

ALLY CARTER



BOOK ONE OF EMBASSY ROW



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**FOR KRISTIN NELSON,
LITERARY AGENT EXTRAORDINAIRE**

CHAPTER ONE

When I was twelve I broke my leg jumping off the wall between Canada and Germany,” I say, but the woman across from me doesn’t even blink. I don’t ask whether or not she has ever heard the story. I’m pretty sure she probably has, but I keep talking anyway.

“My brother said that the fall would probably kill me. But it just broke my right femur in three places. I totally showed him.”

“I see,” the woman says, stone-faced, and I go on.

“I fractured my left forearm when I was ten, and dislocated my right shoulder five months later. Have you ever been to Fort Benning?” I ask, but I don’t really wait for an answer. “Well, you might think that big tree outside the Officer’s Club is climbable. Trust me — it isn’t. Okay. Where was I? Oh, fourteen was the year of the concussion. There were two of them. We were

stationed in San Diego then. I didn't break my ankle until we moved to Alabama."

I take a deep breath. "And that brings me to now. Now I'm here."

"And you're not bleeding," the woman says. "What an excellent start."

"So in answer to your question, Mrs. Chancellor —"

"Oh, it's Ms. Chancellor, Grace. I'm not married."

"Sorry. *Ms.* Chancellor. I don't mean to get into trouble. Trouble just sort of finds me."

Behind her dark-rimmed glasses, I can see a glint in Ms. Chancellor's brown eyes. Her mouth ticks up in something that isn't quite a smirk but definitely isn't a smile. I can tell she doesn't believe me — but I also know that she would like to. Everyone wants me to be different than advertised. Grace: the new-and-improved edition.

What Ms. Chancellor can't possibly realize is how nobody wants that more than me.

"Well, let's hope trouble doesn't have your change-of-address card," she says. "Your grandfather would like this to be a fresh start for you, Grace. A new city. A new home. We would like this to be a chance for you to get away from your issues."

She could have tried to be nice about it. To be . . . you know . . . *diplomatic*. That is the purpose of this place, after all. But I guess diplomacy doesn't always extend to teenage girls with my sort of reputation.

“Is that all?” Ms. Chancellor smiles a little. It’s almost like she’s daring me to top myself.

“Well, I did watch my mother die right in front of my eyes when I was thirteen. But you already knew about that, didn’t you, Ms. Chancellor?”

She recoils as I say this. People always do. To tell you the truth, that’s kind of why I do it. I mean, it’s not like avoiding the topic of the fire will bring my mother back. It won’t make me un-see what I saw. And, besides, I know Ms. Chancellor really wants to ask me about it — to see if I’m as crazy as advertised. This is her chance. If she’s crazy enough to take it.

But she’s not.

Instead, she stands and starts toward the door.

“Well, Grace, why don’t I take you to your room?” she asks, but I can almost hear what she’s thinking — the undercurrent of questions and doubts. My life is a never-ending conversation of the things that people do not say.

Ms. Chancellor smiles. “I bet you’d like to get settled in.”

When I follow her out into the long hall, I can’t help but glance at the double doors of the neighboring office. They’re big and heavy — stately — with the US seal in the center and two flags flanking them. They look so official and so strong, but the most important thing about these doors is that they are tightly closed. Even to me.

“Is he here?” I ask.

I haven’t seen him in three years.

“No, Grace. Your grandfather is a busy man. But he’s asked me to make sure you’re settled in.” She gives me a wave that’s a little too eager, a smile that’s a little too bright. “Come on. I’ll give you the tour.”

“I’ve been here before,” I say, following her toward the stairs.

“Of course, but *I’ve* never had the privilege of showing you around.”

“I lived here every summer until my mom died. I know the way around.”

“Of course you do, but you and I have never really gotten to know each other. I would like for us to be friends, Grace.” Ms. Chancellor stops on the highest step, her hand on the railing. The light from a big round window catches the highlights in her auburn hair. It’s pretty. She’s pretty. I bet she was a real looker in her twenties, but she’s only a few years younger than my grandfather, which makes her at least sixty now. Her auburn hair, I realize, probably comes out of a bottle.

“Chocolate?” She pulls two blue-wrapped sweets out of the pocket of her tailored jacket, offers one to me, and keeps one for herself.

“I’m sixteen,” I tell her.

“So?”

