

J.J. ARIAS

*Body
Check*

BODY CHECK
A LESBIAN ROMANCE



J.J. ARIAS

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For my wife.

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CHAPTER 1



MANCHA LAID HIS MASSIVE, gray and white Pit Bull head in Fab's lap the moment she pulled off the main road. His whine a mournful lament.

"I know buddy, I'm going to miss you so much." She rubbed the side of his face where a splotch of gray spread over half his fur like a melted eyepatch. "But you're going to have so much fun at Grandma's house."

His pitch got higher and more insistent the further away from Atlanta they traveled. Usually, he loved going to the suburbs, but despite her best efforts, he'd noticed her suitcases in the back of the SUV. She didn't blame him. The last time she left him like this, she came back with nothing to show for it.

"They're gonna let you sleep in the bed, okay? I promise." Fab ran her thumb behind where his ear would've been if he hadn't lost it as a puppy before she rescued him.

Forty-five minutes from her loft, her mom and stepdad lived in a farmhouse with an enormous yard and plenty of room for Mancha to run free in the adjoining woods.

Even if she'd miss her constant companion, she knew he'd be well cared for and happy for the nine weeks she'd be gone.

Assuming she lasted that long.

Fab gripped the sun-warmed steering wheel. This time she wouldn't let

herself get stabbed in the back.

Fab's car bounced over the dirt path when the pavement ended. She pulled her dark glasses down to keep the noonday summer sun out of her eyes. She followed the road, lined with broad, mossy willow trees, to a chain-link gate standing open.

At the end of the long driveway, her parents were sitting on their wrap-around porch waiting for them.

"Look, Mancha." She patted his chest to get him excited. "Look who's waiting for you? Is that Tilo?"

At the sound of the Chihuahua's name, Mancha perked up. He loved the seven-pound terror, even if the feeling wasn't always mutual.

"Look! He's with Grandma!"

Mancha's heavy paws dug into her thigh as he used her like a diving board to rocket himself up. His muscular, sixty-pound frame smashed against the car window, his hard head hitting the glass with a *klonck*.

"See? I told you."

The moment Fab opened her door, Mancha bulldozed over her and sprang out of the car. Despite her many attempts to explain it to him, he didn't believe he was any larger than Tilo.

Fab followed Mancha to the porch where he'd already tripped up the steps and slammed into her stepdad's legs, insisting on being greeted with pets and proclamations of being the bestest boy.

"*Hola, Mãe,*" she greeted her mom while smoothing down her black tank top and leggings.

Fab and her mother shared the same long, dark hair, big, almond-shaped eyes, and golden, olive skin. They would also have the same soft, curvy form if Fab didn't exercise for a living.

After Tilo got tired of biting Mancha's ankles to establish his dominance, they took off down the porch steps to run in the grass.

"Hi honey," her mother kissed her on one cheek and then the other before

hugging her.

Fab wrapped her well-defined arms around her mother and squeezed.

Her stepdad, tall and slim, came in for a hug next.

“Hey, Ted.”

“Where are you off to this time?” He motioned for her to follow them to the rocking chairs under the spinning fans.

Fab was happy to get out of the stagnant Georgia heat, but she didn’t have time to sit.

“They don’t tell her until she gets to the airport,” her mother explained, her face folded-over with worry.

“I got a clue from one of the producers I became friendly with last time.” Fab resisted the urge to whisper, as if someone was hiding in the bushes to catch her violating the nondisclosure agreement. “It’s going to be somewhere extremely cold.”

Mancha ran up the porch, knocking into the back of her legs before flying back down the steps where Tilo was waiting in the grass. His tiny, pink tongue lolling out of his open mouth as he waited for Mancha to run in circles around him.

“You’ll be careful, Fabiola, *sim?*” Her mother cupped Fab’s face. “Don’t get hurt.”

“I’ll try,” she promised. This time she wasn’t a sheltered twenty-one-year-old.

After a tearful goodbye, she left Mancha panting at her mother’s feet. Instead of letting herself miss him, she imagined how happy he would be racing through the creek later that afternoon. He was a terrible swimmer, but that didn’t stop him from loving the water.

An hour later, she was pulling into a private airport. Leaving her SUV in the modest garage, she strapped on a backpack and rolled two large suitcases into the small building. As soon as she walked into the small lobby, she spotted the production assistant.

“Fabiola Santos!” The young man jumped out of his seat and darted toward her.

She nodded, even though it wasn’t posed as a question, and slid her sunglasses up to use them as a headband. Her long ponytail slipped off her shoulder and over the top of her backpack.

“Hi! I’m Mike!” His smile was excessive and unrestrained. “Let’s get you checked in.” He gestured for Fab to hand over her bags for him to take.

She didn’t loosen her grip on the handles as she followed him through the security checkpoint.

“Your season is the first one I ever watched.” He stared at her with the wide eyes of someone meeting their hero. “I can’t believe that six years later, here I am taking you to an *All Stars* season.”

Fab shifted her weight between her neon green sneakers. She’d never gotten used to her minor celebrity status. She’d prefer to compete in physical challenges without the cameras.

After checking her bags, they started for one of four gates.

“I couldn’t believe it when you lost,” he said as they walked.

Fab gripped her backpack straps. She didn’t want to think about the past. All she wanted to do was focus on the future. On her second chance. On redemption.

“What was it like to be down to the wire like that?” Mike the PA continued, undeterred by her discomfort. “You and Cameron Herrera were literally neck and neck after that grueling final obstacle. Three days in the jungle. Countless challenges. And then she crossed the finish line like two seconds before you.”

The more excited he got, the higher his pitch. Fab worried he was going to turn supersonic soon. If he imploded, at least she wouldn’t get dragged down memory lane. Her skin shredding over all the jagged rocks in the road.

“I was so sure you were going to win. Apart from just dominating your season, you were beating her the whole time. What the hell happened?”

She stabbed me in the back.

“Bad luck,” Fab replied, her voice low and her jaw tight.

“Are you excited to know where we’re filming this year?” Mike handed their boarding passes to the agent at the gate along with their passports.

Fab strained her eyes, but she couldn’t make out the destination on the ticket.

“I’ll give you a clue,” he whispered as they walked down the gangway toward the charter plane.

Based on the intel that they were filming in a cold climate over their summer, she’d narrowed it down to Patagonia, Greenland, or the northern reaches of Canada.

Cutthroat Island was the longest running reality competition show in the United States. Over the course of two decades, the themes had changed, but the challenges always took place on an island. There were only so many of those covered in ice this time of year.

“It’s only a three hour flight,” he said with a wink before plopping down on the seat next to her in the small plane.

Three hours? Fab cycled through all the destinations three hours from Atlanta. None of them on her list of possible suspects.

Mike the PA leaned over. Even though they were the only ones seated on the flight so far, he whispered. “If you want to hand over your phone now, I can tell you.”

Fab reached into the side pocket of her leggings and pulled out her phone. After sending a text to her mother, letting her know she was on the plane and about to go radio silent until she either won or lost *Cutthroat Island*, she turned off her phone.

“Technically, I’m supposed to check your bags for extra phones before I tell you this.” His face lit up with excitement, as if divulging secrets was his absolute favorite pastime. “But I know you’d never break the rules.” He slid her phone in his jeans pocket and sat back down in his aisle seat. “Belize!”

He wiggled his brows with unparalleled enthusiasm. “Well, a private island off the coast, but technically it’s part of Belize.”

Shutting her eyes, Fab leaned back and thought about the thousands of dollars in winter gear being loaded into the underside of the charter plane. All useless.

After realizing that she and Mike were going to be the only passengers on the flight, she started focusing on her game. She’d spent the last month imagining, and training for, all cold-weather games. Doing burpees in a meat-locker wouldn’t help on a hot, humid island in the Caribbean.

Merda.

When the pilot announced their descent two-and-a-half hours later, Fab looked out the window. The island below was a long, narrow strip of land in a bright, sapphire ocean. It looked like a snake slithering in the warm water. Most of it was covered in miles and miles of trees. The snake’s head was a sandy beach with a huge building at the center. At its tail, a bunch of tiny little huts sat over the water, each at the end of a long dock. She imagined the kinds of challenges the show’s producers could devise in the landscape.

Taking long, deep breaths, she prepared herself for the landing. The moment the wheels touched the small tarmac in the clearing, it was game on.

After the pilot gave the okay, Fab stood and pulled her sunglasses back on. She was ready to play.

“God, this is so cool,” Mike squealed as he fitted her with a tiny microphone and battery pack as they stood in the aisle.

When she lifted her shirt to her sports bra, she flexed her muscles. Just a little.

His eyes widened. “Damn! You came jacked! You’re not playing around!”

The corner of Fab’s lips twitched but she fended off the urge to smile. She did allow herself to stand a little taller. She’d been working hard to be in optimal condition for her return to the competition. The way she understood

it, this season would be full of competitors that had gotten within snatching distance of the win, although she doubted any of them had gotten there the way she had.

“Ready?” Mike beamed.

Fab nodded and led the way out of the plane and down a set of stairs leading to the tarmac below. As soon as she stepped out, she was met by the familiar sight of cameras and a full production crew.

Nerves washed over her. A pang of panic flashed in her chest. The seaweed smoothie she’d had for breakfast threatened to make an appearance.

She gripped the straps on her backpack and held on to them like they were a piece of driftwood after a shipwreck. As if hanging onto the pack could keep her from getting pulled under the waves. Ignoring the cameras, she walked toward the modern resort. She reminded herself that in a few days she would forget the cameras were there.

