re a pretty awesome girl to go out with.

Oh. My... did he just use the g-o word?

“Are... you... KIDDING ME?!” I said, frustrated.

“Really? I would have thought she’d be happy about that...” Stephanie said, but I was SO not!

“Seriously? He likes me, but... he’s so... listen, enough boy drama. When was the last time I focused on *my grades*, I think they’re starting to slip...” I asked my friends, trying to change the subject, even though I already knew they were.

“She’s kind of right. When was the last time *any of us* focused on school? Do I even know *my grades* anymore?” Courtney agreed.

Just then, our best teacher, Mr. Dawson, walked in and started heading towards us, his expression reading that he was exceedingly mad.

The miraculous “after” picture—

draft 1.5 of the improved *MyHAMS*:

Chapter One

“Seriously, I’m begging you, do not wear that one,” I told my best friend.

“Come on. We’ve gone out, like, a hundred times, he genuinely doesn’t care what I wear,” Stephanie replied, but seriously, the baby pink clashed so violently with her amber skin that even *I* could see it. Especially for a guy Stephanie had seen, “like, a hundred times”, this one was a no-no.

“Okay, but still. You know it doesn’t do you any favors. What about your white one? The strapless one that shows off your build really well, that one’s gorgeous.” I couldn’t blame her for not listening to me, considering fashion was more up her and Courtney’s department, but the fact that I was saying something now should have said enough.

“It’s *fine*, I’m gonna wear it. Okay, so what’re you doing tonight? You’re not wasting a whole night away from the school in here, right?”

The Aleger Academy permits two—yep, two—nights off school grounds a month. Otherwise, we’re limited to the black gate circling the campus. Saturdays and Sundays may seem like a bore at first glance, but Aleger Girls are great company. It turns out, epic hangouts are an inherent perk of spy school; “hanging out” never *just* means “hanging out” (or it can *literally* mean

“hanging out”).

“I tried planning something special,” I replied, “but I think I’m in need of something simple. I’m just gonna walk around town, maybe hack into a bank’s alarm system and trigger it so it’ll be easier to rob.”

I was pretty sure Stephanie knew I was joking, but her face still froze with straight concern and a silent question of if she’d have to bail me out tonight. “Okay... Stay safe, I guess.”

I rolled my eyes. “Please, when’s the last time something happened in Whiteville?”

“I don’t think spy life cares what city you’re in. If your enemies wanna kill you, they’re gonna kill you.”

“Yeah, but we’re gonna make those enemies *after* we graduate,” I said flatly. “You can’t tell me we’ve made any after being trapped in the manor since sixth grade. We probably still have a couple of years. Probably.”

“I know you’re joking, you’re just not funny,” Stephanie said cheekily. “Okay, you wanna know why I’m wearing *this* dress? It’s because I don’t care. I’m probably breaking up with Ethan tonight. There, something fun for your ‘simple’ night.”

“*What?*” I cried, my eyes widening. “Why?”

“Because he doesn’t go to a freaky spy school, let alone knows that I do,” she replied, like the answer were obvious. “I don’t know, I feel like I’m supposed to do the right thing here.”

“Since when do you do the right thing?” I teased—because Stephanie White was the same girl who actually *did* trigger the alarm (accidentally) in Mr. Broad’s class after bedtime hours last year to snag the example copy of the final essay exam.

“Like I said, I *feel* like I’m supposed to. I don’t know what’s up with this semester, but I keep feeling like I have to be more careful.”

“Did my mom yell at you?” I asked.

“Go away,” she said, rapidly motioning her hand like she was trying to get rid of a dog or cat sitting on the couch.

I gave her another teasing laugh and took the cue to stand up from my bed, walking out of the room and into the hallway.

I’ve always enjoyed the journey into town; the manor is nestled pretty cozily amid an otherwise dense forest, but something about tonight called for more peace in each step. I guess it was the sun just setting and all of the streetlights turning on as I stepped onto the sidewalk and strolled by. A handful of couples were out and about, hand in hand or arm in arm, and part of me inside couldn’t help but smile for them—how they could enjoy the freedom of their Friday night, every Friday night. Every night in general. At least I had tonight in a place like Whiteville, which even Stephanie calls the mini version of Paris “without the glamour”. Maybe it’s the fact that I grew up here, but I definitely prefer small town over big city. Blending in is, apparently, my natural talent, but Mom

refused to let me use “Invisible” as my code name, and Courtney helped her come up with “Shadow” for me instead.

