

Chapter **O**ne

“**W**here am I?”

I heard the words, but I wasn't sure I'd said them. The voice was too rough, too coarse to be mine. It was as if there were a stranger in my skin, lying in the dark, saying, “Who's there?”

“So it's English, is it?”

As soon as the young woman moved to stand at the end of the bed, I could see that she was beautiful. She had an Irish accent and strawberry blond hair in a shade that could never be anything but natural. Soft curls framed a slightly freckled face with blue eyes and a wide smile. Maybe it was the terrible throbbing in my head—the piercing pain behind my eyes—but I could have sworn I saw a halo.

“And American too, by the sound of it. Oh, Sister Isabella is going to be very upset about this. She wagered a week's worth of kitchen duty you were Australian. But you're not, are you?”

I shook my head, and it felt like a bomb went off. I wanted to scream, but instead I gritted my teeth and said, “You were betting on me?”

“Well, you should have heard yourself, talking in all kinds of tongues—like the devil himself was after you. French and German, Russian and Japanese, I think. A lot of languages no one here even speaks.” She walked to the small wooden stool beside my bed and whispered, “You’ll have to forgive us, but it was either bet . . . or worry.”

There were soft sheets beneath my hands, a cold stone wall beside my right shoulder. A candle flickered in the corner, pale light washing partway across a sparsely furnished room, leaving it mostly in shadow.

Worry seemed appropriate under the circumstances.

“Who are you?” I asked, scooting backward on the thin mattress, retreating into the cold corner made of stone. I was too weak to fight, far too unsteady to run, but when the girl reached for me, I managed to grab her hand and twist her arm into a terrible angle. “What is this place?”

“It’s my home.” Her voice cracked, but she didn’t try to fight. She just leaned closer to me, brought her free hand to my face, and said, “*You’re okay.*”

But I didn’t feel okay. My head ached, and when I moved, pain shot down my side. I kicked off the covers and saw that my legs were a solid mass of bruises and gashes and scrapes. Someone had bandaged my right ankle, packed it in ice. Someone had cleaned my cuts. Someone had brought me to that

bed and listened, guessing where I had come from and why.

Someone was looking right at me. “You did this?”

I ran my hand down my leg, fingering the gauze that bound my ankle.

“I did.” The girl placed a hand over my fingers as they picked at the threads. “Don’t you go undoing it, now.”

A crucifix hung on the wall behind her, and when she smiled, it was perhaps the kindest look I’d ever seen.

“You’re a nun?” I asked.

“I will be soon. I hope.” She blushed, and I realized she wasn’t much older than I was. “By year’s end, I should take my vows. I’m Mary, by the way.”

“Is this a hospital, Mary?”

“Oh, no. But there isn’t much in these parts, I’m afraid. So we do what we can.”

“Who is *we*?”

A kind of terror seized me then. I pulled my knees close to my chest. My legs felt skinnier than they should have, my hands rougher than I remembered. Just a few days before, I’d let my roommates give me a manicure to take their minds off of finals week. Liz had chosen the color—Flamingo Pink—but when I looked at my fingers then, the polish was gone. Blood and dirt were caked under the nails as if I’d crawled out of my school and halfway across the world on my hands and knees to reach that narrow bed.

“How long . . .” My voice caught, so I tried again. “How long have I been here?”

“Now, now.” Mary straightened the covers. She seemed afraid to face me when she said, “You don’t need to worry about—”

“How long?” I shouted, and Mary dropped her voice and her gaze. Her hands were, at last, still.

“You’ve been here six days.”

Six days, I thought. Not even a week. And yet it sounded like forever.

“Where are my clothes?” I pushed aside the covers and swung my feet to the floor, but my head felt so strange, I knew better than to try to stand. “I need my clothes and my things. I need . . .”