Keeping her back straight and her sunglasses covered eyes trained on the sprawling building ahead, she gave producers what they wanted. She had a role to play. The Ice Queen. The Alpha. The Bitch.

Tropical birds cried as they flew overhead. A chorus of ear-splitting *tee-chee-tee*.

“Where’s Stan?” Fab asked one of the producers standing near the path leading to the building flanked by lush, tropical vegetation.

From her experience, they’d mash together short shots of each of the contestants filing off the plane and play them at the start of the first episode. What she said didn’t matter. Only what she looked like.

The producer, of which there would be over a dozen, fiddled with the walkie-talkie in her hand. “Fired,” she replied simply.

As Fab wondered whether Stan lied to her on purpose, she pulled her suitcases toward the building. She didn’t stop to let herself enjoy the ocean breeze filtering through the huge, green banana leaves and cooling her already perspiring skin.

Fab only got as far as the lobby of the high-end spa resort the show had commandeered for a few months, before another producer stopped her. He took her bags and directed her outside. They would be filming the intros right away. No time to rest.

Her sneakers squeaked as she crossed the lobby, its dark brown tile floor an attractive contrast to the stark white walls and absurdly high ceilings. The reflecting pool cutting through the center of the space preached enlightenment and non-attachment while bragging about the most luxurious meditation retreat. As she wondered what it would cost to stay at the opulent resort as a guest, she stepped outside.

Beyond the enormous walk-in pool surrounded by teak deck chairs and a dozen white-tent-cabanas, contestants were lined up on the sand between the resort and the beach.

With another deep breath, she set her expression somewhere between intimidating and indifferent. She gathered clues as she strolled, taking great pains to move only her eyes as she scanned her environment.

The cabanas were empty. No red paramedic tents on the beach - only white ones for the crew and equipment. They were not doing a physical challenge of any sort, or medics would already be on hand.

On the beach there was no sign of puzzles or brain teasers. No strange obstacle to test their nerve or daring. Nothing but eleven contestants already standing on their markers. The six tallest standing on a long riser, and the remaining five standing in front of them.

There was one spot left in the front, presumably for Fab, but a dozen was too few contestants for nine weeks of filming. There was a gimmick. One she wasn't aware of, and there were few things Fab hated more than surprises.

Tense, it was easy to remain stoic as she eyed her competition. The twelve of them were divided into nine men and three women. Fab recognized a few. Most were popular contestants from the seasons before hers. A couple were much newer.

At five-foot-five, Fab was one of the shortest competitors. As directed by the producer, she took her place at the end and prepared to wait.

Behind her, Brian, the guy from the most recent season who couldn't be much older than the minimum requirement of twenty-one, shuffled his feet. She'd watched his performance. The wannabe Vin Diesel was so arrogant and obnoxious, he'd gotten himself voted into the elimination challenge week after week. Week after week he'd been gifted with a purely physical challenge and saved himself from a trip home.

Fab could never confirm, but she suspected that production selected the elimination task based on who was on the chopping block. The moment he was paired with a female challenger and given a task that involved brains over brawn, he'd failed miserably. Wiping the sand with his smug face was going to be fun.

Fab took stock of the rest of the contestants. They'd all been branded as the villain, or at the very least, *difficult*. She knew she didn't deserve the moniker, but if that was this season's theme, she would be expected to seek redemption.

Near sunset, the production crew swarmed the sand. The host, Janette Allen, started toward them in a pale orange linen dress. As a former college basketball player, she had the athletic grace of Robin Roberts, and the shrewd, business acumen of Oprah. Before she took over hosting in the show's third season, it was a sardine in the sea of endless competition reality shows, now it was the king of the ocean.

"Challengers," she greeted them with the wide, sweeping voice that signaled they were already filming. "Welcome back to Cutthroat Island."

Fab crossed her arms over her chest and braced herself.

"The twelve of you have been invited back for good reason." Janette's black, curly hair fluttered around her face in the breeze. "On your season you were all tough to beat," she said with a manufactured smile as her dark eyes swept over Fab first and then the rest. "But you didn't win."

Fab swallowed the six-year-old disappointment. She was on the All Star season to take her rightful place at the top. No tricks. No distractions. Not this time.

“There is something you *did* do rather than claim the title of Cutthroat Champion.”

Janette’s pause filled Fab with an overwhelming sense of dread. The mischief in her eyes was chilling.

“You earned yourself a rival.” Janette raised her arm like Vanna White revealing a vowel. “Now, you’re here to resolve your *unfinished business*.”

From behind one of the tents, a dozen new contestants emerged. As soon as she saw the flash of long, pink hair, she understood why she was there.

She was there for Cameron Herrera. Tall and lean and deceptive. She was the woman who’d stolen her quarter of a million dollars in prize money and now spent her days posting thirst traps on her socials while pretending to be an influencer. The Social Butterfly and Femme Fatale rolled into one dangerous vessel was going to be her real competition.

This wasn’t about redemption. It was about revenge.

CHAPTER 2



SAND CREPT hot and harsh into Cam's sneakers. She ignored the discomfort and watched Fab's reaction as she approached. Despite the sunglasses, she could feel Fab's glare. Could hear her wishing she could disintegrate her with her eyes.

Her stomach clenched. Fabiola Santos was even more beautiful than she'd been six years ago, and she'd been stunning then. The recent pictures on her social media account didn't capture the sharp cut of her jaw, the glossy black of her long, straight hair, the raw power in her body, the lingering hatred in her heart.

"Some of you were selected because of your in-game rivalry," Janette said as Cam and the others lined up on their marks to her side and faced their competition. "For others, the feud developed *after* you left the island."

Aware of the cameras, Cam resisted the urge to wince. Fab had fired the first shots on social media and Cam should've let them go. Things had gotten so out of hand.

"If you want to be the last team standing on Cutthroat Island and win a half-million-dollar prize, you're going to have to figure out how to work together . . . as a team," Janette announced. "You heard me correctly. This year we've *doubled* the usual prize money. That's five hundred thousand dollars on the line."

Fab's upper lip twitched. Her disdain a living, breathing thing desperate to break free from its confines and throttle Cam.

"Fabiola, please come and join your partner. Cameron. The person who had just a little more gas in the tank than you."

Cam's stomach dropped out of her body at the harsh lie.

Despite Janette's direction, Fab didn't move. Cam clung to her own hands as if that might keep the cold panic in her belly at bay. Would Fab refuse to play with her?

Janette opened her mouth to speak again, but Fab stepped forward before she did.

"No one said this was going to be easy, folks." Janette laughed before naming the next pair.

Without acknowledging her, Fab took her place at Cam's side. This was going to be a lot harder than she anticipated. Things were already not going as she'd envisioned them. When the producer pitching to her let the theme of the season slip, and then intimated that Fabiola had already committed, she imagined a chance to make amends. She should've expected that it wouldn't be so simple.

As soon as they were organized into twelve pairs, Janette gave a little speech about *unfinished business*. It was so heavy-handed, Cam guessed it would be the season's tagline.

Cam couldn't stop looking over at Fab, wishing she would talk to her. Nine weeks wasn't long enough to make up for her mistake, but it was all she had.

"Oh, and one more thing." Janette's painted lips curled into a terrifying grin. "There's another tiny, little wrinkle. Getting to the end will depend entirely on your ability to work together on the challenges. This season, no one will be getting voted into elimination." She paused as if giving them time to absorb her news. "The only social game that matters here is the one between you and your partner. Every week, the team who performs the worst

is gone. So figure out how to work with the person you hate, or go home.”

A huge guy Cam didn't recognize because she'd never watched the show again, not even her own season, cheered. Apparently the crippling elimination of the social game was as good for him as it was devastating for her.

The second they were dismissed, Cam turned to her. “Fab, I—”

As if Cam had never spoken, Fab turned on her heels and started for the resort.

Shit.

“Cameron!” A woman from one of the opposing teams waved at her as she approached. “I hate to fangirl over here, but you are my absolute favorite! I wake up to your videos every morning. That tea you turned me on to? Absolutely amazing! I wish I had my phone with me so we could take a selfie! Is it okay if I hug you?”

Cam indulged her in a hug.

“I even got my septum pierced because of you!” She pointed at her nose where she had a thin, hoop nearly identical to hers. “Sooooo worth the pain.”

Cam laughed and made as much polite conversation as she could while being preoccupied. When the woman dropped that her name was Aisha, Cam picked up the tidbit and put it in her pocket.

“Should we check out the digs? The PA that picked me up at the airport said we're all getting our own rooms this season. No doors though.” Aisha shrugged.

What Cam really wanted to do was find Fabiola. She might be able to get a minute with her outside the camera's view. In the first few weeks with so many contestants, they couldn't be everywhere at once.

“Let's do it,” Cam said with as much effervescence as she could fake. Before she was cast on her season six years earlier, she'd watched Cutthroat Island religiously. There was always some hidden twist, some trick. Janette might say that the social game wasn't going to come into play, but she didn't

trust that. It wouldn't hurt to be friendly.

The Pepem Resort was the kind of lavish place where people assumed Cam spent her winnings. The kind of swanky opulence she posted about on her social media. But only if it was comped and #sponsored.

Aisha complained about her partner as they flittered through the lobby, buzzing with cast and crew. The first few weeks were absolute bedlam, but eventually the cameras blended into the background and the cast found a rhythm. That's when people usually started playing the mental game not just the physical, but whoever waited that long was too late.

"Do you want to get a drink?" Aisha's bright, brown eyes sparkled.