“So I’m not a little kid. You don’t have to bribe me with candy.”

“Good. Then I get to eat yours.” She unwraps one piece and pops it into her mouth.

Every year the Swiss ambassador gives a huge box of chocolates

to my grandfather for Christmas, and I know from experience that the candy Ms. Chancellor is offering me is smooth and sweet and unlike anything else on earth, so I take my piece and unwrap it, hold it in my hand for a second before taking a bite. A thin layer of chocolate covers my fingers when I'm finished.

"Here," she says, handing me a handkerchief.

I rub my hands on my jeans.

Ms. Chancellor eyes this, sees it as proof that the ambassador's granddaughter is just as wild and untamed as advertised.

I start down the stairs and summon my most regal tone as I glance back over my shoulder. "I feel we're off to an *excellent* start."

The embassy looks smaller than I remembered. I know buildings are supposed to shrink as you age, but I hadn't been expecting this. When we reach the stairs, my hand feels too big on the railing. I wonder what Ms. Chancellor would do if I were to hop onto the banister and slide down to the black-and-white-checkered floor like I used to do when Jamie told me not to.

"There are fifty-five Americans employed by the embassy," Ms. Chancellor says, slipping back into tour guide mode as if I'm just another visiting dignitary. I can't really blame her — I'm a big job, after all, a responsibility she isn't exactly trained for.

"A few live on the embassy grounds. But most reside in the city. We are the face of the United States here in Adria. We do important work for an important cause. And now, Grace, you're one of us!"

“I know,” I tell her, but she just talks on like it’s all news to me. Like I didn’t spend every summer of my life here up until three years ago.

“Some of the people who work here have children about your age,” Ms. Chancellor is saying. “I suspect you are going to make some great friends here, Grace.”

“Yay.”

If Ms. Chancellor hears my sarcasm, she ignores it.

“We also have about forty Adrian citizens who work with us. Not for us. Never *for us*.” She adds the last part a little under her breath.

When we reach the end of the hall, I see a big round window with a cozy seat nestled into the alcove beneath it. Heavy velvet draperies hang on either side, ready to block the world away. Light ripples through the wavy glass, and I feel myself stop and stare.

In the distance, I can hear a woman counting.

“Twenty-seven. Twenty-eight. Twenty-nine.”

A child laughs.

There are footsteps on the stairs.

“Ready or not, here I come!” the woman yells, and the laughter grows louder.

“Gracie!” The woman’s voice echoes through the hall. “Gracie, where are you?”

“Grace?” The voice is louder — closer. It cuts through the fog that fills my mind. “Grace,” Ms. Chancellor says, and I shudder as I remember where I am. *When I am.*

“Grace,” she tries again. “Did you hear me?”

“Yeah,” I say, shaking my head. “They work with us. Never *for* us. I’ve got it.”

She eyes me, not sure if she should be worried or annoyed. “What I was saying *after* that is that security is our top priority here. Adria is a very friendly post, but we live in a dangerous world. That’s why security protocols are not optional. We do not prop open doors. We do not give out access codes. And we never, ever jump off of walls.”

She removes her glasses and stares at me with eyes the same chestnut color as her hair, and I know she’s not messing around.

“While you are in this building, you are on American soil. This is your country. This is your home. But step outside these walls and you are a visitor in Adria — a visitor with a very important job. Grace, I need to know that you understand me.”

“Sure,” I say, because I have heard this all before. I have done this all before. I have ignored this all before.

“We must respect our host country and we *must respect our neighbors*.” She lowers her voice again and grows more serious. More intent. This is a woman who means business as she warns me, “Sometimes the walls that stand between us and our neighbors are all that stand between our country and war.”

“I understand. Don’t worry. I am not going to cause any trouble.”

And at that moment I mean it. I really, really do. Ms. Chancellor must see it in my eyes, because she reaches out. But as

soon as her fingers touch my shoulder, I feel a shock and jerk away. I'm almost certain I smell smoke.

"Grace?" Ms. Chancellor's voice is too soft — too distant. "Grace, do you know why your grandfather asked you to come live with him?"

"Because my dad's unit is being deployed to the Middle East and war zones aren't as kid-friendly as they used to be?"

"No. You're here because your grandfather has worked in Adria for nearly half a century. He married a woman from here. He raised his family here. This was your mother's home, Grace. It is *your* home. And your grandfather wants you to know it and love it as he does. He has always wanted you here."