I wanted to explain, but the words failed me. *Thought* failed me. Once I got back to school, I was pretty sure my teachers would fail me. My head swirled, but I couldn’t hear a thing over the sound of the music that filled the little room, pulsing too loudly inside my ears.

“Can you turn that down, please?”

“What?” the girl asked.

I closed my eyes and tried not to think about the melody I didn’t know how to sing.

“Make it stop. Can you please make it stop?”

“Make what stop?”

“That music. It’s so loud.”

“Gillian”—the girl slowly shook her head—“there is no music.”

I wanted to argue, but I couldn’t. I wanted to run, but I had

no clue to where. All I seemed able to do was sit quietly as Mary picked up my feet and gently placed them back on the bed.

“You’ve got quite a bump there. I’m not surprised you’re hearing things. You’ve been saying things, too, just so you know. But I wouldn’t worry about that. People hear and say all kinds of crazy things when they’re sick.”

“What did I say?” I asked, honestly terrified of the answer.

“It doesn’t matter now.” She tucked the covers in around me, just like Grandma Morgan used to do. “All you need to do is lie there and rest and—”

“*What did I say?*”

“Crazy things.” The girl’s voice was a whisper. “A lot of it we didn’t understand. The rest—between us all—we pieced together.”

“Like what?” I gripped her hand tightly, as if trying to squeeze the truth out.

“Like you go to a school for spies.”

The woman who came to me next had swollen, arthritic fingers and gray eyes. She was followed by a young nun with red hair and a Hungarian accent, and a pair of twins in their late forties who huddled together and spoke Russian, low and under their breaths.

At my school, they call me the Chameleon. I’m the girl nobody sees. But not then. Not there. The sisters who surrounded me saw *everything*. They took my pulse and shined a bright light into my eyes. Someone brought a glass of water and

instructed me to sip it very slowly. It was the sweetest stuff I'd ever tasted, and so I downed it all in one long gulp, but then I started choking—my head kept on throbbing—and the nun with the swollen fingers looked at me as if to say, *Told you so.*

I don't know whether it was the habits or the accents or the stern order that I should lie perfectly still, but I couldn't shake the feeling that I'd found myself surrounded by another ancient and powerful sisterhood. I knew better than to go against them, so I stayed where I was and did exactly as I was told.

After a long time, the girl who had been there at the beginning eased toward me and took a seat at the foot of my bed. "Do you know why you're here?"

Where's here? I wanted to say, but something in my spy blood told me not to.

"I was doing a sort of project for school. I had to split off from the others. I must have . . . lost my way." I felt my voice break and told myself it was okay. Even the Mother Superior couldn't blame me. Technically, it wasn't a lie.

"We're a bit worried about that head of yours," Mary said. "You may need surgery, tests, things we can't do here. And someone must be looking for you."

I thought about my mother and my friends, and finally, about the Circle of Cavan. I looked down at my broken body and wondered if maybe I'd already been found. Then I studied the innocent faces that surrounded me and felt a whole new surge of panic: *What if the Circle finds me here?*

"Gillian?" Mary said. It was an embarrassingly long time before I realized she was speaking to me. "Gillian, are you okay?"

But I was already moving, pushing off the bed and across the room.

“I’ve got to go.”

Six days I’d been in one place, defenseless. I didn’t know how I’d come to be there or why, but I knew that the longer I stayed, the closer the Circle would be to finding me. I had to leave. And soon.

The Mother Superior, however, didn’t seem very concerned about ancient terror organizations. She had the look of a woman who might tell ancient terror organizations to bring it on.

“You will sit,” she spat in heavily accented English.

“I’m sorry, Mother Superior,” I said, my voice still raw. But the clock was ticking, and I couldn’t stay any longer. Summer. I’d given myself until the end of the summer to follow in my father’s footsteps, and I didn’t dare waste a minute more.

“I am grateful to you and the sisters. If you will give me your name and an address, I’ll send you money . . . payment for your services and—”

“We do not want your money. We want you to *sit*.”

