

ALLY CARTER

BEFORE THE FALL: DEPARTURE

AN EMBASSY
ROW SHORT



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The dream is the same as always. I hear the explosion. I smell the smoke. But I don't feel the shards of shattered glass or the heat of the fire. I only notice the gashes on my skin when the blood runs into my eyes. For a moment, I'm blinded. But nothing can block out the sound.

I'd give anything to block out the sound.

"Grace, no!" my mother yells.

I toss.

"Grace, run!" my mother cries.

I scream.

When at last I bolt awake, my hair is plastered to my face and I'm covered in sweat. But the house isn't on fire. There is no broken glass. My room isn't filled with smoke, and yet I can't draw breath. I lean over at the waist and climb onto my knees, trying to fill my lungs with air, but it won't come. I'm drowning in my bed. I am dying even as I sit in the middle of an Army base, surrounded by soldiers.

The nightmare is over, but still I close my eyes and shake my head. *"Grace, honey . . ."* Mom's voice comes again. But her face is not the one that fills my mind. Through the smoke and the fire, I see him rising from the ashes, his broad shoulders and narrow

waist, the scar that covers the left side of his face. I watch him come closer, and I know . . .

This is the third base we've lived on since it happened, but I will never outrun the Scarred Man.

I know a memory can't hurt me, so I close my eyes and force my breath to become slower, deeper. I force myself not to die.

And that is when I hear them talking.

"She's still having them?" my brother says. I throw off my covers and move toward the door.

The lights are off in the hallway and the house is still, but I know my way in the dark as I creep slowly from my room, following the sound of the voices.

"Should we go in?" my brother asks, and I know they've heard my screaming.

The only light is the flickering glow of the TV, some basketball game in overtime. The air is thick with the smell of testosterone and microwave popcorn, but they have the sound on mute. I hear nothing but worry.

"No," Dad says. "She's quiet again. Let her sleep."

Something in the way he says it makes me wonder how many times the two of them have had this conversation. Dozens? No, hundreds. I can tell. And the verdict is no doubt always the same: There is nothing they can do to fix me. And, for them, that is the hardest thing of all.

I know that I should turn around and slip back through the dark, pull my covers up to my chin, and lie perfectly still until morning. Because if I don't sleep, I won't dream. And if I don't

dream, I won't remember. As long as I don't remember, my father and my brother won't worry quite so much.

I'm just starting to pivot, slowly and softly on the balls of my bare feet, when I hear my brother say, "What are we going to do with Gracie?"

The question calls to mind the image of singing nuns and waves being pinned down upon the sand. If I were a puzzle, they could solve me. If I were a busted chair, they could fix me. But I am broken in a way that can never, ever be made whole again, and it is killing them; I know it. And that's what kills me, too.

"Gracie will be okay," my father tells him.

"That's not what I meant," Jamie says. "Where will she go?"

This, at last, stops me. It isn't the same old conversation. It's a *new* dilemma—a different question—so I stand perfectly still, waiting, as I hear my father say, "I've already made some calls."

It's not an answer, and my brother knows it.

"What kind of calls?"

"She'll be okay, Jamie."

"Does she *sound* okay?" My brother doesn't want to raise his voice—to risk waking me—but the worry is too much.

"She's not getting any worse," my dad tells him.

"Does she sound like she's getting any *better*?"

My brother is right, but my father doesn't say so. He just gets up and walks to the little kitchen that's still filled with boxes we've never gotten around to unpacking. He doesn't see me as he passes, but I have the chance to study him: broad shoulders and muscular arms, a hairline that is probably receding, but he keeps

his head shaved to save it the trouble. He looks like an action hero, but I know better. Bruce Willis and Jason Statham and those guys actually want to be *him*. Major James Blakely. Army Ranger. A real live GI Joe.

And Jamie.

Jamie is just like him.

This leaves me to carry all of my family's disappointment. Luckily, I do it well, standing in the darkened hallway in my bleach-stained PJs and messed-up hair.

And then, suddenly, it's all too much. Too much worry. Too many secrets. I can't carry any more, so I lurch forward.

"You're shipping out, aren't you?" Together, Dad and Jamie spin. They're not disappointed to see me, not really surprised. My father looks as if this moment was inevitable. He was just hoping to put it off a little longer.

"Grace, I was going to tell you in the morning . . ."

"Where are they sending you?" I ask.

Dad shakes his head. "Can't tell you that, sweetie."

"It's a place where they use live bullets though, isn't it?" I ask.

"Yes," he says, and I know that's probably all I'm going to get. That's the thing about being raised by a man in Special Forces. His mission—his life—is classified. Especially from me. He should be a lieutenant colonel by now—was all set for a promotion when it happened. But a daughter with my kind of medical history wrecks havoc on a man's security clearance. So Dad is still a major. And I'm still the reason why.