"Okay." I do not ask how — if Grandpa loves me so much — it's possible that I haven't laid eyes on him since before my mother died.

Ms. Chancellor smiles at me. She thinks we've just bonded. I don't have the heart to tell her she's wrong.

I'm here because there's no place else for me to go.

CHAPTER TWO

Ms. Chancellor thinks the room at the end of the hall is mine.

I am so paralyzed by her mistake I don't even know how to tell her that she's wrong. So I just stand perfectly still, watching the lights flicker and buzz when she flips them on. It's like the room is having trouble waking up from its long slumber. It hasn't been used in years, after all.

Three years.

The electrical outlets all look funny and, in the attached bathroom, there is one spout for hot water and another one for cold. These are the things that remind me where I am — how far I have traveled. This isn't just another relocation from one army base to another. This time I am deep in enemy territory, and I am on my own.

Ms. Chancellor opens the window and lets the cool breeze fill the room. It smells like the sea.

“Now, I know we’ve arranged for the majority of your things to be shipped over, but — Oh, good, someone brought your luggage up.” She motions to the big rolling suitcase and duffle bag that sit beside the bed. “You should have plenty of time to unpack before dinner. Would you like some help?”

She stops and watches me for a moment. Eventually, though, the silence is too much and she blurts, “So? What do you think?” She smiles too brightly; I feel like there’s too much riding on whatever answer I’m being asked to give. “Do you like it?”

Someone has put fresh flowers on the desk, and I reach out to touch them. I eye the white lace curtains and the big queen bed with the twirly, twisty frame and soft-pink canopy. It is every little girl’s dream room. Too bad I’m not a little girl.

Too bad I’m not my mo —

“I think there’s been some kind of mistake,” I say too quickly. “I’m always in the yellow room.” I point in the direction of the smaller bedroom three doors down. “That’s my room.”

“Well, your grandfather and I thought that you’d be more comfortable in this room. Since you’ll be staying with us longer this time. It’s larger, see? And, of course, it has its own bathroom, and — ”

“This is my mom’s room,” I say. As if she doesn’t know. As if it isn’t obvious.

The signs are everywhere, from the ballerina-topped jewelry

box on the dresser to the stuffed animals in the window seat. Every summer of my childhood, my mother made a pilgrimage back to a room that never changed. She grew up, but it did not. When I was a kid, I thought it felt like a time machine. Now it feels like a shrine.

“We can redecorate,” Ms. Chancellor tells me. “Of course, you should pick out your own things. We have a lovely selection of furniture in the attic. Do you like antiques?” she asks, then realizes how silly it sounds. “Of course you don’t like antiques. Well, maybe we can ship some of your furniture over from the States if you’d prefer.”

“That’s okay,” I tell her. “I don’t have a home there either.” For a second, she looks at me like I’m the saddest little orphan in the world, so I point at myself and say, “Army brat,” as if living on ten bases in fifteen years has left me impervious to change. As if what happened is just something else I can move away from and forget.

“Oh.” She nods. “Well, how about we go look around the attic, just in case? Or you can move to the yellow room if you think that would be better.”

As she talks, I pull aside the lacy curtain and stare out the window. Mom’s old room is at the back of the embassy, right beside the ancient wall that runs around the city’s edge. From my place on the third story, I have a bird’s-eye view of the Russian flag that waves atop the next building over. On the other side, I can see Germany and a smidge of Canada — dozens of embassies

all stacked together like dominoes in a ring around the city. Suddenly I am overwhelmingly afraid that I'm going to knock them all down. It's just a matter of time.

That's why, even with the window open, I'm finding it hard to breathe. Ms. Chancellor is saying something about dinner plans and a midnight curfew. She doesn't notice that the walls are closing in. Her wrists don't itch so badly she wants to scratch them until they bleed. When she opens the closet and pushes aside a red sundress, she doesn't hear the voice in the bathroom, calling, "*Gracie, honey, can you zip me?*"

I close my eyes and take a step back, but Ms. Chancellor doesn't notice. She's not looking closely enough.

"Grace?" Ms. Chancellor says. "What do you think?"

I think I have to get out of here. I need to run. To breathe.

"It's . . ." I start, struggling for breath.

"Grace, are you okay?"