Cam hated turning her down, but with the crew filming the throng getting drunk and jumping in the pool, Cam thought she had a fair chance at Fab. A moment of *real* before the show. What she needed to say couldn't be picked up by a camera or a microphone.

The roughly thirty guest rooms were spread over two floors perched above the main level. Every room had its door removed from its hinges. The toilet was behind a door, but the sink and shower were exposed. Every room, every hallway, was outfitted with cameras.

Cam wondered how long it had taken to scout a place like this. One suited perfectly to the show's needs. It probably took weeks to add all the clandestine cameras production hoped the contestants would forget about.

Near the end of the hall on the third level, Cam heard the musical sounds of aggressive unpacking, drawers slamming, faint Portuguese cursing.

Fab was the only person in the entire house more concerned with putting things away than being with the group. Her social game had always been atrocious. If she hadn't won herself immunity so often on their original season, she would have been sent home first. But the rules were different this time.

Following the sounds, Cam stopped in Fab's doorway. The rooms were identical. Modern white walls, dark hardwood floors, dark wood frame bed,

and a balcony overlooking a rugged coastline and tropical gardens. If her room was like Cam's, the balcony door would be locked. Producers wanted them to spend as much time in communal spaces as possible. It was why chairs and desks and tables had been removed from the rooms along with the televisions and phones. It was all part of the pressure cooker experience.

Cam tried to still herself with a deep breath. It was so hard to look at Fab without wanting to break. Mindful of the cameras set into the hallway and above the room door, Cam hurried. They caught video, but not audio.

Sliding her hand up the back of her shirt, Cam turned off her mic. As soon as a producer noticed where she was, they'd send a camera.

"Hey," Cam said, sounding more hesitant than she'd like.

Fab didn't look up from where she was re-folding a thick, long-sleeved shirt from a stack of folded garments on her bed. There was no doubt Fab noticed her lingering before she spoke. Fab wanted to look busy. Or maybe just avoid looking at her.

"Did they check your protein powder too?" Cam glanced at the several large, white canisters arranged on the dresser where the television would have been. "What kind of contraband do they think we're going to sneak in there anyway? Unapproved tampons?"

Her joke fell so flat, Cam could almost hear the echoing clang of it hitting the floor.

Fab had no comment.

"You can't just ignore me the whole time, Fabiola." Cam entered the room without waiting for an invitation.

Fab's hands stilled, but the muscle in her jaw wouldn't be restrained. It danced at a steady rhythm, beating out messages of contempt in Morse code. Her eyes cut away from her bed and sliced through the warm air. Her dark gaze ripped through Cam like a dozen titanium throwing stars.

Absorbing the glare as if she'd been wearing Kevlar, Cam inched across the sparsely furnished room, keeping herself small and friendly. "Can you?"

She pointed to her chest where the tiny microphone was taped to her skin.

Replying with an eye roll so deep it threatened to snap retinas, Fab reached back and under her shirt. After a click indicated her pack was off, she stared at her expectantly.

“I know you hate me.” Cam paused, hoping that Fab might correct her. She didn’t. “I don’t know how to apologize for—”

“If this is what you came here to say, don’t waste your time or mine. If my actions haven’t been clear, I’ll use my words.” Every single syllable was drenched in venomous loathing. Her face twisted with disgust as if having to speak to her was revolting. “I do not forgive you. I will never forgive you. I had no idea you were going to be here. If I knew, I would not have agreed to come. If you want to do something for me, play the game. They cast us as rivals. That is what we are. There is nothing you can say to change that.”

Cam resisted the urge to get closer, to remind her what they’d meant to each other. To beg her. To grovel. To plead for just a minute to explain.

“I’m not your rival, Fab—”

“You’re a great actress, Cameron.” Fab’s lip twitched like the latch on a bowing door rattling, threatening to pop. “You’ve fooled me before. I’m sure you can manage it again if I gave you half a chance. So I will not give you that chance.”

Guilt, wet and heavy, pressed down on Cam’s shoulders.

“Or don’t respect my request.” She went back to re-folding a sweater Cam couldn’t imagine she would need. “It will cost me the bonus we get for every challenge we survive. We all know that taking things from me is your specialty.”

Cam’s chest tightened. She knew she didn’t deserve Fab’s reasonable side, but not getting through to her was so frustrating. She just needed her to drop her tough act and be real with her for a second. “So I came here to apologize and you want me to—”

Her dark eyes snapped up at her again. “I don’t want you to do anything

other than leave.”

Appealing to her reason, Cam switched perspectives. If she didn’t care about her apology, maybe she would care about the game. “But we can’t win this way, Fab. We have to—”

Fab’s nostrils flared, her biceps bulged, the vein in her forehead throbbed. “Get. Out.”

Behind her, the clamor of the camera crew thundered down the hall. The wood floors were going to give them away all the time.

When Fab turned her mic back on, Cam did the same. She’d blown her chance and she couldn’t keep trying unless they had privacy. Something almost impossible to obtain on a reality show.

As she slid by the very annoyed crew and returned downstairs, Cam’s mind raced. For the last six years she’d imagined what she would do if she saw Fab again. If she was able to be alone with her. If she could just explain *why* she’d done it, she was sure Fab would understand.

She’d miscalculated the depth of Fab’s anger. Been wrong that it might have lessened over time. Instead, it had festered and grown.

Shit.

Straightening her spine, Cam refused to be defeated. Fab was right. They’d been cast as rivals. Cutthroat Island was a competition of strength and speed and wits, but it was also a reality show. If they gave the producers what they wanted, they might just find the challenges suited their strengths more often than not. It was never really left up to chance. Not completely. The powers that be had a narrative, one she might be able to mold.

Cam could play the game. And she could win. Win double the amount of money for Fab than she’d won for herself — certainly the interest would go a long way in making amends.

Painting a smile on her objectively pretty face, Cam joined the group by the pool.

CHAPTER 3



DRESSED in matching skintight black compression shorts and black tank tops with Cutthroat Island on the front and their first names on the back, Cam and Fab stood together on the beach. They were at the end of the line of competitors staring at the obstacle course in front of them.

After a quick but heavy morning rain shower, the mid morning day was hot and unbearably humid. The kind of sticky, oppressive, wet heat most of her competitors only experienced while relaxing in steam baths. The kind of misery Cam had grown up with as a born and bred Miami native. This was the kind of weather she'd run track in, swam in, lived in. It wasn't going to slow her down.

As for her competitors, most of them were already dripping with sweat, and they'd only been standing outside for fifteen minutes.

Cam didn't let the weather get to her as she analyzed the course. She judged that it was half a mile long with five obstacles stationed from one end to the other. They'd likely have to sprint from one station to the next. She touched her nose, double-checking that she'd taken her septum piercing out, as she did for all challenges.

The first obstacle was a mud pit with a net sagging over the top to ensure that they crawled through the mud on their bellies. A classic.

Next, there was a drafting table, so they'd probably have to solve a

puzzle. Another classic.

Third, there was a rope ladder with a bell at the top. That would just be a matter of speed.

Fourth, there was a huge rectangular frame the size of a shipping container with hundreds of rubber cords running in all different directions. It looked like someone had sprayed silly string from one end to the other. A colorful corridor full of crisscrossing bands. It would be annoying and exhausting to climb through the obstacle, but not difficult.

Finally, there was a collection of jars sitting on a folding table. Cam strained her eyes to see if she could understand their purpose, but they were too far away.

Overall, it was all too easy. There had to be a catch.

Cam looked at Fab who was standing at her side. Two inches shorter than Cam, Fab was muscular and strong, built for short blasts of speed and power. Cam was long and lean, built for endurance. Their inaugural test should suit Fab perfectly.

“What do you think the gimmick is?” Cam whispered as she leaned close to Fab’s ear.

Fab’s response was a twitching jaw and eyes that remained unmoving like she was challenging the horizon to a staring contest.

Cam’s frustration blazed up her back making her want to arch and hiss. If Fab didn’t realize they were on the same team, they had no chance of winning.

In a whirlwind of cameras and crew that followed her like an octopus’ tentacles, Janette stepped off the resort’s pool deck and onto the sand where the contestants were lined up.

The sight of Janette focused Cam like a shot of Cuban espresso. Pre-game jitters hit her hard and fast. Thoughts of Fab fled, replaced by racing anticipation and bone-deep nausea.

As Janette talked to the camera trained on her, Cam looked straight

ahead. With her pastel pink hair in twin fishtail braids, she only had the tattoos scattered around her arms to make her look like a badass. She set her jaw and glared at the sea like it had wronged her. The producers loved close-ups of intense expressions.

“The team who will go first has been selected at random,” Janette announced. Cam didn’t believe anything was left to chance if it could be helped. “And remember, the team with the fastest time through the course will win an advantage next week. The slowest team is gone. Fabiola and Cameron, let’s go.”

Fab headed for the starting line before Janette finished saying her name. Not even a moment to strategize. To think. To plan.

Cursing under her breath, Cam followed. Fab’s grudge was going to be their undoing.

They took their marks between two stakes in the ground. Cam flexed her hands and took deep breaths as she dug her sneakers into the sand. She leaned her weight on her right foot, primed to run.

Janette joined them at the starting line. “One thing before you tear through this bad boy.”

She signaled for a PA dressed in black jeans and a black t-shirt. He materialized from the sands with a roll of black tape in his hand and a devilish grin on his lips.

Hello, Catch. There you are. I was wondering when you’d get here.

“Ladies, hold hands with your partners, please.”

Fab’s already stiff body turned to stone. Her lip curled like she’d rather eat a live tarantula than hold her hand.