“You *want* to go, don’t you?” My voice is cold, but I make myself stare. Let him look me in the eye and tell me that he’s leaving. Mom, at least, didn’t have a choice. Neither does my father, but I can’t admit that. I can only glare. I know what he won’t say—that he’d rather be in a war zone than stay with me.

The truth is, I can’t blame him.

“Grace, you know I go where they send me,” my father says. It’s not a denial, and we both know it.

“I’ll take a year off school, Gracie,” Jamie volunteers. “How’d you like that? I can—”

“No,” my father snaps. He walks to the TV and turns it off. Suddenly, the room is too dark. Then Dad flips on a floor lamp and the room’s too bright. I find myself squinting against the glare.

“You’re not leaving school.” Dad is using his Army voice. He’s given Jamie an order, and we know that it’s not open for debate.

But for once in his life, my brother doesn’t listen. “Grace is a minor,” he argues. “She can’t stay on her own. I’m almost nineteen. I can—”

“Jamie, you are a cadet at West Point. You made a commitment, and you will honor that commitment.”

“But who . . . ?” Jamie starts, then trails off, and I see his mind work, gears turning until they stop, resting on one thought:

Adria.

Grandpa.

Home.

But I shake my head and make myself remember: I don't have a home.

"You can't be serious," Jamie says, even though Dad hasn't said a thing. "You can't send her to *him*."

"Your grandfather said that Grace is welcome to stay as long as we need her to." Dad looks at me. "He misses you."

"He's got a fine way of showing it!" Jamie snaps.

"Watch it," Dad warns, but my brother charges on.

"He hasn't laid eyes on us in years, Dad. Not since she died."

Jamie doesn't say *Mom*. No one ever mentions her name. She's a ghost in our house, following wherever the Army might move us, constantly living in shadows.

"Your grandfather is a busy man. He has an important job. And I'm sure the accident was hard on him. He's not as young as he used to be."

"All the more reason not to send him *Grace*," Jamie says, like I'm the worst present ever.

"It's not up for discussion, Jamie. Grace needs a home. Your grandfather has invited her to stay. That's the end of it."

And it should be. I should be a good girl and turn around, go back to bed, and say my prayers. But I can't help myself sometimes. I am my own worst enemy. As if I need another.

"Murder."

It takes a moment for me to realize I've said it aloud, for me to feel the gazes that land on me, stricken, as if I've slapped them both across the face.

“You said *accident*, but I saw Mom *murdered*,” I tell them. “It wasn’t an accident.”

My father draws a heavy breath. “Sweetheart, you watched your mother die, and that was awful, but you have to—”

“I saw her *murdered*!” I yell. I’m shaking now. Again, it’s hard to breathe because it feels like smoke has started to fill the room. Or maybe it just fills my mind.

“It was an accident.” Dad keeps his gaze locked on the tile floor. He never looks me in the eye anymore. That’s okay. I don’t want to face me either. “Your mother died in a terrible accident, Grace, and—”

“Is that what they’re calling gunshot wounds these days?”

“Gracie . . .” Jamie shakes his head. He’s pleading with me. *Don’t do this.*

This is Dad’s wife I’m talking about. Jamie’s mother. It’s amazing that they’re only now sending me to the other side of the planet.

“I gotta get out of here,” I say, pushing toward the door. “I can’t . . . I need some air.”

“Gracie,” Jamie says, “it’s the middle of the night.”

“I’m going!” I say.

I’m out the door before I hear my father say, “Jamie, go with her.”

We’ve only been at this base for nine months, but I already know my way around. I make my way down the quiet street, underneath the glow of streetlights, past houses with bikes overturned on the

lawn and perfectly pruned rosebushes. If it were daytime, every porch would be flying an American flag. It's the last place in the world where you would expect anything to go wrong. The air is fresh and clear. There is no smoke—no Scarred Man.

When I reach the playground I make my way toward a swing, sink into it, and rock a little, back and forth. A moment later, I feel as much as see my brother sit down on the swing beside me.

When I stretch my legs out in front of me, dig my toes into the sand, Jamie asks, "Does it hurt?" He looks down at my right leg. The scars are covered, but my brother knows they're there. He knows all the things that are wrong with me.

"No. Not really." Absently, I reach down and rub my thigh in the place where it broke—one of three places, that is. With all my plethora of problems, a bum leg barely registers. Besides, the breaks were clean and I was young. Adria has excellent doctors. I don't even have a limp.

"That was the last time we were there, wasn't it?" he asks.

