

Preview of...

The Gallowan Series

Part 1

Out of Time

A Series By
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Rebecca Fisher Books



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“In a dream, in a vision of the night, when deep sleep falls on men as they slumber in their beds, He may speak in their ears and terrify them with warnings, to turn them from wrongdoing and keep them from pride, to preserve them from the pit, their lives from perishing by the sword...” Job 33:15-18

In A Dream

“This way,” it directed, before disappearing behind the thick foliage ahead.

My pace quickened – short-of-breath, panic pervading. I couldn't see it anymore. The pricking pain of the ground beneath my bare feet was trumped by the frantic fear of being lost, abandoned, alone. The tangled woods thickened and closed in around me, its protruding branches scratching my exposed flesh. But I pushed forward, with desperate faith, believing I hadn't been left to perish.

It reappeared from behind a large beech tree and called me forward again.

“Follow me.”

A slight cry of relief escaped my lips, and my feet tripped through the gnarled floor as I raced to keep up. My panting breath filled the crisp midnight air and my numb, adrenalized limbs instinctively pursued my only hope of salvation. I was alone but for the dancing light, which continued to appear and disappear through the trees and darkness.

In my perilous escape, I'd forgotten that held tightly in one arm and tucked closely against my breast was a heavy bundle of soft cloth. The bundle was why I was awakened with alarm, why I fled with nothing but my nightclothes, and why I followed without question an apparition into the night.

Just as the forest growth seemed too dense to conquer, I broke through a wall of vines and branches into a wide and empty field. I feverishly searched the darkness for the specter that led me forward and found nothing but a vast stretch of land. Overcome by complete exhaustion, I fell to my knees, on the verge of uncontrollable tears. I rocked back and forth, an old habit of comfort, when I became aware once again of what I possessed. Pulling back the carefully wound cloth, I was met with a quizzical and enchanting pair of green eyes staring back at me. A warm and tiny hand reached toward my lips and a slight jingle drew my attention to a tiny silver charm fastened to a woven bracelet around her arm. Our eyes locked in a stare, and a glimmer of recognition passed over me.

Without warning I was ripped from the ground, clinging tightly to the baby, as a sturdy arm hooked around my waist and lifted me up and onto the back of a restless horse.

"Hold on," he called, his voice deep and steady.

His voice, his grasp...they were familiar. I knew him - though uncertain how - and knew without question that he offered protection. My free hand held tightly to the saddle as we raced forward. The night air chilled my bare skin, and I found myself leaning in closer to his warmth, resting my weary body against his. I saw it up ahead, the familiar light leading us onward.

The scene changed, and I suddenly felt the need to run. I slid off the horse and landed hard on the ground. Worried about the baby, I looked all around and could find nothing but an old leather satchel in my hand. No baby. In panic and confusion I continued to search. How could I have lost her? Where was the horse? The rider? Gone.

I was no longer in a forest. I was on a street between my house and the university, a street I had walked many times. It was dark, the streetlights providing little visibility. The street was lined with cars and was dead quiet. I was alone. I looked in the bag for answers and found nothing but blank pages, some crumpled and some torn.

Movement at the end of the street interrupted my confusion. I narrowed my eyes and leaned my head forward trying to zoom in on what was heading my way. Whatever it was, it was moving fast, but I couldn't make out a shape in the darkness. A sense of danger had me struggling to my feet. A streetlamp cast light on the approaching threat as it passed over the illuminated asphalt. My heart clenched at the sight. Three wild, black dogs baring deadly fangs and violent eyes had marked their prey and began to pick up speed. They were coming for me. I dropped the bag and turned to run. My feet were heavy - my escape impossible. I looked back over my shoulder to measure what distance might be left when I slammed into a body, warm and solid. It was his voice. The rider.

"You're not making this easy," he said. I was all at once relieved, insulted and enchanted.

Riley pushed her journal aside and curled back into a ball under her covers. It was still dark out, with a few hours of sleep left before her alarm would assault her. The

moonlight shone brightly through her blinds and as she turned over, it reflected off of her bracelet. She jingled the familiar silver charm and laughed sleepily.

Bugged

The morning of her most recent dream, Riley sat and ate a quick breakfast, mentally preparing for another day of class and one final revision to her latest article for the school paper. The *Campus Crusaders* column had historically involved sniffing out injustices and quirks on campus and reporting them weekly to an increasingly apathetic, and at times hostile, audience. Tom Scott, the middle-aged and wild, gray-dyed-red haired editor-in-chief, desperate to keep the paper in print and a paycheck in his pocket, thought Riley had a fresh voice that would win back readers...and financial support. The previous writers of the column had all found themselves in an awkward predicament. Pointing out the foibles of others is rarely a recipe for popularity, no matter how entertaining or juicy those foibles might be. Kenneth Sealy once reported on scantron inconsistencies during final exams, forcing many students to retake those exams and lowering all but one grade. And while re-testing might seem the worst of offenses, it was

Rachel Horton who upset the majority of the campus with her report on sub-standard food services in the campus's beloved Java Café. It was shut down for over a month and during final exams of all times.