Cam held out her hand first, presenting it to the PA like an offering. As if she couldn’t bare to look, Fab turned her attention to the waves rushing over the compact sand several yards from the course.

When she clasped her hand in Cam’s, a flood of memories invaded her senses. Her skin remembered Fab’s touch. It reacted. It warmed. It missed. It

yearned.

The PA rolled the tape in bands from their hands to their elbows. They'd have to run the entire obstacle as one. Each using only one hand.

"Well, at least you're a lefty," Cam joked, testing out just how awkward it was to move while tied to Fab.

Fab's eye roll was audible over the steamy breeze coming off the ocean.

"The winning team will be the one who figures out how to work together the fastest." Janette smiled before putting her trademark gold whistle between her teeth.

Cam tightened her grip on Fab's hand. It was harder to focus on the mud pit now that she was literally attached to Fab, but the hardest part of Cutthroat Island was always the mental game. If that got knocked off course, they were done.

Tensing her muscles, Cam's thigh twitched, ready to sprint. Her back tightened as she pictured running the course. In the seconds they had for the cameras to set up, Cam ran the first few obstacles in her mind. Tried to troubleshoot the difficulty of completing the once simple looking challenge with a grown woman who hated her attached to her body.

She tried to work out the kinks. It was going to come down to finding a rhythm. To trusting the other person to move with you. Work with you.

They were screwed.

The whistle blew, sending Cam's heart screaming in her ears.

Without hesitation, they bolted.

HAVING Cam stuck to her like dead weight was maddening. Running was impossible. All Fab could do was yank Cam along as she sprinted. Her right arm tugged at odd angles every time Cam moved.

Adrenaline was a pounding rhythm in her ears, her blood surging and

pulse throbbing as she willed herself toward the first obstacle. The mud pit.

“We have to get in sync!” Cam screeched in her ear.

Fab clenched her jaw and dove toward the pit. They didn’t have time for a strategy meeting. All the other teams were going to have the benefit of time. Of watching them flail through the course and learn from their mistakes. Every fraction of a second was precious.

The pit was several inches deep and it sucked Fab in to its thick, sticky depths like fingers curling around her body and holding her down. Like the reddish-brown sludge had a personal interest in halting her advance. It would be bad enough if she didn’t also have Cam anchoring her.

Frustrated, Fab heaved her right arm, wishing she could force Cam to go faster as they crawled through the mud.

“One, two! One, two! We have to move at the same time!” Cam insisted, her shouts loud and frantic.

Well, just announce your plan to the whole freaking world!

Fab paused her slow advance for a second and glanced over at Cam, her face splattered with mud. With a sharp nod, she waited for Cam to start the count again.

“We go on *one* with our free hands,” she said. “One!”

Gripping Cam’s hand, Fab dug her right elbow into the soft mud and pulled her upper body over the mud with her left. They kicked each other a few times until their legs caught up to the synchronization and they crawled out of the mud pit filthy and drained.

Sprinting while tied together was as hard as crawling. It was impossible to find a tempo.

“*Merda*,” Fab cursed in Portuguese when they reached the second obstacle.

It wasn’t an ordinary puzzle like she expected.

The instructions Cam was shockingly smart enough *not* to read aloud so the other teams could hear, were written on a card at the top of the large table.

Using all the cards provided, build a house of cards.

Fab placed her hand over the thick stack and moved it closer to Cam. How she'd wished for a nice sliding tile puzzle, or a tangram, or a math problem. She could do those in her sleep and more importantly alone.

"You hold one side and I'll hold the other." Cam held a card up, ready to lean it against Fab's.

Without arguing, because that was the only real strategy, Fab smeared mud all over the card she grabbed and tilted it toward Cam.

"Damn," Cam cursed when the cards fell over immediately.

Five times they tried and five times the stupid cards refused to lean against each other in order to stay upright. Bitterly, Fab wondered what kind of touchy-feely therapist had come up with this representation of what happens when you can't work together.

Fab stilled her hand and focused for a moment. It wasn't the breeze knocking the cards over, it was a lack of stability.

"I'll hold them together, you place another card at the top of the peak. That might stabilize them and stop them from sliding down immediately."

"How I regret not building these on rainy summer camp days." Cam crouched to get a better look at where she was placing the little roof on their triangle house.

Fab rolled her eyes. She didn't need to learn more tidbits from Cam's life. She had given her everything she needed to know six years ago. It made her immune to her charms.

With the new system, they moved carefully not to knock already erect cards as they built. The sun crept out from behind a thick, white cloud. It dried the mud on Fab's body, making her skin tight and uncomfortable. She didn't let herself think about the pulling discomfort.

"Check!" Cam shouted as soon as she put the last card on top of their pyramid.

A whistle blew, signaling that they could go on.

They each tried to tear off around their side of the table.

“Gah!” Cam cried when she snapped back like a rubber band into Fab.

Unable to resist, Fab smirked. She hadn’t meant to remind Cameron how much stronger than her she was, but the unintended consequence of their mistake amused her just the same.

Cam pushed her, giving in immediately and running around to her side.

Sprinting the second time was easier, even if Fab had to slow herself down for Cam to keep up. If she could just throw her over her shoulder this would be so much easier.

Sand caked onto their legs where it mixed with the mud, making Fab’s limbs feel like anchors. It was a good thing she’d been training with ankle and belt weights for the last month in preparation for the competition.

Cam obviously hadn’t prepared as well, and her struggle to get to the rope ladder showed.

What did you think? You were going to waltz in here and flash your pretty smile and trick another fool into giving you their money?

“This is more rhythm,” Cam said breathlessly when they reached the wide rope ladder suspended from a metal contraption.

Fab shook her head. “It’s more about balance.”

“Whatever, we just have to move together.”

Fab rolled her eyes. “Obviously.” She raised their bound together arm. “Slow controlled movements or the rope is going to swing everywhere and you’ll run out of gas before we hit the top.”

With her left hand, Fab tested the rope. Climbing it with just one arm was going to be difficult.

“We can’t go up the front,” Cam decided, her eyes scanning the obstacle. “We have to climb up the sides. It’s the only way to keep it steady—”

They didn’t have time to keep talking. As soon as Fab pulled herself up the front of the rope, Cam had no choice but to follow.

Their combined weight pushed the ladder forward causing it to swing

away from Cam's dangling foot.

"This isn't going to work!" Cam's scream rang in her ear.

"Stop complaining and just do it!"

Fab's biceps burned as she kicked her foot, holding herself up while trying to find the next limp wrung. It was like the stupid thing was moving away from her on purpose.

Sweat and mud bled into Fab's eyes, burning them as she willed her body upward. But gaining an inch had been easier when they were stuck in the pit.

Grunting, Cam held her body close to the rope, bending with it. With a hard tug, Cam forced their connected arms over the wrung, sending the rope cutting into Fab's armpit.

The ladder stabilized, allowing Fab to claw her way to the top on frustratingly shaky legs. Every obstacle had obviously been designed to zap their energy, and they were barely halfway through the course.

"Hurry up!" Fab shouted, her hands shredding against the rough rope. There would be blisters later, but she couldn't think about that now, she was more concerned about her forearms giving out.

"You think I'm taking my time for the view, *Fabiola!*"

Like flies tangled in a spiderweb, it took raw strength to force herself up to the top. Cam's shouting melted away and blended with the sound of wind picking up speed. With a guttural scream, Fab expended every ounce of energy as she neared the bell. Her hands and feet roared with pain. Her hamstrings vibrated like a guitar string being plucked repeatedly.

Cam's right arm, a couple of inches longer than Fab's, extended over the top of the rope ladder. With her fingertips, Cam hit the side of the bell, filling the air with the glorious sound of a whistle blowing.

Skittering down the rope was ugly, but mercifully fast.

As soon as Fab landed in the sand, she used her grip on the rope to keep from falling. It hadn't been an act of feline reflexes, more like her hands had gone stiff from gripping the rope so long that she'd been unable to let go.

Fab's legs had the consistency of melted gelatin as she shuffled through the sand toward the fourth obstacle. She tried to pump harder, to run faster, but her legs refused to give in to her demands. Her upper body ached as frustration and a relentlessly hammering heart made it impossible to think. She understood the animalistic desire to gnaw off a limb to escape a trap. All she wanted to do was rip off the tape binding her to Cam with her teeth. If she could just get free of her, she could finish the shitty course by herself.

Sweat and mud and sun blurred Fab's vision, making the colorful tangle of bungee cords ahead impossible to see well.

Without slowing, Fab dove into the corridor head first. They'd wasted too much time on the rope, they needed to get through the obstacle fast.

Immediately, Fab's limbs tangled in the first line of cables positioned across each other and creating X-shaped barriers. She tried to wedge herself through the gap, but it was like being pulled under water.

Cam's long leg appeared in front of her, holding down the tight bungee enough to get her through. Pushing and pulling and falling, they worked through the tangled mesh slowing their advance.

"One more! Let's go!" Cam screamed as they neared the end of the draining netting.

Fab clenched her jaw and dug a little deeper.

They emerged on the other side crawling on their hands and knees through the sand.

"It's a puzzle! We can do this!"

Cam's voice mingled with the furious pounding in Fab's ears. She usually lived to compete, but all she wanted was to get this over with.

"What the hell are we supposed to do with this?" Cam picked up one of the jars. The mud on her arms had dried gray, except where streaks of sweat shown brown where she'd rehydrated the muck. In other places, the mud had scraped off, leaving Cam's fair skin visible.

Fab focused on the instructions. In a basket, she found a book of matches.

“They’re candles. We light them.”