I've got to get her out of here, I think as I turn to the window and notice the tree that stretches up to the sky, its big branches easily within my reach. "It's perfect."

When Ms. Chancellor leaves, I know I'm supposed to unpack and settle in. But I can't touch my things. There is already a hairbrush in the drawer in the bathroom. An old raincoat and umbrella hang from a hook on the back of the door. The dresser drawers are empty, but the shelves are full of books. My mother's books. Nancy Drew and Agatha Christie. She always loved a good mystery.

And the one thing I know for certain is that I don't want to be here. Not in this room. Not in this embassy. Not in the city of Valancia or the country of Adria.

I. Don't. Want. To. Be. Here.

The cry is in my throat, rising up, but I don't dare let it out. Instead, I open the window wider. I've already thrown one leg over the sill and am reaching for the nearest tree branch when I hear a small voice say, "Where are you going?"

I freeze.

It's always quiet here. I'd forgotten that about Embassy Row. You would think that so much diplomacy would make some kind of noise — a hum at least. But all I hear are birds, the wind in the tree. Maybe a little bit of traffic in the distance, but for the most part it is silent. I stand perfectly still, waiting for the voice to come again.

"Hello! Hello!"

Then I see her, sitting on the edge of the wall, back straight, one skinny arm waving in my direction. She can't be older than twelve. She has pale skin and white-blond hair. It's like looking at a ghost.

"Where are you going?" the girl asks again. Her accent is Northern European — German, perhaps.

"Nowhere," I say.

"You look like you're going somewhere!" she yells.

I climb back into my mother's room and rush out the door.

• • •

I'm not going to have a panic attack. I'm not going to let it come and sweep over me. I'm not going to give anyone a reason to call my father or the doctors, to count my pills or make me talk. I solemnly swear that I will never talk again if I can help it. So I run faster. The stairs come two at a time, swirling, spiraling. Taking me away from the room with the canopy bed, from the hairbrush and the mysteries, from the problems I can't solve.

But as soon as I reach the landing I can see the bottom of the stairs and the boy who is already standing there, waiting.

I freeze, stunned.

He is not supposed to be here.

When he says, "Well, if it isn't Grace the Ace," I know it is too late to run. Wherever I might hide, he'd find me. He was always able to find me.

"Isn't that what your brother always calls you?" the boy asks, but doesn't wait for an answer. "Anyway, welcome back."

He smiles like it's the easiest thing in the world. Like he's exactly where he's supposed to be. But he's not. His accent alone is enough to tell me that he is on the wrong side of the wall.

He's not supposed to be here.

For a second, I almost wish Ms. Chancellor were still with me. I feel too small again, the embassy too big. It's like I'm ten and about to be in trouble. Locked in a closet, then scolded for following the boys and told to go back to my room. I feel the sudden urge to jump off the wall or out the window, just to prove I can.

"So when did you get in?" the boy asks.

“I’m sorry,” I say, forcing myself to walk closer to the blue eyes that are staring back at me, too big, too intense. It’s a gaze that might burn if I let it, so I decide not to let it. Not even a little bit. I cock my head and eye him. “Have we met?” I ask.

The boy laughs. “Nice try, Grace. So how’s Jamie?”

“Perfect. As usual. If you actually knew my brother, you’d know that.”

“Oh, but I *do* know your brother,” the boy says, his accent stronger. “In fact, I know *you*.” The boy doesn’t wink, but he gives me the kind of smile that goes with one.

“Oh, gee, I’m sorry I don’t remember,” I say as I reach the main floor and turn to start down the hall. “I guess you didn’t make much of an impression.”

“Sure I did. Of course, the last time we saw each other they were scraping what was left of you off of the German courtyard, so I can see how your memory might be impaired.”

“Canadian,” I say. “I was in the Canadian courtyard. I’ve never fallen into Germany.”

I start to push past him, but the boy moves to block my path.

“How long are we going to play this game, Gracie?”

“I’m sure I don’t know what you mean.”

“Then allow me to introduce myself,” he says, playing along as he gives me a low bow. “Alexei Volkov, at your service. I live next door.” He nods out the window toward the Russian embassy.

Because that’s the thing about Embassy Row. The boy next door is probably Russian.

He is *not supposed to be here*.

“Then shouldn’t you be getting home?” I ask. “I’d hate for us to have an international incident. It’s only my first day back.”