Riley's piece covered a much more threatening topic than improper food handling or mismarked exams - a topic that most students would pass over, skipping to the scandalous articles about their peers. The university's chancellor, Tabitha Mollock, on the other hand, would not pass over it, wherein lay the danger. The piece questioned large donations made by the chancellor to an outside organization known only as *Legionnaire Inc.* While the piece didn't mention Mollock specifically, rather an "unspecified university administrator", Mollock would easily read between the lines. Riley was able to gather little information on her own about Legionnaire Inc. or the connection between them and the university. Everything she knew came in the form of local news clippings, Legionnaire financial and member reports, photographs of meetings between Mollock and unnamed persons allegedly from Legionnaire, and messages addressed to Riley personally, all placed in her home mailbox regularly over the last two months by an anonymous source named A.T.

According to A.T.'s research, Legionnaire Inc. had advised on the university board that designed and built the new and very popular Student Union and made large and frequent donations of money and other resources to the most pledged fraternities and sororities on campus. They hadn't done this as Legionnaire Inc., rather as a subsidiary of the corporation named Moving Up. The connection was well hidden, but A.T. clearly had access to some well-kept secrets. Moving Up was a searchable entity that aimed to organize and mobilize college-age youth for philanthropic and community improvement

purposes. Sounded great. That is until one started connecting the dots leading from Legionnaire Inc. down to Moving Up and into the lives of students on campus. Most frightening of these connections were the rumored activities on and off of campus at the hands of these university entities and the recent “look the other way” policy of the school administrators and campus police. While most reports were of debauchery in all its forms, some were much more alarming. The case of Amanda Kendall was the worst. She was a new pledge at Phi Psi Omega and had gone missing early on in the semester after a sorority event. No one affiliated with the sorority could seem to remember Amanda ever being present that night, but her mother insisted she had dropped her off that night because Amanda’s car was in the shop. She watched Amanda walk into the house but never heard from her again.

Riley had combed through the police interviews recently placed in her mailbox, and found it peculiar that someone like Amanda, reportedly beautiful and well liked, could go unnoticed by a single attendee. Something was definitely wrong. Not surprising at all, Phi Psi Omega had received donations by Moving Up.

Riley had done her best to remain objective as she wrote the piece. She was just as concerned about being manipulated by her anonymous source as she was frightened by the picture that was coming into focus about Mollock and Legionnaire Inc. Tom hadn’t read it, but Riley knew he would shudder with excitement. He despised Chancellor Mollock. She had been appointed two years before Riley came on board the paper and had, according to Tom, attempted to control what went to print through the manipulation of funds and staff. When an article reflected well on the administration, funding would suddenly appear in abundance. When an article did otherwise, they could hardly afford

the paper they printed on. A couple of journalists prior to Riley had been expelled on, according to those students, erroneous charges of cheating. Their articles never went to print. Tom was reluctant to go into detail about it, and when Riley asked to read the infamous articles, he claimed they had gone missing much like their writers. Riley had a feeling Mollock wasn't going to appreciate her particular piece and a sudden fear that she might not ever make it to graduation.

With those thoughts nagging at her, she grabbed her bag and headed toward the front door. But something caught her eye. It was another familiar envelope, placed purposely on the open countertop. A note sat atop it. *This was left for you. See you at dinner. Love, Dad.*

The envelope was thinner than usual. She ripped it open to find two papers. The first was a letter addressed to her:

Riley - For reasons I cannot explain at this time, I must ask you to refrain from submitting your article to Mr. Scott. I have enclosed a replacement that will fulfill your deadline requirement. I must also ask that you no longer write or conduct any research using the campus computers. This is not only for your safety but for the safety of Tom and others. I will notify you when it is safe to proceed. Sincerely,
~A.T.

She quickly flipped to the next page. The article was titled *The Chancellor Gives a Tour by Riley Quinn*, and went on to describe the week's most photographed event – the Chancellor giving students from a disadvantaged neighborhood high school a tour of

the college campus. The photograph included Mollock and representatives of Phi Psi Omega shaking hands with students as they posed in front of the Student Union.

Riley suddenly felt sick, angry, manipulated. And it wasn't just the staged picture of the Chancellor and her minions that did it. It was this anonymous source that was now going to dictate what she did or did not do with her article. It had bothered her from the beginning that A.T. suggested she write the piece, but that's what journalists do, right? They get a tip, and they investigate. She suddenly found herself pacing the kitchen tiles, her hand slightly crumpling the new article.

“Who do you think you are?” she yelled at no one. “This is my article!”