Cam looked like she was resisting the urge to shatter the jar against the table. They didn’t have time to break. Not now. “Are you freaking kidding me? That’s impossible!”

“Hold it. I’ll open the lid.”

Cam pressed the jar to her chest, giving Fab more leverage as she struggled to twist off the top. The producers had used mason jars just big enough to make one-handed operation as difficult as possible.

“*Caralho!*” Fab cursed, her sweaty hands making it impossible to get a good grip on the lid. Everything on her was either covered in sweat or mud or both. There was no way to dry her hand.

As if reading her mind, Cam squeezed her shoulder blades together, checking something.

“The top of my shirt. I don’t think there’s mud on it.”

Fab considered whether she’d rather stick her hand in molten lava.

“Hurry up!” Cam’s blue eyes sparkled with insistence.

Gritting her teeth, Fab tried to touch Cam as little as possible as she dried her hand on the damp square of Cam’s racerback.

On the second attempt, the jar’s lid popped open.

“Open them all at once,” Cam demanded.

Fab was already going to do that, but part of her wanted to try and light the small wick at the bottom of the jar first. Just so Cameron knew that she wasn’t running the show.

Her desire to win, or at least *not lose*, won out and she opened the other two jars in quick succession.

Cam looked inside the jar. “The wick is so short. Even if we light the match, how are we going to get it down there without putting it out?”

Fab held out the matchbook with *Cutthroat Island: Unfinished Business* printed in orange letters. “One problem at a time.”

Fab flipped opened the matchbook with her thumb and Cam tore off a

match. With trembling hands Cam tried to put enough pressure against the striker to cause a spark. It was deceptively hard to anticipate how much counter-pressure to give her.

The matchbook was soggy in Fab's hand. She gripped it tighter, wishing she could free her right hand and light the stupid match herself. The game designers had come up with a nightmare scenario.

Cam discarded the useless match and ripped out another. Somehow they'd gone through half the book. Maybe they'd gotten a faulty set.

When Fab had the idea to hold the matchbook flat against the table so Cam could apply as much pressure as she needed, they were rewarded with the sweet flicker of flame. Right before the whistle sounded.

"Good effort, ladies!" Janette approached the finish line a few feet from the table with the unlit candles. "You're out of time. This is about who goes the furthest the fastest, so you might still be in this. Aisha and Brian, you're up next."

Fabiola resisted the urge to kick the sand and have a meltdown. Instead she ignored Cam's voice while a PA cut her free from the binding.

Getting as far away from Cam as she could, Fab marched to one of the white production tents on the sand and cracked open a cold bottle of water. All she wanted to do was take a shower and retreat to the silence of her room, but they would be out there until sunset.

From her place in the shade, Fab watched team after team use Cam's suggestion of climbing up the side of the rope ladder. Team after team got to the stupid candles. Most of them even managed to light them before timing out.

Fab practiced her deep breathing and tried not to despair. They needed one team to perform worse than them. Just one.

CHAPTER 4



“THAT’S how you do it! Let’s go! Yeah, baby! That’s what I’m talking about!” The troglodyte named Brian strode into the resort shouting and clapping his meaty paws.

Filthy and tired, the last thing Fab had energy for was an overgrown child boasting about how quickly he and his partner completed the course that nearly sent her home. Seconds separated her team from the very worst. Seconds had given her another chance.

After leaving her filthy sneakers and socks outside along with the rest of the groups shoes, Fab padded toward the floating stairs leading to her room upstairs. She desperately wanted to wash out the mud caked in her hair and other more inconvenient locations.

A hand on her shoulder stopped her advance. The unexpected touch made her flinch. She whirled around to find Brian, his upper body devoid of dried mud, grinning.

“Fabiola, where are you going?”

Fab stared at him, confused why he was addressing her like they were friends when she’d never spoken a word to him.

He used his shockingly square head to point at the contestants milling around behind him. Despite everyone being as muck-covered and gross as Fab, they were grabbing the colorful drinks waiting for them at the reception

desk and congregating outside instead of showering.

“Sit with us.” He added a smirk at the end of his sentence instead of a more appropriate question mark.

“No.” She started to turn, but Brian lightly tugged her wrist.

As if his hand had left a glowing red mark, Fab stared down at her forearm and then back at him.

“Come on, don’t be a sore loser,” he urged. “You just had a bad day. Let’s be real, you and I are the best competitors here.” He looked around, making sure that the stragglers had taken their drinks to the pool. “I think they’ll end up splitting us out of groups and let us play individual games.”

Fab blinked at him. If the theme of the season was *Unfinished Business*, she sincerely doubted his theory. She remained silent. It wasn’t her job to correct his error in judgment.

“We should work together to get to the end,” he whispered. “You just gotta get your partner to fall in line and do what you say. That’s how *I* won today. You just tell your partner what’s what. Someone’s gotta be in charge.”

Fab was already covered in enough shit. She wasn’t interested in more coming at her from Brian’s mouth. She turned and walked away, leaving him standing with his hands on his square hips.

An eternity later, Fab had finally washed all the mud out of her nooks and crannies. She jotted down a note to the producers. Next time, she wanted long compression shorts like the male players had been given. There was absolutely no need for their uniforms to be so short.

With a towel wrapped around her sore body, Fab glared at the clothes in her closet. She grimaced. When she’d packed her bags full of thermal long johns and flannels and sweaters, she hadn’t imagined landing in the Caribbean. In early June.

In jeans and a thick, white cable knit sweater, Fab tossed her wet hair in a high ponytail and went downstairs. She wanted to get her confessional out of the way.

Talking directly to the camera while being prompted by producers was her least favorite part of the process. It was so easy to cut the things she said together and give whatever edit they wanted depending on the narrative they chose.

She steeled herself. It would all be worth it if she won.

“Hey.” Cameron, her clean pastel pink hair in waves over her sunburnt shoulders, walked toward her in the hallway. “Can we talk, please?”

Fab refused to look at Cam’s bare, muscular legs or her toned arms. The camera operator and sound guy behind her, however, were impossible to ignore.

“Why?”

Cam’s bright blue eyes flashed with surprise, as if she’d expected Fab to set out a tea party for a totally-bitching-gab-sesh.

“The other teams are getting their shit together,” Cam explained, her voice low.

Fab raised her eyebrows in question.

“If you hadn’t sequestered yourself in here, I wouldn’t have to tell you,” Cam snapped. “It’s like a group therapy convention down there. Everyone realizes that we have to work with our teammate to survive, and you know these games only get harder and harder.”

The air conditioning in the resort was seriously lacking. As Cam talked, all Fab could think about was how hot and stifling her sweater was. She’d been so stupid to blindly believe what someone told her. A lesson life kept trying to teach her.

When Cameron stopped talking and looked at her expectantly, Fab realized that she had no idea what she was supposed to reply.

“What do you want from me?”

Cam rubbed the thin, black tattoo on her forearm. The one that looked like a piece of intricate lace had landed on her skin and made a home on the soft surface.

“How much clearer can I be, Fab? If we can’t work our stuff out, we need a truce. There’s no way we can win like this. We need to be able to communicate with each other. We need to trust each other.”

Trust?

The word ricocheted inside of Fab like a projectile hitting every vital organ, though it assaulted her sense of decency most harshly.

“How dare you say that to me?” Fab heard the snarl in her tone, but she couldn’t tamp it down. Cameron looking her in the eye while having the audacity to talk about trust was far too much.

Cam’s faced flushed violently. Normally, anyone’s embarrassment would cause Fab to back off, but in Cameron, the reaction was enraging and insulting. Fab knew for a fact that Cam did not regret betraying her. She was a liar and a snake.

“You know I can’t explain,” Cam whispered, her voice shaking like tears were imminent.

Fab clenched her jaw. She had no interest in seeing her cry. All she wanted was to be away from her.

“We have nothing to talk about anyway.” Fab straightened, focusing on the middle point in Cam’s forehead to avoid looking in her wounded eyes.

Cam’s distress emanated from her like a gas leak. Fab felt her frustration at not being able to speak openly, but that was her own fault too.

“I just wish I could apologize the right way.” Her eyes jumped over her shoulder as if Fab could forget that their every move was recorded. That their secret made it impossible to speak openly.

“And you think you’re owed forgiveness?” Fab’s blunt fingernails dug into her sore, blistered palms but she refused to wear her pain on her face. “Can you really be so entitled? You’ve had six years—”

“Six years to what, Fabiola?” Her Miami accent sharpened the consonants in her name. “You’ve blocked my phone number, my socials—”

“Doesn’t that tell you something? I don’t want to hear what you have to

say. I'm not interested in falling for your lies again. You won and now we're here. You do you, I do me, and we get as far as we get. Just stay out of my way."

Abandoning her plan, Fab spun on her heels and started back to her room, wishing she had a door to slam.

Thankfully, Cam didn't follow her. The crew knew Fab wouldn't give them anything but stoicism and made the wise choice to follow Cam instead. Cam would be happy to paint Fab as an unreasonable asshole while making herself the easy-to-love sweetheart. No one knew the snake she was at her rotten core.

Cameron Herrera had done a fantastic job of crafting her persona. So good that Fab had fallen for it. Fallen hard. She'd believed her sweet face, her affable demeanor, her whispers warm and rushed against her ear.

Standing at the sliding glass door she couldn't open, Fab forced herself not to react. If Cam was sorry, it was only that she was stuck with her and this time she couldn't lull her into a false sense of security.

Her eyes fixed on the dark waters illuminated by the resort's lights. The waves were rushed and angry, leaving no doubt that a storm was coming.

