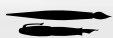


ALLY CARTER

SEE HOW THEY RUN

BOOK
TWO OF
EMBASSY
ROW



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CHAPTER ONE

I don't know where I am. I don't know why I'm here. And as I study the woman who stands two feet away from me, staring, I realize I don't know her either.

Not even a little bit.

Sure, she is my grandfather's chief of staff. She says she was my mother's friend. I've seen her every day for weeks now, but she is a stranger. For a second, I have to wonder if this might all be a nightmare. But not a nightmare, really. A hallucination. A fantasy. An . . . episode. That's what the doctors call it when my mind drifts to places that aren't real and aren't here and aren't now.

I've been doing it for years, they tell me.

Ever since my mom died.

Ever since I —

No. I don't let myself think about what I did. There are some things that, once remembered, you can never quite forget.

"Grace, it's okay," Ms. Chancellor says. "You're safe here."

I know she's afraid I'm going to turn around and run down the tunnel from which we've just emerged. Or, worse, that I'm going to lash out — that I'm going to fight. With her. With the truth. With reality, because reality keeps trying to kill me, and one day it might just succeed.

"Grace?" Ms. Chancellor's hand is on my arm, and only then do I realize I've started to shake. Then again, I'm always shaking.

Unlike Ms. Chancellor. I look at her hand — at how steady it is — and I think about how it held the gun. She didn't waver. She didn't tremble. She just took aim at the most powerful man in Adria and pulled the trigger.

That was a week ago. Now she's looking at me as if nothing happened at all.

"Will he die?" I ask before I even realize how much the answer matters.

"Who?" Ms. Chancellor asks.

"The prime minister. He's in a coma, right? Will he die? Or will he wake up?"

I want him to die so that he can never hurt anyone again — so that he will never be able to tell the world it was the US ambassador's chief of staff who sent him to his grave.

But I also want him to live so he can tell me why he wanted my mother dead and exactly who first gave the order. I need him to give me a list of all the people that I have to destroy.

I wonder which fate Ms. Chancellor would prefer for the prime minister. As usual, she's not saying. Instead she eyes me over the rim of her dark glasses and answers, "Oh. It's not clear whether or not the prime minister will ever recover. It was a very serious heart attack, after all."

For a second, I'm certain I've misheard her. But then I realize that she's smiling like someone who is three moves away from checkmate and there's no way anyone can stop her.

"You can't be serious," I say.

"Oh, I'm quite serious. Heart trouble runs in the prime minister's family. The attack was very sudden, you know. Almost lethal."

I saw Ms. Chancellor shoot him. I saw the bullet wound and the blood that covered his chest. I saw it!

Didn't I?

I don't know anymore, so I shake harder.

"No." My voice is quiet even though I want to scream. "It wasn't a heart attack. He was shot. You —"

"Of course it was a heart attack, Grace. What else would it have been?" Ms. Chancellor gives me a knowing look, and I'm pretty sure this is her way of telling me I'm not crazy. But she will never, ever say so.

Heart attack.

Now I know why the streets have been so calm, the city so normal. I've been alone in my room for a week, but even so I should have recognized the signs of a country not at all concerned about an attempt on the life of its primary leader. If Adria thinks

the prime minister was brought down by natural causes — not an American bullet from an American gun — then . . . “No. That can’t be. People can’t actually believe that his heart failure had nothing to do with the bullet in his chest.”

Ms. Chancellor cocks an eyebrow. “What bullet?”

There would have been paramedics and doctors, the Adrian equivalent of the Secret Service. And reports — so many reports. My mind can’t fathom the amount of power that this kind of cover-up would take — the scope and scale of a lie of this magnitude. But I know by looking at her that it isn’t just possible — it *happened*.

I’ll never look at this woman the same way again. It’s one thing to mortally wound a man, but then to make it look as if it never happened at all? Who is she? *What* is she?

Nothing is as it seems.

After all, the room we’re in isn’t supposed to exist. I’m not supposed to be alive. My mom was supposed to be an antiques dealer.

No one was supposed to want her dead.

Slowly, Ms. Chancellor steps away and I stop focusing on her and start focusing on where I am, in a passageway deep beneath the city of Valancia, standing on the threshold of a secret.

“What is this place?” I sound almost feral, I know. And I shake harder.

“We shouldn’t have come here,” Ms. Chancellor says, worried now. “You’re not ready yet. It’s okay. We can come back another time.”

I shake my head. “No. I want to know everything. I want to know everything *now*.”