As she paced in a growing rage, a thought crossed her mind that caused her to stand still – one that had crossed a few times recently. It was the thought of not making it to graduation over all of this...of being accused of cheating or something worse and disgracefully dismissed from school. She stopped pacing and sat down to think for a minute...calm down. Maybe A.T. was worried about the same thing. But how would he or she know to be concerned? And how would they know she had recently done a search on Legionnaire from the paper's staff computer?

That was it. She was tired of being in the dark. While she respected the anonymity of journalistic sources, this was getting too personal. A.T. knew where she lived, where she researched, and more frightening, somehow knew her article was finished. Riley made a decision. She was going to find A.T. and make a few demands of her own.

Following her morning journalism seminar, Riley made her way to *The Daily Word* offices, conveniently located within the communications building. As she approached the double doors, a thought hit her hard, causing her to stop just in front of the entryway. What if Tom was somehow involved? It would certainly explain A.T.'s knowledge of her work habits, deadlines, and even her home address, which was required information on her application to the paper. But what if he was involved on the other end of things? What if Mollock had gotten to him? It did seem strange that he wouldn't show Riley the articles responsible for the sudden expulsion of two very promising students. And even though he spoke semi-conspiratorially of the Chancellor, taking the anti-Mollock position with staff would be expected from the editor of the school paper. But he had printed a handful of surprisingly Mollock-favorable articles in the last two months, and funding was increasing by the week. They had recently installed two brand new computers and impossibly expensive software.

She began to panic, break a sweat even, as she stood paralyzed at the entrance. If Tom was a Mollock minion, Riley was certain to wind up the next victim of the system.

She took hold of the metal door handle and pulled against the fear that was rising up in her. As she stepped forward, a cold rush of air pressed down on her from the vent above the doorway. While it was a relief from the sweat now soaking her clothes, it brought on chills. The place she had come to work every day for months suddenly felt threatening.

Riley walked through the door that led to *The Daily Word* - a relatively nondescript door off of the main hallway. It was this way intentionally, with the hope of

avoiding angry readers and the occasional pranksters. With the door closed behind her, the silence grew thicker. She listened for the everyday sounds of Tom rustling papers or making calls but heard nothing. She walked past the small reception desk and into the editing room. All was still. With the anxiety growing infinitely with every step, Riley peered through Tom's cracked door.

He sat off-kilter in his chair, staring straight ahead at nothing in particular. He looked lost and frightened even, his appearance more frayed than usual. He didn't notice Riley right away. Whatever was on his mind held him captive. Riley cleared her throat and knocked. Tom looked up as if awakened from a long coma. It took him a few seconds to pull himself back into the present.

"Oh, hey, Riley," he muttered, bewildered. His voice was weak. "What can I do you for?" he asked with a tentative chuckle. His attempt at levity fell short. It was clear to Riley, and likely anyone who could see him, that Tom was terrified. Someone had gotten to him, and it had everything to do with her article.

With his guard down and his nerves on edge, she figured she could get information from him more readily, and felt only a little guilty about it. She sat down in the chair across from him with the envelope in her hands, a copy of the new article inside. He stared at it and his face grew slightly agitated.

"I met someone today," she started, trying to pretend she couldn't tell he was in some sort of crisis. "A.T." She said the name flatly and watched for a response. His eyes didn't move from the envelope. "Have you met A.T.?" she continued, hoping for some tell, some reaction. He broke his fixed stare and looked back at her with confusion again.

“Sorry, what were you saying?”

“A.T. I met someone named A.T. while researching another article I’m working on.”

“No. Never heard that name before.” His eyes went back and forth between Riley and the envelope in her hands. “Is that your article for the *Crusaders* column?” He could barely keep his composure, and the name A.T. elicited no response at all. Either he was faking it, which Riley doubted he could do to save his life in his present condition, or he really had no idea who A.T. was.

“Yes, it’s done. Finally,” she chuckled, watching Tom’s reaction. He gave a half laugh.

“Well, let’s see it.” He reached his hand across the table. It was shaking ever so slightly. Riley handed the envelope over, angry that she was turning in A.T.’s article instead of her own. Tom fumbled with the envelope, half tearing it open. He slid the article out and read it like his imminent death might be etched in the line breaks.

She watched as Tom’s confusion grew. He flipped the one-page article over, looking for more on the back.

“This is it?” he asked with a breath of relief.

“Were you expecting more? Or something else?” Riley needed answers.

“No...no, no. I just...I knew you were doing a piece on the administration, I just thought it would be...” He was struggling to put together something that sounded believable. Something that sounded non-threatening for whomever might be listening.

Riley concluded his sentence. “Something a lot less approving? Something about Le-?” Before she could say the word *Legionnaire*, Tom’s eyes widened and he held his finger to his mouth, shaking his head with agitation. He got up and closed his door as quietly as he could close a door with a squeaky hinge. He leaned his weight against the desk and took from his pocket a handkerchief to wipe the sweat beading on his forehead. His thin, reddish hair was collecting in thick, soaked sweeps over his head as his stress and perspiration increased.