The mall was easiest to browse, so I made that my first destination (with the cinnamon rolls on the second floor being my second). The mixed aromas of new fabric, plastic and paper bags, and deep-fried food blew into my face upon opening the door, and suddenly, the cinnamon rolls were first on my list. There was a reason I’d skipped dessert after dinner tonight.

I only got halfway to the escalator in the middle of the first floor when a male voice behind me called, “Hey.”

I turned around. A teenage boy half a head taller than me was strolling up to me.

“Uh, hi,” I said, trying to avoid a stammer—and getting caught in eyes so warm, deep, and brown, they reminded me of melted chocolate. His straight hair that went down to his ears and, funnily enough, curled upward at the tips rivaled his eyes in color, and his light-brown skin radiated a strange warmth about him. Strange because he was a complete stranger, and I’m pretty sure the *last* thing you’re supposed to feel around a stranger is warmth. “What’s up?”

“Sorry, I just—I saw your coat. It’s totally my sister’s style, she’d want something just like it. Can I ask where you got it?”

My coat? For his sister? Just randomly?

Total creep, or totally cute stranger?

“I don’t know,” I said, “I got it as a Christmas present. Sorry.”

“Oh...”

Okay, *that* level of disappointment was tempting me toward somewhere in the middle on my spectrum.

“Sorry,” I said again. “Um, have a good night.”

I turned around and started my way to the escalators again—until the footsteps behind me kept thumping with my steps. This boy was following me.

“Where are you going?” he asked.

I briefly turned around again. “Second floor.”

“Could I join you?”

I stopped, accidentally letting him catch up. Instinct was warning me to start inspecting this guy’s *real* motive for approaching me. “I mean, if you’re heading the same way for a jacket store, I can’t stop you.”

“Well, no,” he admitted, with the corner of his mouth twisted upward into a half smile. A half smile I wish didn’t make my stomach fold in on itself with butterflies. “I guess I’m just looking for... something else to do besides walking—”

A deep growl roared from my stomach, cutting him straight off.

Not butterflies, I realized with heat swarming my cheeks. *Hunger. Dessert hunger.* Those food court smells were only getting worse the closer I got.

“Oh, sorry,” the boy said, “are you hungry?”

“No, not really,” I replied, trying to deter a dinner date response as fast as I could.

“Snack, then?” He reached into his jean pocket and pulled out a Twix bar, holding it out to me. “I just picked it up from the vending machine, but if you want...”

“No, really, it’s okay,” I said, feeling a smile somehow start to stretch my lips. “I kind of already had food plans, you keep that.”

He put the candy bar back into his pocket, nodding. “Sure thing.”

And sure enough, he still followed me onto the escalator. He wanted to talk to me. He was interested in me, something about me, that was for sure—and yet, he kept almost the entire ride up the escalator in complete silence as he looked at my vest under my jacket.

And then I realized. And then we were climbing off of the elevator before I could cover up my vest and the boy opened his mouth.

“Does that say the ‘Allergy Academy’?”

To my surprise and disbelief, I burst out laughing. “What, no! ‘Aleger’.”

The boy straightened, a soft smile bracing his lips. “Oh, got it. Sorry. Nice to formally meet you, Allergy Girl.”

“Okay, no,” I said, sharing his smile (also to my complete

surprise), “my name is ‘Carm’—”

Which, I don’t know why I’d even felt obligated to tell him, considering he’d already been turning around before I could reply and walking down the south side of the mall. Opposite the food court.

Had I wanted to *keep* talking to him?

“Wait, where are you going?”

“Like you said,” he called back, turning around briefly, “second floor.”

Chapter Two

“That’s *crazy*... On the same night I had a date where I broke up with my boyfriend, you snagged a date with a hottie at the mall? You’re finally taking my advice!”