“Actually, that’s why I’m here. You see, I’m the guy your brother put in charge of you.”

At this, I have to laugh. “Oh, he did, did he?”

“Yes. I am to . . . and I quote . . . ‘keep Grace from killing herself or anyone else.’ Especially me. He was most emphatic about that last part.”

“I don’t need a babysitter.”

“That is not what I hear.” Alexei crosses his arms and leans against the wall, blocking my way. But there’s something in his eyes as he looks at me. “You grew up, Gracie.”

“People do that. Even little sisters.”

“You will always be Jamie’s little sister.”

“So he likes to remind me. But that doesn’t make me your problem.”

“I guess this is where we must . . . what is it you Americans say? Agree to disagree.”

Alexei has lived on Embassy Row since he was three. He’s attended the English-speaking international school since he was five. His English is as good as mine, but he likes to play this game. They all do. I don’t play any game that I can’t win.

“How have you been, Gracie?” he asks. His voice is too soft now. Too sincere. And I hate the sound of it. It makes me wonder: What does he know? What has Jamie told him?

For better or worse, I lower my head and say, “Alive.”

“Good,” Alexei says. Then a darkness crosses his face, and I

can feel the words coming even before he tilts his head and says, “I was very sorry to hear about your mother. She was always very kind to me.”

“I . . .”

The doors to the formal living room are open, and when I stare through them *I see blankets draped over chair backs. Somebody has built a fort.*

“Jamie!” a little blond girl calls. “Alexei!”

But the boys are nowhere to be seen.

A woman sweeps into the room, takes the little girl in her arms.

“Gracie, what’s the matter?”

“They left me.” The little girl’s voice quivers, full of tears she won’t let fall. “Jamie and Alexei left me!”

“Oh, Gracie.” The woman holds her tighter. “That’s why I’m here. I will never leave you.”

“Never leave me,” I whisper.

“Grace?” Alexei’s voice comes to me. But it’s deeper than it used to be. He and Jamie will never build a fort again. “Grace, did you say something?”

“I . . . I have to go.”

“Grace — ”

“I have to go now!” I shout because he is too close. The past is too close. The emotions I keep bottled up inside of me are pushing to the surface. And, most of all, I am tired. I’m so, so tired. And if I have to stay inside this building one moment longer I might not make it. I might just crumble into ash and blow away.

There's a small courtyard behind the embassy. It's filled with rosebushes transplanted from the White House and secluded benches — a few meandering paths that crisscross the grounds.

As I reach for the door, Alexei says, "Grace, you can't go that way."

I spin, throw my arms out wide, and shout, "Watch me!"

Then I back into the door, pushing as hard as I can. But I'm bigger than I used to be. Stronger. And the doors open too easily against my weight. The stairs are slick and I lose my balance as soon as I'm through the door. I can feel myself slipping, falling.

A hand grabs me from behind, but it is the exact wrong sensation at the exact wrong time. I feel like a rope has been fraying inside of me, slowly unraveling until . . .

Snap.

I turn and lash out. A cry rises up in my throat, primitive and raw, and then I'm pushing and lunging. Falling. As I land in the rosebushes, I can feel the thorns of a rosebush tearing into my skin, clinging to my clothes. But I can't stop. I have to get away, so I push to my hands and knees and try to crawl through the dirt, but my head is spinning. I see stars.

But . . . no. Not stars. The bright lights flash with quick clicks, rapid-fire. I brush my hair out of my eyes and look up at the international press corps that stands around me, cameras raised, capturing my every move. There must be at least fifty people in the courtyard. From the edge of the crowd I see Alexei's father looking on, horrified.

"That's why," Alexei says so softly I barely hear him.

Only then do I realize I am not alone on the ground. The Russian ambassador spits and gags beside me. Blood runs from his nose and he brings a hand to his mouth as if he has been hit.

Because he *has* been hit.

I look down at my own hands. They're shaking. And on my knuckles there's a faint smudge of blood.

"Hello, Grace, darling."

Instantly, I recognize the deep Southern drawl that even after decades in Adria he still hasn't lost. I squint up through the sun. Vaguely, I make out a dark suit, a red tie, and white hair — a smile I haven't seen in years.

I wipe the mud from my face and steal one last glance at the obviously upset Russian.

Then I turn back to the man offering me his hand and say, "Hi, Grandpa."