“What is it?” Riley asked, her voice demanding.

Tom cleared his throat. “Well, Riley,” he began, speaking abnormally loud. “This article looks great. Good piece on university outreach.”

Riley was getting angry. Angry that someone had turned Tom into a paranoid mess, angry that her writing was being manipulated, and angry that she was playing along with it all. Journalism was supposed to be free of corruption, objective, and bold. She was about to begin a lecture on journalistic integrity when Tom shook his head again and mouthed *not here*. He reached for a pad of paper and began to scribble something on it.

“So when can I expect your next piece? You said you were working on something new? Some new source?” He talked while he wrote.

Riley rolled her eyes and went along with the charade.

“No later than next week, I would say.”

Tom passed the pad of paper to her.

“That sounds great. So we’ll see you tomorrow?”

Riley began to read the scribbled note. His writing was as sketchy as he was in the moment.

Not safe to talk here.

Meet tonight - at the pub.

8 O'clock. In the back.

Stay off of the campus comps.

“Yep, tomorrow,” she replied, nodding to him in confirmation. He took the pad and placed it in a worn leather satchel. It looked older than him, though similarly mussed.

Without warning, as usual, time slowed and the heaviness of familiarity encircled Riley. Her mind searched for a connection. Her eyes scanned every part of the scene in front of her. The recall persisted and the familiarity grew heavier and more certain. Her eyes locked on Tom’s satchel. There it was. The connection. That same bag had made an appearance in her last dream. Empty but for crumpled papers, illegible and seemingly pointless.

“See you then. Have a great night, Riley.” Tom smiled awkwardly, and a bead of sweat rolled down his forehead. He caught it with his handkerchief. His voice snapped her out of the recall cold. It was gone. If it hadn’t happened all her life, she might just chalk it up to *deja vu*.

“See you then.” Riley opened the door and exited the building, occasionally looking over her shoulder. Whoever had threatened Tom was watching and listening. Her

heart raced at the thought of what Tom would tell her. She had almost named Legionnaire out loud. Her fists clenched at the thought of A.T. and having been dragged into something much bigger than she ever imagined. At the thought of so willingly walking into the middle of it.

She looked at her watch. It was 11 o'clock. She needed to talk to Cameron, who was currently in a forensics class in the science lab. But he was just going to have to politely excuse himself because this was an emergency, and if there was anything at all Cameron Joseph Walters would leave his forensics class for, it was an emergency of this exact nature.

Riley and Cameron had been friends since the tenth grade. They had a level of comfort with each other that allowed for each to be themselves without worry of judgment. Cameron was eccentric, to say the least. He was just an inch taller than Riley with black curly hair cut longer on top than on the sides. His dark brown eyes were framed by black-rimmed glasses and thick bushy eyebrows. He had a small build of mostly olive skin and bone, with just enough muscle to avoid being thrust into the puny category of the teenage caste system. He had a quick wit and an obsession with anything spy related. Because of a questionable ninth grade year, the details of which Cameron had not wholly shared with Riley - though he would trust her with his life - he would never be eligible for employment with the FBI, CIA, or most government agencies. It had to do with computer hacking and an antagonistic e-card sent to the secure personal account of a high-ranking government official. Needless to say, Cameron's spy options were forever limited. He currently interned for a local private investigator while working toward a forensics degree with the hopes of running his own cyber-security business someday.

Cameron's aspirations consisted of building a name for himself in the forensics community and forcing the CIA or FBI to one day come begging for his help. "Who would be saying sorry then?" he always concluded. Riley never questioned his logic. Let a boy dream, she decided.

She peered through the window of the lab door waiting for Cameron to look up. She had sent a text saying *I'm at the door...It's serious*. He reached for his phone, read the message, then looked up with a grin – a grin that meant he was ready for an adventure. He collected his things and approached the professor, whispering something into his ear. The professor patted Cameron's shoulder and whispered something in return before Cameron headed toward the door.

"What excuse did you give this time?" Riley queried.

"My grandma died," he said without emotion.

"Didn't she die last month?"

"Most people have more than one grandparent, Riley," Cameron countered with faux indignation.

"How did she die?"

"A shark attack," he retorted matter-of-factly.

"Your grandma surfs?"

"She paddleboards, if you must know."

Riley giggled. Cameron stopped and faced her, dead serious. His ability to keep a straight face while concocting his absurd stories was nothing short of art.

“She’s the world champion paddle-boarder in the octogenarian division. She will be greatly missed.”

“That’s tragic,” Riley responded, wiping a fake tear, unable to hold back her laughter.

“Very. Now what’s the emergency?”

“I need to ID someone.”

“Let’s walk,” he responded, taking her elbow and leading her away from the lab and toward the parking lot. Silence. Cameron didn’t trust any space with a buggable surface. So nowhere, basically. But evidently the open walkway nearest the parking lot would suffice. “Continue,” he allowed.