I would’ve slapped Stephanie for the words had I been more irritated than, I’ll admit, crushing on said “hottie”. “Okay, the LAST thing I would call it is a date. Is that what you call a guy who follows you around the mall and borderline stalks you for a conversation?” I told her, sparing a glance at Blaire and Courtney on my other side as we sat on the carpet.

“Okay, but hear me out—what if you go back to the mall and find him again?” Courtney said, smirking.

“You guys, again, he practically stalked me until we ran out of conversation, it wasn’t anything close to a date. I just needed to air it out and forget about it. Hey, it’s all the more reason we should spend our next night off campus together.”

Thankfully, nobody had an argument or reason to continue the conversation after that.

“Okay, who studied for Mrs. Trover’s test today?” Blaire asked, happening to catch us all in the middle of a bite at breakfast.

“They train us to have nearly photographic memories and *you*, of all people, didn’t study?” Stephanie asked flatly after

swallowing.

“It’s not my fault! Courtney made me put down the textbook last night and dragged me to karaoke in Kingsport, it was bedtime by the time we got back.”

One of the Aleger Academy’s cruelest tests: academic obligations even on a night we’re meant to have all to ourselves. Like Blaire had said, the more we tried to take advantage of that night, the longer it took us to study. Poor Blaire would just have to hope that she wouldn’t dip below her 98 percent average by the time we had Mrs. Trover.

“As foreshadowed by the introductory paragraph on page 218, we’re about to enter our study unit on the trying times that was the first third of the twentieth century,” Mrs. Trover explained from the front of the brightly lit classroom, ever in her eloquent (and cumbersome) teaching manner. “The sinking of the *Titanic* and her sister ship *Britannic* were the very preface of the decade that would end with World War I, which, as you all know, would be quickly followed by the rise of World War II, but, of course, not before the tragedy of the *Olympic*. As we’re about to discover and analyze in detail, humanity showed its most persistent courage during these first few decades.”

Thankfully, someone was whispering my name next to me.

“*Carmie*,” Blaire hissed. I turned my head to her just as she slid a note onto my desk.

The window.

“What?” I mouthed as Blaire pointed at the window. Out in the hall, watching us, stood a tall woman with her hands behind her pantsuit. My mother.

“What is she doing?” I whispered to Blaire.

“I don’t know, but she’s trying to get your attention. Look.”

I obeyed. Mom nodded down the hall, eyes intent on me.

“Excuse me, Mrs. Trover,” I called from my seat, raising my hand. “The headmistress is waiting for me.”

Mrs. Trover looked in my direction before noting Mom standing outside the window. “You’re excused, go ahead.”

I grabbed my backpack by my desk and felt every eye on me as I strolled down the aisle of desks. I tried to ignore the stares as I opened the heavy door and stepped into the hall.

“What’s wrong?” I asked Mom, who put her hand on my back and started leading me down the carpet and toward her office.

“Who said something was wrong?” she asked—suspiciously casual for a woman whose partial reasons for enrolling me here in the first place included “making sure past enemies never tracked my location and held me at ransom at a normal school”.

“Um...” I replied, her door falling into sight as we approached the foyer. “Okay. Then why did you need to pull me out of class?”

She didn’t say anything, instead pulling open her door and

leading me inside. I sat on one of the white couches against the wall and put my backpack down at my feet. To my surprise, Mom took a seat next to me.

“Okay, sweetie. I just received intel about a situation that I need you to be aware of and prepared for in case it spirals into something due to—past circumstances.”

“What?” I said, trying not to let my nerves lock up my body.

“Gabe’s vacation is over and he and his family are coming back to Whiteville.”

Great. *Great*. As soon as I was starting to settle back into the swing of things with no Gabe around during all of summer (and even started convincing myself that he’d become so infatuated with wherever he’d gone that he would move there), he was coming back? Now I was completely housebound! I couldn’t enjoy my nights off campus with him roaming around town again! He’d already gotten too close to finding out my cover the last time I’d seen him, which was the entire reason I’d had to break up with him in the first place! We ended on... well, *civil* terms, but if I saw him again and anything, even friendship, started between us, it put the Aleger Academy at risk all over again. Didn’t it?

Mom simply rubbed my shoulder as I sat there with my thoughts, like she was hearing every one (which I wouldn’t be surprised if she could do that).