“If you could direct me to the train station—”

“There is no train station,” the Mother Superior snapped. “Now, sit.”

“I can’t sit down! I have to leave! Now!” I looked around the small, crowded room. I was wearing a cotton nightgown that wasn’t my own, and I clutched at it with bloody fingers. “I need my clothes and shoes, please.”

“You don’t have any shoes,” Mary said. “When we found you, you were barefoot.”

I didn't want to think about what that meant. I just looked at the innocent faces and tried to ignore the evil that might have followed me to their door.

"I need to leave," I said slowly, searching the Mother Superior's eyes. "It would be best if I left . . . *now*."

"Impossible," the Mother Superior said, then turned to the sisters. "*Wenn das Mädchen denkt daß wir sie in den Schnee rausgehen lassen würden, dann ist sie verrückt.*"

My hands shook. My lips quivered. I know how I must have looked, because my new friend, Mary, was reaching for me, easing closer. "Don't you go worrying, now. You aren't in any trouble. The Mother Superior just said—"

"Snow." I pulled aside a curtain, looked out on a vast expanse of white, and whispered against the frosty glass, "She said *snow*."

"Oh, that's nothing." Mary took the curtain from me, sliding it back to block the chill. "These parts of the Alps are very high, you see. And, well, we've just had a bit of an early spell."

I jerked away from the window. "How early?" I asked, silently chanting to myself, *It is June. It is June. It is—*

"Tomorrow is the first of October."

"I . . . I think I'm going to be sick."

Mary grabbed me by the arm and helped me limp down the hall, past crucifixes and frosty windows to a bathroom with a cold stone floor.

I retched, but my stomach was empty except for the glass of water, my throat filled with nothing but sand. And still I

heaved, throwing up the bile and acid that seemed to be eating away at my core.

When I closed my eyes, my head felt like a top, spinning in a place without gravity. When I finally pulled myself to my feet and leaned against the bathroom sink, a light flickered on, and I found myself staring into a face I totally didn't know. I would have jumped if I'd had the strength, but as it was, all I could do was lean closer.

My hair had been shoulder length and dishwater blond my whole life, but right then it was a little past my ears and as black as night. I pulled the nightgown over my head, felt my hair stand on end from the static, and stared at a body I no longer knew.

My ribs showed through my skin. My legs seemed longer, leaner. Bruises covered my knees. Red welts circled my wrists. Thick bandages covered most of one arm. But it all paled in comparison to the knot on the side of my head. I touched it gently, and the pain was so sharp that I thought I would be sick again, so I gripped the sink, leaned close to the mirror, and stared at the stranger in my skin.

“What did you do?”

Everything in my training told me that this was not the time to panic. I had to think, to plan. I thought of all the places I could go, but my mind drifted, wondering about the places I had been. When I moved, the pain shot through one ankle and up my leg, and I knew I would have a hard time running off that mountain.

“Here, here,” Mary said, pressing a cool rag to my head. She

brought a cup to my lips, made me drink, and then I whispered, “Why did you call me Gillian?”

“It was what you kept saying, over and over,” she said. Her Irish accent seemed thicker in the small space. “Why? Isn’t that your name?”

“No. I’m Cammie. Gilly is the name of . . . my sister.”

“I see.”

My mind swirled with the options of the things I should and shouldn’t do until it finally settled on the only question that mattered.

“Mary, is there a telephone?”

Mary nodded. “The Mother Superior bought a satellite phone last summer.”

Summer.

At the Gallagher Academy for Exceptional Young Women, there are typically seventy-six days in our summer vacation. That’s eleven weeks. Just under three months. One quarter of a year. I had allowed myself the summer to search and hunt and hopefully find the truth about why the Circle wanted me. The season had never seemed that long before, but right then it was like a black hole, threatening to suck up everything in my life.

“Mary,” I said, gripping the sink tighter and leaning into the light, “there’s someone I need to call.”