“I’m being followed. Watched.” That made Cameron’s eyebrows rise in interest and a bit of concern.

“Really? I like what I’m hearing,” he said without thought.

“You like that I’m being stalked?” Riley shot back.

“No, I like that I will be able to track down your stalker and help you ruin him or her,” he clarified with a heavy dose of protectiveness.

“Well, there might be more than one, and I don’t know who, if anyone, needs ruining,” Riley corrected.

“More than one stalker? What possible enemies could Riley Quinn have?”

“Well, if the terror on Tom’s face is any indicator, they’re seriously scary ones,” she replied, the truth of it raising goose bumps all over her.

“Well, if your alliteration is any indicator, it is very serious,” Cameron quipped. Riley pushed him, and the worry on her face finally registered with him. “You’re really scared, aren’t you?”

“I’m getting there,” she admitted.

“What do you have so far?”

“Someone named A.T. has been delivering all kinds of source material about a shady organization called Legionnaire Inc. directly to my house. This morning, A.T. delivered a replacement article and a warning not to publish the piece on Mollock and Legionnaire, warning me to stay off the computers at the paper. Then I found Tom a pale and shaking mess in his office. He gestured that it wasn’t safe to talk and wrote a note asking to meet at the pub tonight. From what I’ve gathered, Legionnaire is bad, and I mean really bad. Some elusive umbrella corporation for organizations like Move Up, who invest and consult in universities. Ours anyway. We’re talking missing people, drugs, gambling...every form of yuck your innocent mind could imagine. Think Phi Psi Omega. Amanda Kendall.” Cameron’s eyes widened, and an impressed half-frown and nod followed. Riley Continued.

“Mollock has ties to them, but I don’t know how deep. Some photos. Some paper trails. That was the basis of my article. Suddenly that’s a no go. Tom’s a mess. I need to know who A.T. is, and I need to know who threatened Tom. Can you help with that?”

“Did Shrek and Fiona have little green ogre babies?” he asked.

“Um, yes?” Riley answered, half-sure of what he was getting at.

“Yes, Riley. Yes they did. And you’ll know who A.T. is the next time they approach your house or your car. As for Tom, that might be more difficult. Let’s head back to the paper.”

“Right now?” Riley asked, somewhat hesitant to enter the unsettling scene she had just left.

“I have a bug detector, and I’ll be able to trace the signal if it’s anywhere near campus. That will at least let you know if you’re being watched, or if Tom has finally inhaled too much printer ink.”

They headed back toward campus while Cameron gave instructions.

“Don’t say anything you don’t want overheard. If they have cameras, we’re toast. Let’s hope that’s not the case.”

“What do I tell Tom?”

“Tell him you forgot a book or your dad’s favorite pen or the last bite of your brownie. I don’t know - just don’t mention out loud that I’m sweeping the place.”

“You’re such a pain.”

“That’s what they all say. But they come back. They always come back,” he dreamed.

“Are we talking about the FBI again?” Riley confirmed.

“Maybe.”

“Okay, Agent Walters. Here we go.” Riley pulled open the door to the communications building for the second time in the last thirty minutes. No suspicious lurkers in the hallway. They entered the office and found it completely dark. Riley reached for the light switch, but Cameron grabbed her wrist and shook his head. He proceeded to flip on a flashlight and scan the room looking through some kind of tube. Completely clueless as to what he was doing, Riley leaned against a wall and waited for him to finish.

After five long minutes, Cameron switched on the lights and wrote a note to Riley.

No cameras.

Make busy sounds with papers or whatever you do here.

I’ll need about ten minutes.

Riley busied herself with the filing cabinet and the computer, fake-typing an article while Cameron swept the entire office. He quietly pulled out his laptop and stared fixedly while he typed. After about fifteen minutes, he signaled for her to close up shop. They said nothing as they exited the office, then the building. They both got into his 1989 silver Montero and closed the door before Riley couldn’t take it anymore.

“So?”

“You’ve got lice, babe.”

Riley instinctively scratched her head. “It’s bugged?”

“One in each room from what I could find. You’re gonna love the next part. I traced the signal, and it’s close. Either on campus or not far from it.”

“Mollock,” Riley growled through her teeth.

“I’d need more time to pinpoint it.”

“I might need that information if she tries to ruin me,” Riley said, mostly to herself, as she took in the news.

“They’re obviously tracking the computers. I could trace that, too.”

“Yeah,” Riley responded, staring straight ahead, finding new meaning in the generous software investment.

“Let’s sweep your house and set up some eyes to look for A.T.”

Riley glanced over at Cameron with concern. She had never considered that her house might be bugged. She felt a little queasy at the thought. Cameron noticed.

“It’s just precautionary. I’m sure you’re clean,” he tried to say confidently but failed. How could he be? Even Riley didn’t know with whom she was dealing or how far they’d go to protect whatever she had uncovered.