CHAPTER 5



CAM PULLED on her newly cleaned and mud-free sneakers. After four straight days of stormy weather, she was grateful to be competing again. Being trapped indoors with Fabiola refusing to acknowledge her existence had been painful.

The only time Fab left her room was to exercise in the gym or take something to eat upstairs. If this game had required forming alliances, she and her partner would be on the chopping block without a doubt. It was like Fab wanted people to dislike her. Like she didn't want to risk forming connections.

Guilt tugged at Cam, but she put it aside. It was game day and she had to focus. Her blisters had mostly healed and her body recovered after some deep tissue massage. She was ready to win. Maybe with time she could get Fab to see she was sorry. That required staying long enough to make amends.

Outside the side entrance leading to the tarmac, several white production vans waited for them. Wading through the air thick with humidity, Cam dodged puddles before climbing into the boxy vehicle pointed out by production.

“Next to Fabiola.” The PA gestured to Cam's partner as if she wouldn't recognize her with sunglasses on.

As she passed two other teams similarly situated next to partners with bad

blood, she said good morning. Fab stared straight ahead as if they were heading to a maximum security prison.

“*Bom dia*,” Cam greeted Fabiola in one of the few Portuguese phrases she remembered. That she’d taught her in an alternate dimension.

Fab’s face remained unmoving.

Cam plopped down next to her, willing the energy between them to change. “Ready to kick some ass today? Me too!”

Nothing.

A middle-aged woman with impressive biceps named Tara turned around and shot Cam a smirk. “I don’t know who is kicking anything in this heat.”

“I’m from Miami, baby!” Cam drummed on the empty headrest in front of her. “I can do anything in this weather! All twelve years of PE I had to run outside in this.”

Cam’s reluctant partner shifted in the seat next to her, the first indication that she wasn’t a cardboard stand-in for the real Fabiola.

Tara laughed. “That’s a lot of talk for someone who almost went home last week!”

They all referred to the previous challenge as *last week*, even if it was only four or five days. It made it easier for production.

“We’re going to win today, just watch,” Cam promised, hoping she could manifest it.

At the end of a long, bumpy trail, the caravan stopped at a huge clearing surrounded by tall, mature trees. A cold, sick feeling dripped down Cam’s back, mingling with her sweat.

Craning to look out the van window not being blocked by Fab’s head, Cam divined the purpose of the day’s game. Suspended at least forty feet in the air, a series of painted wooden planks were arranged in a complicated, overlapping maze. She guessed that teams would compete three at a time, given the green, blue, and yellow planks lined up like winding paths held in the air by metal scaffolding.

The narrow planks looked like they'd fit only one foot at a time, but balance alone couldn't be the challenge. Maybe they'd have to knock each other off, but Cam couldn't figure out how that played into the *working-with-your-rival-is-crucial* theme.

Glancing at Fabiola, she wished they could talk this out. The other teams would be bouncing ideas off each other. Figuring out what they were doing was a necessary precursor to coming up with a strategy. She and Fab did neither.

Once outside the van, steam bubbled up from the dirt and choked the air from Cam's lungs. With the unobstructed sun from above and blazing humidity from the wet earth below, Cam was a rotisserie chicken roasting from all sides. If she wasn't afraid of heights, she'd welcome getting on the floating platform for some relief.

Following the producer's directions, Cam relaxed. If she found the wet heat uncomfortable, her competitors were probably dying. Although her team did have the disadvantage of having black t-shirts. The teams with the lighter colors weren't absorbing every ray of sun and collecting it like a weight dragging them down.

As the taller member of her team, Cam stood on the riser behind Fabiola. On either side of them, pairs looked up at the task and whispered.

Cam leaned over to whisper in Fab's ear. "We're the only ones not trying to work this out."

Fab's only response was a twitch in her jaw.

Cam flared her nostrils, her eyes fixed on the neat, thin script tattooed over Fab's shoulder blade. The letters her fingers had dug into once, that she'd clung onto with her head tossed back and her mouth open in a silent scream. She was still trying not to scream now, but for very different reasons.

"Are you really this stubborn? We're going to lose," Cam insisted through gritted teeth.

Ready to die on her hill, Fab pretended not to hear her.

“Good morning, contestants,” Janette, dressed in a linen tunic and capri pants, emerged from one of the production tents at the edge of the clearing near where paramedics stood waiting.

Cam forgot about Fab and remembered the looming test of her mental discipline. Exposure therapy, breathing exercises, visualization techniques, hypnotism, she’d done it all to get over her fear of heights. Well, the height wasn’t her fear. It was more her disinterest in falling to her death.

Running her sweaty palms over her small compression shorts, she forced herself to take long, deep breaths. Even if what she really wanted to do was hyperventilate. That morning’s protein shake and açai bowl threatened to make an appearance.

As the cameras set up around Janette, Cam tried to soothe herself with facts. The obstacles were designed by engineers. Tested and re-tested to make sure they were safe for the size and weight of every competitor. And then legal had to approve it all. The network’s aversion to getting sued would ensure her safety.

Thank you, litigious America.

When she completed her calming practices, Janette was already explaining the game. What little peace she’d claimed for herself evaporated into the steamy ether.

“One member of your team will put these on,” she lifted the blacked-out goggles in her hand, “and go up there.” She pointed at the colored, interlocking, planks standing four stories above her head. “From the ground, your partner will guide you across your team’s colored planks. The team that gets the furthest the fastest wins. If you fall off or step on the wrong color, you’re out. Your order is selected at random, but you can choose who will go up and who will give directions.”

For a terrifying moment, Cam expected Fab to refuse to go up. She didn’t mind heights, but she likely remembered that Cam hated them.

Barely looking over her shoulder, Fab turned her head. “I’ll go up.”

There was no kindness in Fab's voice. No indication that she'd volunteered to save Cam from the discomfort. That she'd elected to confront her own fear of the dark so Cam wouldn't have to deal with the height.

"I'll memorize the steps. I don't need your help," Fab added as if needing to disabuse Cam of any misconceptions.

Cam's relief disappeared as quickly as it came. "Don't be ridiculous," she hissed. "I can guide you across. You'll waste too much time—"

Fab's head whirled around and her body followed. With her sunglasses sitting in the van, there was nothing to filter the intensity of her deep, brown eyes. Her naked gaze was blistering, as if she wanted to reduce Cam to rubble.

If shock hadn't rooted Cam to the riser, she would've staggered off it. No one had ever looked at her with such hatred. Her heart dropped into her stomach. For the first time she considered the possibility that she couldn't mend what she broke.

"Your voice is distracting," Fab explained in a low voice like she was admitting something shameful. Her face softened and her eyes lost their fire as they dropped to the dirt. "I won't be able to think. Let's just get through this, please."

Cam's heart rocketed back into her chest just in time to break. Tears pricked the back of her eyes like the sun burning her scalp. She wanted to reach out. To touch her. To hold her. To explain. To beg for forgiveness, but Fab turned around. Her body tense. She didn't want to be chased and Cam resisted the urge to do it anyway.

Of the eleven teams remaining, they were slotted to go ninth. Plenty of time to watch and troubleshoot, if only Fab would speak to her.

Instead of working on the problem together, Fab stared up at the obstacle and counted.

"Fabiola and Cameron you're up."

CHAPTER 6



FABIOLA HELD on to the scaffolding being hoisted into the air, her eyes shut tight. With a little time, she'd convinced herself that she wasn't blindfolded. That she was choosing to close her eyes so she could keep out distractions while she ran the maze in her mind's eye.

She hated the dark. Hated the loss of control it brought with it, the unawareness. So all she had to do was convince herself she wasn't wearing blackout goggles. It helped to remember that as much as she was afraid of the dark, Cam was even more petrified of heights.

When the surface beneath her feet stopped moving, the sound of Janette's whistle set the timer running.

Fab visualized the yellow-colored planks she'd been assigned to follow. She repeated the pattern she'd memorized. Twenty steps forward. Hard left. Ten steps forward. She ran over the many turns, the places the path turned back on its self creating squares, where yellow crossed with blue and green.

Gripping the safety harness that would catch her if she stumbled, Fabiola took a step forward. She hadn't accounted for the breeze trying to nudge her off balance, but she should have.

Taking blind steps was much harder than she anticipated. She knew she was moving slow, but her legs shook too hard to push.

You're not going to die if you fall. Move.

On the twentieth step, she felt for the turn. The plank that should be waiting for her. It wasn't there.

She cursed under her breath but willed herself not to panic. She knew that the distance from the ground to the platform and each person's gait would affect her count. All she had to do was find the first turn and then adjust her math. Now that she could forget the green and blue paths she'd also memorized, she had room. This was just a puzzle and she excelled at puzzles.

Three tentative steps later and Fab still hadn't found the left turn. Each second she failed to progress knocked them further down in the standings.

"Fab," Cameron's disembodied voice was soft and gentle in her earpiece, as if she'd been afraid to startle her.

The sound of her voice so close was nearly enough to knock her off the narrow bit of wood.

"You're four or five steps from the turn," she said in a whisper that ran down Fab's neck, leaked into her heart, and punched it with a closed fist.

It was a whisper she knew. In the darkness of her kidnapped sight, her brain didn't believe that Cam's lips weren't grazing the shell of her ear. That the weight on her body was a safety harness and not Cam's arms.

"You have to move, Fab," her tone was husky and low.

"Stop talking!" Fab snapped, needing to be free from the confusion overwhelming her senses. She couldn't run away from her here, it was too cruel to torment her like this.

Like Bambi fresh off a roller coaster binge, her knees trembled as she pushed forward. She needed to trust herself. She found the left turn five hurried steps later.