“So... he’s coming back and gonna go to the high school in

town again?" I asked.

"Until Thanksgiving."

I let out a heavy breath. If it weren't my mom's job to keep tabs on intel like that for the sake of the school's safety after what happened last semester, I would've been mildly disturbed. No, what disturbed me right now was the fact that Thanksgiving was almost three months away, now five nights' worth of freedom from now until then. I couldn't actually let Gabe's presence affect that, could I? I was a better trainee than that!

Yeah. That's why you almost got the school exposed the first time and had to dump him.

"I didn't tell you so you would worry about it," Mom said, giving my shoulder a squeeze. "I told you to be aware and prepare for what to say to him in case you ever run into him. The situation's delicate, but you've grown a lot. And you're gonna learn a lot more this semester. Don't sweat it, just head to lunch when you're ready."

I looked up at the clock mounted above the door, surprised that she really had pulled me out just before lunch—probably to save me from Mrs. Trover's babble at the tail-end of class.

Being the headmistress's daughter sure has its perks.

Mom walked with me through the large entry foyer of the manor and into the elegant Dining Hall. Despite having been a student here for over a year now, I still wasn't over the stunning

colonial architecture that was the Aleger Academy manor, over 250 years old. The Main Staircase has always been my favorite part; it's the only time I ever let myself pretend I'm a duchess in *Pride and Prejudice*. The Dining Hall, though, is my second-favorite room. (Our cook is rumored to have been a personal chef for the U.S. President before coming here, which tracks for a lot more reasons than just the desserts, but I'm legally not allowed to disclose those here.)

"Hey!" Stephanie chirped as I took a seat between her and Courtney at our table with my plate of spaghetti. "What did your mom want?"

"Um... It was my first real-life intel update, put it that way. And now I'm housebound for our next few nights off campus until Thanksgiving."

"What, why?"

So I explained, telling the three of them as quietly as I could amid a sea of other sophomore Aleger Girls eating about Gabe coming back to Whiteville, about how he was back to the boy he'd been when we'd first met and I'd nearly exposed us all.

"Are you kidding me? Are you *serious*?" Courtney whispered with wide eyes. "Okay, I get not wanting to risk running into him, but you can't let that ruin our FEW nights of freedom away from the school!"

I actually *didn't* want to be stuck in the manor for the next

three months straight. I needed to know the details, I needed to know his schedule, what he knew now, what he remembered—only then would I be able to leave campus for some much-deserved fun and relaxation from school without jeopardizing anyone’s careers or, you know, lives. It sounded dramatic, but it was true; one breach in spy security was an inevitable lead, whether it took a day or a year for the bad guys to find the end of that rope. Gabe had been too close last semester, and, for all I knew, he was either further away or even closer.

“I can’t risk it,” I argued. “Whiteville’s too small—if we run into each other, it’s not gonna be long before he starts asking the same questions and I have to give him the same answers and same suspicion. I have to avoid him. That’s the only way to keep things okay.”

Which, with how weird of a start this semester had already had, it was pretty hard to believe that things were okay even now.

“Well, did your mom say *when* Gabe’s coming back?” Courtney asked.

“You’d think she would’ve mentioned it. I was just thinking about how crazy it is that she does everything around here that she does and still keeps tabs on him just in case.”

“Imagine Gabe’s mom called to drop the hint,” Stephanie said, scoffing with a chuckle under her breath. If not for how much that woman had adored me when Gabe first introduced us, I would’ve

given the suggestion no thought. Unfortunately, Gabe's mom's adoration was now all I *could* think about.

"Yeah, well..." I muttered, trying to ease us away from the topic before eavesdropping ears could catch us.

"Oh, right, I meant your mom sneaked into Gabe's house while they were all gone and found the family calendar—or your mom figured out how to integrate mind reading into the tracker she secretly chipped Gabe with and heard how excited he was to see you again this semester. Or—"

"What was it you said last night?" I remarked. "I know you're joking, you're just not funny."

"I thought it was funny," Blaire teased, nudging Stephanie's shoulder as she twirled another bite of spaghetti.

"Right? God forbid a girl tries to brighten the depressed mood that *is* our lives while we're in training."