She got out of the Montero and into her relatively new, similarly colored Saturn Ion. They both headed toward her house, Riley filled with dread at the thought of her home under surveillance. It occurred to her that not only had A.T. involved her in this dangerous game with Legionnaire, but her family too. And without considering it for a moment, *she* had involved Cameron. The queasiness returned and she found herself praying that, like Cameron had assured her, the house would turn up clean. From that point on, she promised out loud, she would be more armed and careful in her approach with Legionnaire and Mollock.

Recall

That night, after Cameron swept her house and the search came up clean, and after installing two cameras on the front porch, Riley sat down at a small table in the back of the pub just blocks from campus, re-reading the article she had submitted but not written. A combination of relief and shame fought for occupation of her thoughts. Almost every part of her wanted to submit the damning article about Mollock, but the warning from A.T. and the meeting with Tom had her more concerned about her safety than the potential loss of her journalistic integrity.

Riley closed her eyes and listened to the rise of sound filling the room around her. Since she had arrived, the pub had transformed from low-key, sunlit, and nearly empty to brimming with smiling faces, voluminous conversations, the regular clink of glass, and

the steady flow of music from the jukebox. Outside, the streetlamps had come on, the shops had lit their signs and displays, and people walked past the window adjacent to Riley's seat in the corner, providing her the perfect view for people watching and writing. The textured burgundy walls and amber lighting were soothing, and in the revelry of the room, she easily disappeared. Tom had chosen their meeting place wisely.

She checked her watch every few minutes, always scanning the room and the street outside for Tom. She had arrived an hour early, following dinner with her parents, in order to get a good seat in the back - always investigating, always searching for more information. He was twenty-five minutes late, which was unlike Tom. He was an early bird, and she was half-surprised to find the corner sans Tom when she arrived. Something was wrong, and a gnawing sensation grew in her chest. Maybe Tom hadn't overreacted. Maybe the terror in his eyes was for good cause. She went over and over their conversation in her mind, wondering if whoever was listening could have picked up the panic in his voice or the indignant tone in hers.

As she scanned the many faces in the room again, feeling less and less secure in her corner each minute, a young man caught her attention. Not only because he was the most attractive guy she had seen anywhere near campus in four months, or because of his piercing blue eyes, perfectly assembled features, and confident stance against the wall across from her. No, he caught her attention because he was staring at her. At first she thought it was a passing moment, his eyes catching hers by mere chance, but he held her gaze. That familiar recall hit her hard once again. It melted down from the top of her head to the ends of her fingers. The sounds around her were muted and everything but him

blurred. Eyes locked, she grasped at memories. Nothing clicked. She scrolled through the rolodex of memories, searching...

“Can I get you another drink?” someone nearby asked her.

She looked up to find a waitress patiently awaiting a response. All sight and sound snapped back to the foreground. Riley shook her head no and smiled politely. Frustrated by the distraction, she looked back at the guy across the room, but the recall had unraveled before she could assemble any meaning. She looked behind her – thinking perhaps he had been looking at someone else - but turning back, she found his eyes still fastened on her. He didn't waiver. She quickly looked down, studying the pattern on the carpet, unsure of what to do. It wasn't *that* he was looking at her – he wasn't the first guy to look at her - it was *how*...like he knew her.

Completely unsettled, she packed her things and headed for the door, not looking back. She hoped to catch Tom outside. If not, she was going home. There had been enough suspense and strange for one day. Hopefully A.T. had made the mistake of showing up on camera and she might finally have a small clue about what the heck was going on.

Taking her usual shortcut home, she turned onto the winding street behind the shops. It was quiet, and much like an alleyway, dimly lit. She had never worried about that fact before, but now she couldn't shake the fear coming over her. The pub was less than a mile from her house, and she tried to walk whenever possible to avoid the freshman fifteen she had been warned about by those who had gone before her. Suddenly, walking home seemed like the dumbest idea she'd ever had. Consequently, she quickened

her pace, longing to be safe at home in front of her computer screen...writing or reading. It was the one place that brought her comfort, the one thing that cleared her thoughts.

She scanned through her memories again, wondering where she had seen the guy from the pub before. She looked over her shoulder to see if he had followed her, but there was no sign of him. In fact, the street was completely empty except for her. That was unusual, especially for a Friday night. Less frozen in place than usual, she looked forward and focused on walking faster to get to the lit neighborhood streets.

Riley continued her mental search for the pub guy as her breaths grew short from her increased pace, and to resist totally freaking out and crying like a baby. She pictured each row of every one of her classes, scanning the seats for his face. Nothing. And then...there it was again. Recall. The dream. Bits and pieces playing out before her throughout the day. But never before had it happened so many times in one day - each piece aligning themselves closer and closer together as if racing toward a climactic end.