"Uh-huh," I say, but I don't want to talk about the time I broke my leg or how high the drop is from the top of the ancient wall that circles the city. I don't want to think about Embassy Row and its mansions or how blue the water is as it laps onto the beach. I don't want to dwell on those things, but the things I want to say are the last things that my brother will ever want to hear.

So I swing a little, ask, "Do you think it's changed?"

I don't turn to face him, but I can feel my brother there, his breath a cloud of fog beside me.

“Probably not,” he says. “It hasn’t changed much in centuries. I doubt a few years will make a difference.”

He’s right, of course. Jamie is always right.

“You don’t have to go, Gracie.”

I laugh. This is Jamie’s form of rebellion, defiance.

“Of course I have to go,” I say. “What do you have against Grandpa, anyway?”

“I don’t have anything against him, it’s just . . . you weren’t there—at Mom’s funeral.”

“No,” I say. “I was kinda tied up at the time.”

Jamie looks like he might cry. “Don’t make jokes, Gracie.”

“Do I look like I’m laughing, Jamie?”

“Let me talk to Dad again.” Jamie is up and moving to stand before me. I’ve never seen him look so desperate or so scared. “I can’t imagine he’s really okay with this. You should have seen the two of them after the funeral. I’ve never heard so much shouting. It’s no wonder we haven’t been back.”

“His daughter died,” I say.

“Yeah. But his grandchildren didn’t.”

“Dad didn’t want us going there without Mom. Grandpa’s busy. He didn’t have time to watch out for us.”

“And now you’re going to *live* there?” Jamie asks as if I’ve just made his point for him, and I guess I probably have.

“If something happens, Gracie . . .” Jamie shakes his head. Worry fills his voice. “If something happens, I won’t be there.”

“What’s going to happen?” I ask. It’s not a rhetorical question. I really want to know. And I really don’t. I’m almost afraid of the answer, but I ask again, louder. “What’s going to happen, Jamie?”

He doesn’t say what he is thinking, but I can see it in his eyes. The worry and the fear and the doubt.

What if I have an incident?

What if I stop taking my meds?

What if I see something, hear something, do something?

What if I go crazy?

Gracie is a bomb, my brother is thinking. And now our father is about to send me to the other side of the world before I can explode.

“Do you miss it?” I ask after a long time.

Slowly, Jamie answers, “Yes.” But I know that’s just half of the story. My brother and I don’t just miss Adria. We miss Mom. And Adria was her home, her family. Her world. It’s like we’ve lost our guide, like maybe we no longer have the right to be there without her.

“Do you think you’ll ever go back?” I ask him.

This time there is no hesitation. “If you’re there, I’ll go back. Just as soon as possible. I’ll be there, Gracie. You don’t have to be alone—”

“But I do, Jamie,” I say, finally looking up at him. “I was always going to end up alone.”

We are a family of three, my dad and my brother and I. A very tiny tribe of nomads, but I was always going to have to brave the

world eventually. There are some things even an Army Ranger and a West Point cadet can't stop.

I see my brother start to argue, object, so I blurt, "Besides, it might be nice, going someplace new."

"It's not new. We spent every summer of our lives there until three years ago."

"Yeah," I say. "But maybe that's what I need. Someplace where no one is looking at me, waiting for me to break down or just . . . break."

"Dad and I don't do that," Jamie says. I cut my eyes at him. "We don't *intend* to do that."

I start to swing and my brother studies me.

"Alexei is still there," Jamie says, adding it as if it's an afterthought.

"Yeah."

"He's right next door if you need anything, or—"

"I think you're forgetting. Alexei is *your* friend."

"No. Alexei is my best friend, which makes him your friend, too. And that's why he's going to be watching you like a hawk."

"Jamie—"

"No. I'm serious, Gracie. Someone's going to have to keep an eye on you, and we both know Grandpa isn't going to take the time."

"Don't bother Alexei," I say. "I'll be good."

And for a moment I mean it. I swear I really do. I will not go chasing after ghosts. I will not stir up trouble. I'll never say the words *murder* or *arson* or *Scarred Man* ever again.

Adria is across an ocean and a continent and sea. It was my mother's birthplace, my grandfather's home. The capital stands on the Mediterranean coast, surrounded by a wall that's eighty feet high and a thousand years old, impenetrable. Protected. And for a second, I let myself breathe, thinking that maybe—just maybe—it is the one place where the Scarred Man's memory will not find me.

I smile at my brother, knowing there's only one way to find out.

ALLY CARTER is the *New York Times* bestselling author of the Gallagher Girls and Heist Society series. Her books have been published all over the world, in over twenty languages. She grew up on a farm in Oklahoma and has never caused an international incident (to her knowledge). You can visit her online at www.allycarter.com.