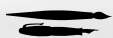


ALLY CARTER

TAKE THE KEY AND LOCK HER UP

BOOK
THREE OF
EMBASSY
ROW



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CHAPTER ONE

When the screams come, I can't be sure that I'm not dreaming.

I bolt upright in bed. The walls are thin, and I can hear the shouting, the force of something being thrown against the outside wall of the cabin, shattering in the place just above my head.

The wall shakes.

The ceiling creaks.

And I roll off the narrow cot, shaking.

I know better than to be afraid, but it's instinct now as I wrap my arms around my knees, pulling my legs close to my chest. In the age-old war between fight and flight, I'm Team Flight. Even in my thin T-shirt and bare feet I want to run faster and faster, farther and farther until I reach the end of the earth.

But instead I creep toward the window and look out the dirty glass, and a stark truth hits me: I'm already there.

"Is that all you've got?" Alexei's voice slices through the morning air. The sun is up, but the rays have yet to burn through the heavy fog that covers the ground like a blanket fort we can't help but hide inside.

"I'm gaining on you, buddy," my brother yells.

"Yeah." Alexei circles around him. "Let's see you do it again."

How many times have I seen them fight like this? Too many for me to count, I'm sure. This is the part where my brother is supposed to launch himself at his best friend, where they are supposed to tumble to the ground, Jamie a little heavier, Alexei a little taller, the two of them a whirl of limbs and strength. But that doesn't happen.

Instead, my brother takes a step, unsteady and uneven. Then another. And another. It's like he's being sucked into quicksand.

Despite the dew on the ground and the chill in the air, sweat gathers on my brother's brow and his body shakes as he takes an unsteady swing at Alexei, who ducks, then swings back.

Gently.

Alexei is being gentle with Jamie. That's how I know that things really are as wrong as I remembered.

Jamie lashes back, but Alexei just pushes Jamie's fist away.

"Again," Alexei says, and they resume their positions.

It's like Alexei's training a child, a little boy who is a long, long way from being his equal. And the thought makes me want to cry.