I’m too thin, they tell me. Too frail and tired and broken. I can see it in her eyes. The lies I’ve been living with for years have all fallen away, leaving me with nothing but pain and anger and a deep, deep sadness that this woman would give anything to fix. She’s kind enough to try, but smart enough to know she should know better. So Ms. Chancellor pats my arm.

“Very well, dear. Come along.”

Ms. Chancellor walks ahead of me then turns back, holds her arms out wide, and sweeps them across the massive space that sprawls before us.

“What do you think?”

I think I’m still in a nightmare. A very elaborate nightmare. But I don’t dare tell her that.

I just follow her onto a balcony that is old — no, *ancient*. But it doesn’t creak beneath my weight. The walls are solid stone. Below us, the floor is composed of glossy white tiles that gleam beneath the massive gaslight chandeliers hanging overhead. A huge stained-glass window shines from high on the wall to my left, its light slicing through the cavernous space, showing the symbol that I have been seeing for days but never really stopped to study until now. We are at least a hundred feet beneath the streets of Valancia. How the light reaches that piece of stained glass I do not know and do not ask. There are far more important questions on my mind.

“What is this place?” I ask, knowing the answer must matter but having no idea exactly how.

“It is the headquarters,” Ms. Chancellor says.

“Headquarters for what?”

But Ms. Chancellor doesn’t answer. Instead, she starts for the steps that spiral down to the floor below. “Come with me, Grace. There is a lot for you to see.”

When we reach the bottom of the stairs, I touch the heavy wooden tables that sit in the center of the room. They’re covered with books that are so old their pages have actually grown thin. I think I could probably see through them if I held them up against a light.

“It’s like a library,” I say, reaching out for one of the old books.

“Not without gloves, dear,” Ms. Chancellor chides. I pull my hand back. “And it’s not *like* a library, Grace. It *is* a library. Of a sort.”

That’s when Ms. Chancellor walks by the weapons — rows and rows of them lining one wall. There are spears and swords, daggers and arrows — bows so large they look like they must have been wielded by giants. It makes me think of empires and gladiators and the battle between good and evil. I’ve lived on army bases my whole life, but I’ve never seen anything like this.

“Are those real?” I ask.

“Of course.”

“How old are they?”

“How old is Valancia?” Ms. Chancellor glances over her shoulder and eyes me. She doesn’t wink, but she looks like she might want to. “Come now. There is something in particular you need to see.”

I follow Ms. Chancellor through an arching doorway, down a stone corridor that twists and curves. The ceiling is low, and gaslights burn at even intervals, but even so, the light is dim as it bounces off the old white stone.

There is no sound here, a hundred feet beneath the city. No honking buses or ringing trolley bells. No tourist has ever set foot in these hallowed halls — I’m sure of that. I’m walking in important footsteps, but I have absolutely no idea whose.

Finally, the corridor opens into a large circular room. The ceiling rises, dome-like, above us. And in the center of the room stands a woman, carved from wood. She looks toward a sky that she can’t see, reaches out for a sun that she can’t touch. One wing is unfurled behind her, its tip long since rotted away. Her other wing is broken. And I know this poor angel will never fly again.

“What is this?”

I hold my hand out tentatively, asking for permission, and Ms. Chancellor nods.

“Go ahead, dear,” she says as I touch the old, smooth wood. “It was the masthead of a ship a very long time ago. One of seven ships, to be precise. This is the angel that guided the *Grace*.”

I spin on her. “The what?”

Ms. Chancellor grins as if to say *You heard me*. Then she just brings her hands together and asks, “Do you know the story of Adria, dear?”

My grandmother was Adrian. My mother was born here — raised here. I came here every summer for the first twelve years of my life. I’m fluent in Adria’s language, but I don’t know this

country, I'm starting to realize. It's my home, but I still feel like an invader, someone who should be cast outside its walls.

"Mom used to tell us the story," I say. "But somehow I think it was the wrong one."

Ms. Chancellor chuckles. "What you and most of the world have been told *is* true. It is simply a tad bit *incomplete*. As much of history is wont to be."

My blood is pounding harder now, like I've been running. But am I running to or from? I honestly don't know.

A chandelier hangs overhead, but the gaslight is dim — a fluttering, flickering thing. So Ms. Chancellor lights a candle and holds it up, walking toward the wall that circles around us.

In the glow, I realize that the wall is covered in canvas. A mural stretches all the way around. Several arching doorways stand at regular intervals, breaking up the scenes.

When Ms. Chancellor raises her hand, her light shines upon sand and ancient strongholds and a scorching sun that reflects off the shining armor of an army riding into battle.