I hated that she had a point with that. I hated even more that I had to go to bed that night with that thought, tangling my already confused emotions and stealing at least another hour of sleep from me. At least I didn't need to think about how to keep Gabe busy or anything, just avoid him for five measly nights—except, if I'd managed to meet *him* in the middle of a field surrounded by a sea of other strangers that night, was I really supposed to think that the chances of running into him again were that low? Whiteville was too small. Of all the people that were

around me that night, I'd met just him—

Like the guy at the mall. Then again, he was a different story; I hadn't bumped into him at all. He'd practically sniffed me out just to ask me a question about my jacket. Who was he? And why had he been so persistent to get a conversation out of me? Why had he chosen to stay for just the escalator ride and nothing else after how otherwise persistent he'd been to tag along?

Did he already know whom he was really looking for when he approached me?

Those questions and thoughts continued roaming through my mind. I couldn't sleep no matter how long I tried, and with that, the clock transitioned us from Thursday into Friday.

"Whoa, someone didn't sleep," Courtney noted that morning from the closet as I sat up in bed. I could already feel the rat's nest sitting on my head.

"Whoa, someone knows how to say 'good morning'," I shot back. "I kept thinking stupid thoughts and..." I fell onto my back. Why was the beginning of this semester so full of girl-life drama? I already missed the Aleger Academy's version of normal (which usually includes a dart gun, invisible ink, and sometimes a potato masher), and my instincts were warning me to be prepared for a new definition of it.

The school day, both normal and spy version, automatically

improves when there aren't any tests on a Friday. Now I could go to Mom's office for a quick chat before going to my room for a bath and then bed. Sleeping in was my number one priority tomorrow, and I was going to take full advantage.

"Hey, sweetie, how was your day?" Mom asked, opening the door wider for me to walk into her office.

"Good... but I'm still kinda bummed that I won't be able to spend my next night off campus in *complete* freedom."

Mom pressed her lips together, turning to face me as I walked to the couch on the left side of the room. "Because of Gabe?"

"Yeah."

"I really don't think you need to worry about it this much. Especially with the new semester and how much you learned from experience alone a few months ago. You can't let your fear inhibit your training."

"I don't trust myself," I blurted, crossing my arms against my chest. "I was dumb enough to pick him in the first place, I was dumb enough to *trust* him in the first place even though he was a normal person, ESPECIALLY because he was a normal person. I didn't have any right answer to any of his questions last semester, and I still don't when I think about them!"

Mom ambled to me and took a spot beside me on the couch. The quiet was... well, embarrassing. Somehow, she made it worse by wrapping an arm around my shoulder.

“Have you ever said any of that out loud before?” she asked.

I didn’t answer.

“Okay.” She took her arm out from around me. “Then let’s drop it. I have a surprise for you.”

I looked up at her, skeptical, because “surprise” could range from a new pair of jeans to the last missing chemical ingredient for a United States bioweapon meant to wipe out entire pastures.

When Mom stood and looked at the open door, I somehow knew that it was neither. And I braced myself.

“Come in, Jak,” she called.

There in the doorway of her office came through the same boy I’d met at the mall two nights ago. And he looked right at me with a warm, knowing smile and said, “Hi again, Carmie Jordan.”

Chapter Three

“Can we have a moment to talk?” I asked Mom, keeping my stare on Jak to emphasize the message.

“You’re not gonna kill him, are you?” she teased as she headed for the door. “He’s not just an ally, he’s our lead.”

I almost wanted to stop her from leaving with that—because when a spy has a lead for something, they might already be boiling alive in some hot water—but my pride refused to submit to my shock. Mom closed her office door behind her, and I hardened my gaze against Jak’s brown-eyed stare.

“What’re you doing here?” I said, crossing my arms against any excuse he was ready to pull up.

“Nice to see you, too,” he answered simply. “Carmie Jordan, right?”

I didn’t bother asking him where he’d snagged my full name; if Mom actually trusted him enough with it, he was definitely like every other girl in this school. Except, you know, he was a *boy*. A boy was standing in my school right now, in front of me, like he *belonged* there!

“Did you actually end up stalking me a couple of nights ago?” I said, trying to suppress the rising defensiveness impeding on my voice. “What’s up with my mom bringing you past security and into her office? How do you guys even know each other?”