Somehow retaining awareness of her surroundings, Riley breathed steadily to try and calm her nerves. The recalls never turned into anything significant. She reminded herself of this fact, though the truth was this felt significant. None of her recalls had looked her dead in the eyes before, from across the room, gorgeous. None of her recalls had been so closely connected to people in her every day life. None of them involved her on an empty, dark street. As she strategically crossed over another side street to avoid any followers, she noticed Tom's car and paused to look around. No Tom. Maybe he had walked around the front block and she had missed him. She was going to turn back and head toward the pub when something caught the corner of her eye. She walked closer to

make out something lying on the sidewalk beside his car. She stood, heart racing, panic building as she stared at Tom's satchel. It lay on the ground, papers strewn on the sidewalk, spilling out of its pockets like it had been searched through in a hurry. She knelt down and picked up the note pad he had handed her earlier that day and read the words he had written about their meeting at the pub, about it not being safe at the office.

What was happening? Riley didn't know what to do. She considered running home, calling the police, being anywhere else in the world - when in the midst of her contemplation, a chill came over her. The kind of chill you get when someone is watching you. Hoping to prove the chill and herself wrong, she looked behind her again, this time finding three men not far behind her. Her heart jumped and adrenaline coursed its way through her. They seemed to have come from nowhere, and something about the way they walked - side by side, at a quick pace - set the alarms off. While she tried to reason that they couldn't possibly be coming for her, the alarms continued to sound - heart pounding, sound amplifying, vision intensifying - as if warning her to run. She quickly grabbed Tom's satchel and papers.

Afraid of looking foolish by running away, not knowing who these men were, she instead began speed walking as subtly as possible, but upon turning back, her reason was dashed by the fact that the men were now only twenty yards away. Even in the dark she could make out their features. They were all similar in height and build, muscular, and wearing the same black jeans and black long-sleeved shirts. They even had the same buzzed haircut and looked more like a pack of hungry wolves than men - eyes on their prey. The dogs.

“You have got to be kidding me,” she half-whispered. They didn’t speak to each other but kept their focus on Riley, advancing on her quickly. Now she was scared.

Though she couldn’t fathom a reason three men would be pursuing her in such a threatening way, instinct kicked in and she began to run. While every scary movie she had seen told her not to look back, she couldn’t help herself. When she did, she found they had broken into a slow run as well, in unison. When she turned back, she slammed into the guy from the pub. She yelped and stood stunned as he held her by both arms and looked over her shoulders at the fast approaching men.

A black van with no rear windows screeched around the corner. The back door slid open, darkness filling the inside.

“You have to come with me,” he said matter-of-factly, quickly turning toward the van, pulling her alongside him.

“I don’t think so,” she retorted, ripping her arms from his and looking between her two options, desperate for another, maybe one involving a beach, a virgin margarita...Without warning, he picked her up and threw her over his shoulder and within a few steps, into the van. Before she could scream, the door slid shut and they were moving. She was in the back of an empty van with no seats. He knelt in the corner, eyes tracking her every motion.

“Let me out of here!” she yelled, reaching for the door handle and attempting to open it and jump who knows where.

“It’s locked,” he stated coolly. “And even if it weren’t, where were you going to go?” At this, a smirk formed on his mouth.

Riley was more angry than frightened, though she was pretty sure she had quite literally just been kidnapped by the man of her dreams. Her pulse quickened as his eyes stayed fixed on her.

“Where are you taking me?” She stayed kneeled by the door, fingers on the handle, hoping by some chance it would unlock.

“Somewhere safe.” His tone was smooth and calm, as if this was the most normal of situations.

Surveying the van, she looked for a potential weapon. Nothing. She had taken self-defense classes and fast-forwarded through moves in her mind. She sized him up. He didn’t seem threatening, but then again, he had just picked her up like a pillow and thrown her into the back of a black, windowless van. She remembered the three men pursuing her. Had he just saved her? Her ire grew with her confusion, as did her heart rate. The panic was returning. Where was he taking her? What did he mean by safe? Her parents would flip out if she weren’t home in the next hour!

Short of breath, she took one last look around the van, her self-defense instructor’s violent advice running through her mind. He had once told Riley that were she ever to be taken, she should do whatever it took to get away, bite an ear, poke out the eyes, fight to the death, because she wouldn’t want to live through what the kidnapers would do to her. Riley had taken the advice with an uncomfortable giggle, but only because she had never anticipated actually being kidnapped. Suddenly it seemed like sage

advice. She didn't know where they were headed, but she feared she would be outnumbered when they arrived.

Her wild stare and predatory posture seemed to concern him. The smirk faded and he was bracing himself, one hand against the van wall and one anchored on the floor, ready for an attack.