"At the end of the twelfth century, the Third Crusade was coming to an end," Ms. Chancellor says, beginning the story that every child in Adria learns in the cradle.

On the next panel, sand blends into sea as seven white sails set out for the horizon.

"Sir Fredrick and his knights left the holy land. They took their seven fastest ships and made for England, but a massive storm blew them terribly off course. They couldn't see the stars. They had long since lost sight of land. Day after day the storm

beat on, until these men who had survived years of battle began to fear that they would die there, swallowed by the sea. But then — as the story goes — on the seventh morning, Sir Fredrick saw it.”

When Ms. Chancellor moves to the third painting, I have to step back to fully realize what I’m seeing. A man. It is a painting of a man, a *giant*, standing in the clear blue waters I know well.

“As you know, Grace, the Romans founded Valancia. Even two thousand years ago it was the crossroads of the world, and to mark the entrance to the bay they erected a monument, something to announce to the world that this was their land. Of course, eventually, the Roman Empire gave way to the Byzantines, and the Byzantines eventually lost Adria to the Turks, and the Turks to the Mongols, but the point is that for a thousand years a great stone idol stood, guarding Adria’s shores.”

“What is it?” I ask, gesturing to the painting.

“It’s Neptune. Roman god of the sea. Some say the angel led Sir Fredrick and his knights through the storm, kept them safe until Sir Fredrick could see Neptune on the horizon like a beacon, calling them home.”

I watch Ms. Chancellor’s light play over the scene as seven ships sail though the long, dark shadow of Neptune’s outstretched hand.

“Was there really a statue?” I ask.

“Oh yes. I’m told it was the height of two football fields.”

“Why haven’t I ever seen it?”

“Oh, it fell and eroded away ages ago,” Ms. Chancellor says with a wave of her hand. “The important thing is that it still stood

when Sir Fredrick and his men battled that storm. Because of it, they found Adria. And safety.”

It’s easy to imagine ships full of war-torn knights coming here to outrun their demons. I don’t stop to consider the irony that this is where mine found me.

In the next painting, Adria looks like Eden. The seven ships bob on peaceful waters while the knights make their way onto the land. They fall to their knees and kiss the ground.

“When Sir Fredrick’s men climbed onto our shores they were greeted by people who had never known anything but war and unrest — people who had been mere pieces on a chess-board for centuries. They were greeted by people who took them in. Of course, at the time, Adria was ruled by the Mongols.” Ms. Chancellor points to the painting, at the warriors who watch Sir Fredrick’s knights from the hills in the distance. “But the knights quickly formed an alliance with Adria’s people, and together they fought until this new land was their own.”

When Ms. Chancellor turns to me again, there is a new twinkle in her eye. “Seven knights came to Adria, my dear. What the stories never say is that this is where they found and married seven women.”

When she reaches the next-to-last picture, Ms. Chancellor shines her light upon the beautiful faces of the brides who stand behind their husbands, smiling knowing smiles.

“These women had been born here, raised here. They knew every tunnel the Romans had carved beneath the city, every cave high in the hills. What the history books never say, Grace, is that

Sir Fredrick and his knights won Adria because their wives showed them how to do it.”

She says this like it’s important, and I have to remind myself that once upon a time, my mother came to this room and heard this story.

A part of me has to wonder if this is what killed her.

Ms. Chancellor lowers her candle. “Now, it’s important to understand that Adria had never known peace. Not really. It was too important, too pivotal — every great empire wanted it for its own. And so as the knights of Adria ruled, their wives watched and listened and whispered in their husbands’ ears ways to keep their homeland from being pulled once more into war and chaos.”

She takes another step and lets her light fall upon the image of a great stone wall beginning to rise around the city.

“They told their husbands they would feel safer behind a wall. They suggested who the new country should trade with and why. And, most of all, these women remembered what their mothers and grandmothers had learned from the Romans, the Byzantines, the Turks, and the Mongols: that history almost always repeats itself. And it is almost always written by men.”

She’s right, of course. There’s a loop in my life — a pattern of violence and death and heartbreaking sorrow that I would give anything to stop. To rewrite. To end. But my walls are not yet high enough, not strong enough. What Ms. Chancellor doesn’t know is that I never will stop building.

“So that is how Adria was born, Grace. Sir Fredrick became King Fredrick the First. The knights who led the other six ships

were given lands and riches and a place at the king's side as his most trusted advisors. Years passed, and their sons became princes and lords and the leaders of Europe.”

She pulls the candle farther from the wall. Its gentle glow lights her face, and somehow I know this moment matters. My heart is pounding, my hands sweating as Ms. Chancellor turns to me.

“We are what became of their daughters.”