She tried to adjust her math, but she was unnerved, stressed, the pressure of the clock ticking, of Cam's voice, too hard to manage.

Fab took longer steps. She'd judged the second plank was half the size of the first and guessed how far she needed to go accordingly. It took all her self-control not to run.

“Stop!” Cam shouted.

Reflexively, Fab stopped short.

“You almost walked off the edge!”

Cam sounded frantic.

“Are we losing?” Fab couldn’t help but ask.

“No you lunatic! You almost walked off a ledge four stories high!”

“I’m connected to a safety harness! I’m not going to splatter!”

“You could still get hurt,” Cameron said softly. Too softly.

Fab turned right and started counting the eight steps she expected to be there. “I told you I don’t want your help, and I certainly don’t want you screaming at me!”

Five. Six. Seven.

“Stop!” Cam shrieked.

“Stop shouting! You’re right in my freaking ear hole!”

“Then stop trying to fall off,” she replied through teeth gritted so tight the pressure might snap the cables holding Fab above the dirt circle.

“That’s what you think—”

“*Fabiola*,” she said in Spanish “now is not the time to argue with me!”

“Whisper screaming is still screaming!” Fab countered, her nerves making it impossible to think. If she could just rip off the blindfold she could breathe. She could reassess her plan.

“Turn left,” Cam instructed, her words laced with venomous irritation. “Stop being a petulant child.”

Everything in Fab wanted to ignore her, but she couldn’t let herself lose. She turned left, picturing where she was in the strange looping shape of the yellow path.

“I know where I am. I don’t need your help,” Fab snapped.

“Really?” Cam scoffed. “You seriously think you can do this without me?”

“I was doing just fine before.”

“Okay Ms-lets-rewrite-history! You almost fell off twice!”

Fab found the next turn without Cam’s help. Following the imaginary map, she visualized the blue plank running over hers and the green one running parallel for a dozen feet.

Focused, she moved with confidence. “See! I don’t need you!” She couldn’t resist gloating.

“Sure about that, killer? You just stepped into the blue line instead of the yellow.”

The sound of Janette’s whistle drained all the blood from Fab’s adrenaline-loaded body.

“Fabiola and Cameron you’re disqualified!”

Yanking the goggles over her helmet, Fab looked down. Her traitorous feet, one in front of the other, were firmly planted on the blue plank. Around her, the other two contestants were nearing their finish lines.

Fab resisted the urge to scream into her microphone, to ask Cameron why she hadn’t stopped her. The question was stupid and would only make her look stupider than she felt. Shame sealed her lips as she walked to the end of the platform.

As she avoided eye contact with the other competitors, and the guy pulling her back to safety so they could lower the rig, Fab reminded herself that they could still survive. They couldn’t win, but they didn’t have to. All they had to do was *not lose*. She’d made it more than halfway across the path. If they made it a little further a little faster than one other team, they’d buy another week.

With two teams left to go, they wouldn’t have to wait long to learn their fate.

CHAPTER 7



“I HOPE IT WAS WORTH IT.” Cam wiped the sweat off her face as they followed the producer to the van. She couldn’t stand to look at Fabiola. “I hope your ridiculously hard head is more comfort to you than a chance at half a million dollars.”

Stomping ahead of her in the mud, Fab threw her helmet into the woods like an angry toddler instead of responding.

A crew member put them on their marks in front of a dense patch of tropical vegetation. Sweaty and sad was how the show liked to shoot their exit interviews. “Fabiola, Cameron, stand here please.”

“Are you really not going to say anything?” Cam glared to her right where Fab was doing her best impression of a car crash dummy, staring ahead with her lips pressed into a line fine enough to disappear.

As the sun set behind the trees and all manner of flying insects swarmed them, the crew rigged microphones and cameras and lights all around them.

Cam knew they’d be filming every moment, hoping to catch their explosive fight, but she didn’t care. It was probably her last chance to talk to Fab. She just wanted to get through to her. Have a fight. Scream. Accuse. Whatever it was, she was just desperate for Fab to look at her and say something. Something real.

In her periphery, she spotted a producer. He was waiting to see if Fab

might react.

“Can we get this going, please?” Fab swatted at a mosquito on her sweaty arm as she called to production. “We all know how desperate Cameron is to get back to her picture taking career.”

A mildly-deranged bubble of laughter burst on Cam’s lips. “Are you actually kidding me right now? You’re going to take a cheap shot at me? Your inability to listen to anyone but yourself is the reason we’re standing here right now. If you weren’t such a—”

Fabiola snapped her head to the side so hard Cam was sure she’d sprained her neck. With wide, rage-filled eyes, Fab gave her a stink-eye fouler than a barge full of dirty diapers baking in the sun.

“And do you want to tell all of America why I can’t stand the sound of your voice?” Fab gestured toward the cameras. “Why I’d rather move blindly around a death trap four stories high instead of listen to you? Why I’d prefer to go home with integrity rather than work with you?”

Cam’s frustration deflated. She was right. Cam was the core of the problem.

Shooting a furtive glance at the cameras, Cam pleaded. What they’d done was against the rules. Against the terms of their contracts. If Fab told their secret now, they’d lose everything. That wasn’t true. It was Cam who’d won the money. She’d have to give it back, but that money was long gone.

Fab had kept her secret all this time. It was Cam’s only indication that she might be amenable to mending things. But now that they’d lost, maybe Fab was ready to get them both banned from any future shows. Maybe she was ready to go nuclear.

Sneering at her, Fab looked away as if disgusted. “Yeah . . . I didn’t think so.”

Tears pricked the back of Cam’s eyes. She wanted to come clean, but she gritted her teeth instead. She couldn’t do it in front of the cameras. She’d be taking Fabiola down with her. Hurting her again.

After taping their loser's segment, Cam pulled off her microphone and handed it to the crew member. There was no reason to record them any more. They'd lost. Now, they'd have an hour to pack their bags and leave the island.

In the van, Fab rested her head against the glass near the back. Cam grimaced. This was not how she'd planned this. They were supposed to win so Cam could make things right.

Cam took the seat behind her so the PA driving the van wouldn't catch on that they were talking. Leaning forward, she could only see Fab's nose and chin between the seat-back and the window. How she wished Fab would just talk to her. She knew that somewhere in there, Fab still cared about her. She was desperate to connect to that person. The one capable of forgiving her.

"I am so sorry," Cam whispered, wishing she could reach out and touch her.

"I don't care." Fab rolled her face away.

Resisting the urge to cry, Cam accepted that her betrayal might really be unforgivable. It was a shard of ice shoved right through her heart.

Bumping along the trail, Cam closed her eyes and worked hard not to cry. She could blame her emotions on getting knocked out of the game, but that wasn't the precious thing she'd lost.

When the van finally stopped, Cam opened her eyes. In the darkness it was hard to see outside. The only thing she could tell for sure was that they hadn't returned to the resort.

A producer opened the van door. "Let's go, ladies."

Cam stood and so did Fabiola. Looking at her, she mouthed, "what the hell is this?"

Fab covered the sides of her eyes as she bent over to look out the window. Returning her attention to Cam, she shrugged. "I can't see anything."

An uneasy feeling dripped into Cam's stomach and settled there.

“Another obstacle?”

Fab looked like she was accessing her memory banks. She'd been such a huge fan of the show and watched it religiously with her father until he passed away a few years before she was cast.

“Season ten,” Fab whispered, stepping into Cam's personal space. “They sent all the losing teams to the wilderness to rough it in tents and stuff.”

The memory flooded Cam's mind as she caught up. “Until midway through the season when they all competed against each other and then they purged the bottom five teams.”

Fab nodded.

“You think it's that?” Cam searched Fab's face. In this horrible moment, it was like she had her Fabiola back instead of the one who hated her.

“Won't be that exact gimmick, but maybe something like it.”

“Fab, if we get a chance. . .” Cam reached out and took her arm. Fab flinched and pulled away. “I want to stay.”

Making a noncommittal noise with her throat, Fabiola turned and led the way out of the van.

As soon as Cam saw Janette standing outside and surrounded by lights so bright it made it impossible to see anything else, she knew the game wasn't over.

Cam's heart crawled out of her stomach and returned to its rightful place in her chest where it could race properly. They stood on their markers, dazed by the lights and change in circumstance.

“Well, ladies. You failed today. Miserably.” Janette shook her head. “That was probably one of the worst displays of teamwork I've ever seen. You do know that you have to talk to each other to win this game, right?”

Cam's lead crown of shame forced her head to bow as she lowered her gaze to her feet.

“What do you think you're going to do with another chance to stay in the game? Blow it by refusing to work together?” Janette, who was apparently

personally offended by their performance, pressed.

“We’re not going to mess it up again,” Cam vowed, editing her language for network TV.

Janette raised a beautifully painted brow. “A bold claim considering you only survived the first challenge by a hair and then failed spectacularly at the second.”

Fabiola’s entire body went rigid. Even her scalp was red and pissed off. “We are not going to blow it.”

Janette’s lips twitched into the briefest of smiles. “Then welcome to purgatory, ladies. You’re going to have to fight your way out.”

Behind her, huge spot lights turned on one at a time illuminating a tunnel of trees and vegetation. At the end of the partial tunnel, a ton of floodlights filled a circle of dirt with light. At the center of the circle stood the male and female pair that had been eliminated just a few days before.

“The rules here are easy,” Janette explained. “If you beat them, they go home and you get to stay to fight another day. Week after week, the team that loses will be sent here. Whoever wins in the ring, stays. Losers go home empty handed.”

Fabiola looked at Cam and nodded. “Let’s do it.”