“It’s not stalking if you’re a trained operative,” he said cheekily, sticking his hands into his jean pockets. Like the conversation we were having was totally normal. Why did that bother me so much? “I wanted to make sure I knew the right girl before I did set foot in her mom’s office—we’re both the headmaster’s kid, so it felt appropriate—”

Headmaster’s kid? What school does he go to?

“—to talk to Headmistress Jordan about how my school’s approaching our joint semester this year with the Aleger Academy.”

“Your *what?*” I asked, my arms instinctively tightening around me.

“Yeah,” Jak replied, nodding. “That’s been the plan for the past couple of months. Your mom never told you? Redstripe’s known about it since the first day of school.”

“I’m so happy for them,” I said, dumbfounded. Why would Mom keep something like that from me, and how did this guy know before I did? “I still don’t know why harassment was part of the deal when you could’ve just asked me if I was who I was.”

“Asked you if you go to the super-secret spy school hidden in the Whiteville forest?”

“Yeah, since you were fairly confident it was me.”

“‘Fairly’ gets you killed,” he quipped. “Imagine my disappointment that your jacket was a ‘Christmas present’.”

He tilted his head down. Like he knew more than I did. And

then, I realized, he *did*. I didn't understand how I could go from ogling at that smile a couple of nights ago to wanting to slap it off his face today.

He's not gonna give me any answer I want, not quickly at least. I need to go yell at Mom.

I set my sight forward and tried walking past him, but he grabbed my wrist. And for whatever demented reason, I stopped.

"I'm sorry," he said with a nod, taking my hand into his in a handshake. "I never wanted to trick you. I was just... exploring."

As if that made it any better, he slipped past me and beat me to the door. I was so caught off guard that I didn't notice the folded piece of paper he'd planted in my hand until I went to clench my fists.

This boy was able to disarm me with a glance and a sentence. That didn't automatically make him an enemy, but in my world, it made him public enemy number one.

Still, I unfolded the note:

I hope this is an appropriate top-secret way of asking another spy if she wants to go to the movies with me on one of her free nights soon.

"WHAT? He asked you *out*?" Blaire squealed at breakfast the next morning. "Did you say yes?"

"Why would I?" I asked dully. "I don't even know him, and he

deliberately tricked me.”

Courtney cut me off, holding up her finger. “We don’t know that’s one hundred percent yet. You’re not *complete* strangers, and he’s good enough for your mom to trust—come on, you have to say yes so Blaire and I can know what it’s like!”

I scoffed with Stephanie, on my other side, as I cut another bite of my ham and cheese omelet; Stephanie’s life was our very own private reality dating show, so the three of us never felt like we were missing out on much (see the Ethan situation on the first page of this report). But we’d never gotten a glimpse of *spy* dating drama. That was a completely new season, or even a whole spinoff. Part of me, maybe a big-enough part, was morbidly curious—especially because, if I *have* to be completely honest here (and Mom says I do), another part of me still felt ruthless butterflies every time I looked at Jak’s face.

“Fine,” I said, freaking out inside. “I’ll give him an hour and a half.”

Simultaneously, the stars seemed to align and combust the Saturday night that Jak was meant to take me out (a term with which a spy needs to be *very* careful by the way). I couldn’t remember the last time I’d been so begrudging to do something I kind of wanted to do. Maybe it was the fact that Jak *had* tricked me, at least to some degree—because why would he have left me on the second

floor so cryptically like that if he didn't believe I was the headmistress's daughter?—and I hated that he had tricked me so easily. I hated that he had gotten into my school and made friends with my mom so easily.

Or maybe I just hated that he had already proven to be a better spy than me.

For a brief second, faking being sick flashed through my mind, but sadly, I outgrew the third grade seven years ago. Instead, I forced every ounce of dignity and confidence I had forward and met Jak in front of the movie theater in the town square.

“I didn't stalk you this time,” he said with his million-dollar smile, extending a hand to me from his jean pockets. “You look nice.”

He gave my hand a gentle squeeze. And curiously, while I had no idea what that meant, I knew I liked him an ounce more for doing it.