She threw herself at him, all caution left behind her, hoping to knock him unconscious - then worry about the driver. Her weight knocked him into the van wall, and she used the advantage to grab for his throat. Maybe she could squeeze long enough and hard enough to knock him out. She wrestled to get her balance and reach for him. He grabbed her wrists and turned her around, holding tightly, her arms pinned and crossed against her chest, her back against him. She tried to pull away, but he was too strong.

"Let go of me," she screamed, trying to drop her weight to the floor, swinging right and left to escape his grip.

"I'm trying to help you," he grunted against her thrashing. "And you're making it very difficult."

"Everything alright back there?" A voice drifted through a window to the front seat. It sounded only a little concerned, amused even.

"It's fine," he replied, annoyed.

"It's not fine," Riley said through gritted teeth. "Let go of me."

"If I let you go, are you going to calm down?" His voice was smooth again and so near her she could feel the words on her neck. The thick recall came over her again. His

voice, his smell, his warmth. She felt dizzy, lost...strangely soothed. She stopped thrashing about, and his grip slowly loosened. She pulled away to the far corner and stared at him in utter confusion.

“Who are you?” Her voice came out more weak than she liked.

“I’m Finn.”

“Finn,” she repeated, still trying to make sense of his familiarity. “Why were you following me?” She leaned against the van wall, heart racing to the surge of adrenaline.

“You were in trouble.” His eyes maintained contact with hers while he spoke. Something about them made her heart quicken.

“How did you know I was in trouble?” His brevity was getting her annoyed again. She sat up and crossed her arms. With this, his smirk returned.

“A lot of questions.”

“I’m in the back of your van. I figure the least you owe me are some answers.” He laughed and the smirk grew to a full smile, perfect white teeth and all.

“Alright, then. It’s my job to know if you’re in trouble and get you out of it.” He cocked his head slightly to the side in anticipation of the next question, which she was about to ask when the van came to a stop. Their eyes darted to the van door. He extended his arm, pointing one finger at her.

“Stay there,” he commanded, eyebrows raised in all seriousness.

“Excuse me? I’m not a dog!” She got to her feet, hunching over so as not to knock her head on the van roof. Predicting an oncoming attack, Finn slowly ran his fingers through his hair and sighed.

“Please don’t make this more difficult than it has to be.”

Her heart rate was accelerating once again, fearful of what awaited her on the outside. The door made a clicking sound. Panic set in. This was her only chance. Tackle him, get out of the door and run.

His jaw set tight, and he prepared for another blow. She lunged at him, this time with the purpose of knocking him away from the door to give her an easier escape, only this time his arms moved around her and used her momentum to flip her over to the floor. He quickly had her arms pinned above her head, his weight pressing down on her to prevent her from moving.

“Get off me!” She was breathing hard and attempting to wiggle out of his grip. No luck. He stared down at her, breathing heavily through his nose.

The van door slid open. Riley turned to find an older man, maybe in his seventies, with white hair curled at his forehead and smiling blue eyes surrounded by age.

“You’ve got yerself a wily one here, Finn.” He rocked back on his heels and let out a light laugh. “She almost had yeh there, boy.”

Finn didn’t move.

“Hardly,” he replied, pride swelling. Riley narrowed her eyes and gave a daring smile, guessing Finn’s pride was at stake. He let go of her wrists and stayed crouched,

expecting another attack. She pulled herself upright - her feet beneath her and her hands touching the floor for balance. They locked in a stare, like animals sizing each other up. Riley threw herself toward the door in one last attempt to escape. The old man's eyes widened and he stepped back, hands raised, but before her feet hit the ground, Finn had her back on the van floor, pinned.

“Aaahh!” she growled, fighting uselessly against his weight. He was solid, unwavering.

“No need to fight, love.” A woman appeared in the doorway. She too had whitish hair, long and wavy, and a kind face. “We’re only here to help yeh.” The woman held her extended hand up to her mouth, palm side up, and smiled before blowing. A fine dust swirled and then settled over Riley’s face. She shook her head, trying to avoid breathing it in, but it was no use. The world around her grew heavy. She fought to remain conscious, but it was as useless as struggling against Finn, who had let go of her wrists and was leaning back against the van door, watching her with awe and attraction and adrenaline shaken over ice.

“Just let go, love. All will be well.” The woman’s voice came as an echo as she leaned over Riley, smoothing her hair.

“Fiery, I tell yeh,” the old man said, shaking his head with a smile. “She almost had the boy twice. If it weren’t for yeh coming with yer fairy dust, we’d be here all night.” He chuckled, but his voice sounded faint to Riley.

“Quit yer blabberin, Thomas. Tis here is no fairy’s dust and yeh know it. Say it again, and I’ll turn yeh into a fairy!”

“No need to get feisty, Hannah.”

Their bickering faded, and blackness began to swallow Riley’s vision. Their faces loomed over her, seemingly harmless, and before she lost consciousness she caught sight of something familiar, something she *could* place this time...a bracelet...her bracelet...on the woman’s wrist.

Stay tuned for more from the Gallowan Series...