“You, too,” I said. At least, I was pretty sure a button-up shirt was appropriate for a first date—outing—get-together—was I really on a date with the spy-in-training who'd tricked me? “So, what do you want to see?”

“Do you like surprises?”

I narrowed my eyes at him. “Not from you.”

“Well, then keep an open mind.” He offered me his arm—okay, that, I knew, was gentleman talk. “Then you'll have fun.”

I rolled my eyes, trying to mask the small amount of joy threatening to bloom in my chest. In an instant, when I took that first step with Jak toward the theater entrance and looked ahead, that joy withered like a rose in a desert.

“Wait,” I said, stopping and unclasping my handbag hanging on my shoulder to pretend something important was in there. “Sorry, I forgot to do something—I’ll meet you inside.”

“Okay,” he said with a slight warning in his voice, “but if you try to run away, I know where you go to school.”

I deadpanned at him, which he parried with his smile. It wasn’t fair that he had such a powerful weapon, especially when I had to go attack the trio of Aleger Girls huddled by the corner of the movie theater.

“So I guess it’s complete coincidence that you’re here tonight, too,” I stated, prompting the three of them to face me.

“Hey, I warned you,” Courtney argued, sticking a hand on her hip. “Blaire and I wanted to see what it was like.”

“And I’m here to give you pointers,” Stephanie said, stepping up to me and spreading out my hair behind my shoulders. “Sweetie, you really have to melt some of the ice a bit, you’re gonna scare him away—”

“How do I scare you guys away?” I whisper-snapped, backing away from her primping. “You guys, I’m barely here already, and I don’t even know if I want to call this a date or a hangout or

whatever. Can you just leave us alone and I'll tell you everything later?"

"Honey," Stephanie stated. "He's tall, he's cute, he's a spy, you're not finding another one of him at *least* until we join an agency after we graduate. I can't let you mess this up."

"We'll be undercover!" tiny Blaire said in the back, gripping Courtney's arm like she'd get lost otherwise. "Please?"

"I brought money for tickets," Stephanie added with a shrug.

I shook my head, huffing. "I can't stop you from watching whatever we watch. Just—don't sit near us, and *do not* approach me until we get home."

"Deal!" Courtney chirped, suddenly beaming.

With a final demand that they stay outside until they saw me and Jak leaving the ticket counter, I met Jak inside.

"Thanks," I told him, bringing a chunk of hair in front of my shoulder that Stephanie had pushed back. "So what're we seeing?"

"That'd ruin the surprise," Jak said, nodding in the direction he wanted me to follow.

We passed through the dimly lit hallway of theater doors on both sides of us, movie posters boasting what was playing behind each one, until...

Oh no. He didn't. He didn't actually—

"This is us."

"*A Wedding for Four?*" I said. "You're gonna watch a romcom

with me? How do you know I even like romcoms?”

“You don’t have to,” he answered, stepping aside to allow another couple in. “If you love them, I picked something great. If you hate them, we get the next hour and a half to make fun of how bad it is.”

He was good. He was dangerously good.

“So you don’t like them,” I said, venturing a guess.

“Doesn’t matter if I do or don’t.” He pulled open the door before pointing his gaze at me. “I know how to read facial expressions.”

That was a brag, and he knew it, and he might have even known that I couldn’t stand him for that.

Rounding the corner of the long entry hallway, Jak led me up to the top row, center view—which, considering the half-empty room, wasn’t surprising to see that those seats were still available. I wondered where my friends were as Jak and I settled down and he started opening a box of chocolate-covered raisins. When had he bought a box of chocolate-covered raisins?

Why don’t I notice anything when I’m around this boy?

“I do have to know if you like these, though,” he murmured, tilting the box toward me. “And unless you wanna end the night right now, say yes.”

“Unfortunately for you, they’re my favorite,” I replied, cupping my hands. He poured me a generous dozen. “Thanks.”

I made the mistake of glimpsing up from my pile of raisins, right into his stare. Right into his vivid, deep stare that the darkness of the theater couldn't hide, not with commercials playing against a white background illuminating the brown of his eyes that matched the chocolate in my hands. It couldn't have been longer than a couple of seconds—because who stares at someone for that long for no reason?—and yet I'd lost track of time completely the longer our eyes stayed with each other.

Loud music blared across the room, signifying the start of the movie, and I tore my eyes to the screen. In my peripheral vision, Jak, thankfully, followed my lead.

What was that just now?

The midday shot of a park brightened the room just enough for me to catch the three Aleger Girls making their way inside, not-so-discreetly scanning the rows—or maybe they weren't discreet to *me* because I knew they weren't scanning for empty seats.

Without warning, Stephanie caught my eye and sent me a smirk. I sent her a playful glare before honing my focus onto the giant screen.

“Thank you for that,” I told Jak as we walked through the movie theater exit, streetlights illuminating the square every dozen feet apart. “Fine, I admit it: I secretly like romcoms.”

“*Because* of how bad they are...?” he drawled, like he was really

guessing.

“Yes,” I admitted, “but also because they feel normal. They feel, like, really fake, yeah—but that’s any attempt of normal I try, you know?”

“I happen to,” he said, sticking his hands into his pockets again. “Thanks for letting me occupy your night.”

I was close, *close*, as in so-close-that-it’s-not-even-on-a-ruler close to saying, *Thank you for occupying it*, but I shut myself up with a nod. “I’ll see you at the school on Monday for Redstripe’s first day.”

“You will,” he replied, sounding... hopeful about it.

In full honesty, that had been the subtlest invitation for him to walk me home if he was, in fact, going back to the school with me. Evidently, though, he still had plans for the night, and I wasn’t sure I could blame him considering we’d be going back to our strict schedules and spy school behind our walls after tonight.

I’d forgiven him by then for tricking me in the mall, and he did deserve my gratitude for the night. But something about him, maybe even *by* the way he’d stayed behind in the square, was still rubbing on me the wrong way. Not everything was completely right about him. We were spy against spy technically, which meant until I knew otherwise, he had every secret under the sun I needed to be wary of.

Sunday morning, the girls were still singing about last night.

It was just, when we got to the breakfast table, they lowered their volume so as to not alert the other girls that we were, in fact, about to have boy spies treading the halls of our school tomorrow.

“Oh! I forgot!” Stephanie chirped, leaning forward to see Blaire past me. “Did you bring the note?”

“Oh yeah!” Blaire said as Courtney, on her other side, clapped with excitement. Blaire dug into her skirt pocket to hand the paper to me.

“What’s this?” I asked skeptically.

“Jak kind of might have seen us walking out of the theater and knew we were your friends,” she sang, poking me on my arm. “And then he wrote this and asked us to give it to you. He’s good.”

Too good. I tried to keep that at the front of my mind as I unfolded the paper again. *So that’s why he stayed behind last night.*

I really did have a fun time. Maybe it warranted a second date?

Date. Date. Date. Jak *had* seen it as a date!

“You’re *dating*,” Stephanie whisper-sang, grabbing my shoulders and swaying me back and forth.

“No,” I muttered, realizing that that was what I meant. I straightened, turning to each girl around me. “No! No, no, we’re not, we can’t, this has to be breaching at least one kind of code of conduct—or even security of some kind—”

“You’re *making excuses*,” Courtney sang, perching her elbows onto the table and her chin onto her hands. “Aren’t you happy?”

“I don’t—” I began, glancing down at Jak’s note again. Why wasn’t I? What was this resistance in my chest? What felt so wrong about this? Was it just Jak? Was I still upset he’d “beaten me” a few nights ago?

“I don’t wanna... get into this right now,” I said, realizing the words as I spoke them. “It feels wrong somehow. I think I went last night to be nice, but I don’t like how I lose every sense of training and instinct when I’m around him.”

“You know what that’s called, right?” Stephanie said, smirking. “You have a *crush*—”

“Stop that,” I said at her song, ready to argue some more until my feet detected the heavy footsteps on the wooden floor, approaching us.

I looked up. They were so heavy that I was pretty sure the water in my glass was slightly swaying because of them, not because our planet was moving at a speed of nearly 70,000 miles per hour.

Mr. Dawson, tall, rigid, and firm in his suit that commanded respect from all of his trainees in class, marched toward the table. The handsome face of the Aleger Academy’s favorite teacher ever since he was first hired had been stamped with a glare, and those sharp eyes were pointed straight at the four of us.