“Competitors, gear up.” Janette clasped her hands.

When the cameras turned away, Janette leaned toward them. “This is your last chance,” she said so quietly she was nearly impossible to hear. “Get out of your own damn way and don’t throw this away.” Her dark eyes darted between them. “Again.”

CHAPTER 8



BEING ready to go home one moment and then snapped into a safety harness the next, Fab was surprised she hadn't gotten whiplash. She pushed the day, and their failure, aside and focused.

She'd allowed Cameron to distract her, but she reminded herself that she was there to prove herself. To show the world, and Cameron, that she could've won six years ago if she hadn't been tricked. That's what mattered.

Fabiola fastened the black helmet to her head. They'd only initially been able to see their competitors in the ring when they arrived. Now that they were standing inside of it too, the obstacle was clear. Two parallel beams were suspended high in the air by four cranes. Their task would require balance. She and Cam both had excellent balance. She just wished that it wasn't another heights game. Those really wore on her partner.

"What's the trick?" Cam's eyes were turned up to the floating beams.

Fab shook her head. She wished she knew.

When their harnesses had been checked twice by two different people, ropes were clipped to their backs. Fab was placed in front of one beam and Cam on the one next to her. Apparently they had the disadvantage of going first.

"Climb on up ladies," a crew member said when the beams were lowered to the ground.

Fab looked at Cam. Her face was pale and sweaty.

Shit.

After a moment of hesitation, Cam stepped onto the beam and held on to one of the chains connecting the beam to the crane. Once they were both on their own beams, they faced each other.

“Hang on until the crane stops moving,” a man said before giving the rope on her back another tug.

Fab nodded.

Janette appeared next to them. Her attention on the camera pointed at her. “It will be physically impossible not to work together. If these competitors hope to survive, they have to keep each other balanced.”

Fab furrowed her brow. Cameron was at least ten feet apart from her. How was she going to help her do anything?

As if reading her mind, a crew member appeared holding a long, thick rope.

“Once you get to the top, the beams beneath your feet will rotate backward thirty degrees, pointing your toes toward the sky. The only way to stay on, and walk across to the other side, will be to use each other’s body weight to stay up. You need to keep the exact right amount of tension on the rope or you’ll fall.”

Glancing at Cam, Fab imagined just how freaked out she was. Not only was she going up, but the chances of them falling were going to be high.

“Let’s go!” Janette signaled for the young man dressed in all black to hand them the rope.

Fab took hers first, and wrapped it around her right arm. It would be easier for Cam to use her dominant hand. The rope was so rough and heavy, she hurried to acclimate.

“Wrap it around your bicep and forearm,” she called out to Cam, not caring if she was teaching the other team. “It’ll make you feel more stable.” She didn’t explain that getting rid of the rope’s tail would make tripping over

it less likely. She didn't want to put the idea in Cam's mind.

Pale and in a full sweat, Cam nodded.

As soon as Cam took the rope in her hands, Fab could feel how hard she was trembling across the line. Her heart threatened to break out of her chest. She wished she could compete by herself.

"Take them up!"

Cam plastered herself to the chain as they were raised higher and higher. Fab didn't waste her energy moving. She kept her knees bent and her eyes trained on Cameron, wishing they had their earpieces back so she could remind her that she wasn't going to get hurt.

"I'm going to hold you when we start, okay?" Fab called across their divide. "Just keep your eyes on my helmet. Don't look at anything but that, okay?"

Cam nodded, the trembling on the line growing more intense.

"Here comes the rotation," Janette shouted from below.

"Bend your knees and keep your arms close to your body so you don't gas out!"

Cam did as directed. When the sound of new machinery whirled and started tipping them backward, Fab kept her focus on Cameron whose eyes had slammed closed.

The rope yearned to yank Fab forward as she adjusted her grip. Leaning back slowly, she compensated for the pull of Cam's weight. The hard tremble on the rope was devastating. Cam was absolutely terrified.

"Slow and steady isn't going to work, okay? Move your right foot shoulder-width apart and then bring your left foot right next to it. Do that again and again on my count and we'll crab-walk to the other side."

Cameron opened her fear-stricken eyes and trained them on Fab. She nodded.

The sound of Janette's whistle ripped through the air and sent a new jolt through every muscle engaged in Fab's body.

“Right foot!” Fab shouted.

Without hesitation, Cam moved a few feet to the side. Fab mirrored Cam’s movement with her left.

“Left!” Fab shouted and they moved in unison.

Thanks to the ungodly amount of squats she did on a daily basis, moving along the beam was easy. Cameron’s ability to keep her core tight meant there was very little pull on the rope. If it wasn’t for her trembling, there would be no movement on it at all.

“Can you go faster?” Fab shouted when they were a third of the way across the beam.

Cam nodded.

Unable to stop herself, Fab flashed a smile. Being scared out of her mind didn’t inhibit any of Cam’s fierceness. It was the early mornings in the gym together where they’d first gotten to know each other. Cameron was the only person who worked as hard as Fab, she just didn’t like to let it show.

“Right! Left! Right! Left!”

The quicker they moved, the sturdier the rope felt. As if they’d been tasked with nothing more taxing than playing hopscotch, they flew across the beam. When Janette blew the whistle, Fab’s arms and legs were barely burning.

“Great work, ladies!” Janette called from below. “Halle and Kirk, you’re up!”

The moment they were back on the ground, Cam looked like she wanted to collapse to her knees and kiss the dirt. Fab resisted the urge to speak to her. To tell her she’d done a great job. Pity had taken over her good sense, but she didn’t want her getting the wrong idea.

As soon as she was unhooked, Fab walked away, unfastening her harness as she strode toward where their competition had been standing. A minute of staring into Cameron’s scared, clear blue eyes had been quite enough for her.

“Thanks for that,” Cam said as she took her place next to her.

Fab kept her eyes trained on their competitors being prepped to go up. She refused to acknowledge the warmth of her body at her side. The gratitude and relief in her voice.

She'd been caught off guard and acted on instinct. Something she had to be careful not to do again.

As they waited for the opposing team to be pulled into the air, Fabiola reminded herself of the facts.

Cameron had pretended to fall in love with her six years ago. She'd played a long con on her and convinced her that if they made it to the final and won, they'd share the quarter of a million dollar grand prize. Fab had fallen so hard for her, she agreed even though it was explicitly against the rules. She trusted her so much, she didn't hesitate to let Cam walk over the finish line first. And walk over it she did, but she didn't stop. She took the money and never looked back.

The sound of Janette's whistle brought Fab back to the present. There was no sense in recalling the past. All that mattered was right now. The team trying to get across the beams faster than them. The chance of proving that she would've won if she hadn't been cheated.

CHAPTER 9



“CONGRATULATIONS, LADIES. THAT WAS IMPRESSIVE.” Janette clapped for them right after she sent the losing team home. “You put on a masterclass up there and you live to fight another week. Rest up and get ready. You have one hell of an uphill battle from here on out.”

Cam resisted the urge to jump on Fabiola and wrap her body around her to celebrate. Her adrenaline was a geyser, but it hadn't impaired her brain function. Fab's body language had been very clear since they stepped off the beams. NO TRESPASSING. KEEP OUT.

They walked to the production vans waiting to take them somewhere else. If not back to the resort, then maybe a tent in the woods.

“We won that because of you,” Cam admitted when they stepped onto the van. “Thank you. For what you did for me. I freaking froze.”

Fab shrugged and dropped into the seat behind the driver. Cam dared to sit next to her.

“I was pretty sure I was going to die.”

Fab shook her head. “They have us rigged to safety gear with redundancies. You have a better chance of getting hit by lightning than that gear failing.” Her voice was straightforward. Dispassionate. Unwelcoming.

“Tell that to my fight or flight response. When I get up there, I just freeze. You know I did a bunch of hypnosis before I came back this season. I don't

think it worked. If you hadn't—"

Fab turned to her head, her expression cold and unflinching. Cam already knew what she was going to say before she said it. Her raw hands turned clammy and her stomach backflipped into an acidic pit.

"I felt bad for you. I'm not a callous monster, but don't confuse that for a white flag or an olive branch or whatever. We are not friends. I don't trust you. I'll never trust you. Unless we're performing game-related tasks, I'd really prefer if we didn't speak. It would be truly excellent if I didn't have to see you either."

She turned her head and faced the back of the driver's head like she hadn't just cut Cam into gory confetti.

Cam swallowed her shame and nausea. "Got it," she squeaked.

Several minutes later, a shockingly long time considering they were on a small island, the van stopped.

Cam didn't wait for Fab and bolted out of the van. The warm, fresh air and the sound of lapping water was a wonderful greeting after such a silent and awkward ride.

When the van turned off its headlights, they were plunged into near total darkness. The moon, a crescent sliver in the night sky, didn't offer much light.

If experience told Cam anything, it was that night vision cameras were being trained on them. Capturing their lost and confused expressions.

Resisting the urge to ask Fab for her take on what was going on, Cam peered around, her eyes squinting. She really didn't want to spend the next several nights sleeping in a tent.

Lights flicked on in the distance, revealing what looked like a hut at the end of a long dock. It was too dark to be sure.

Prompted by production, Cam and Fab walked side-by-side down the wooden dock stretching over the water, the planks creaking beneath their feet. As they neared the end, Cam remembered the little cabins on stilts

dotting the easternmost end of the island when she flew in.

“Well this is better than a tent in the woods,” she muttered with a relief.

At least they’d be safe from all the mosquitos and sandflies. Scorpions, black widow spiders, tarantulas, and bullet ants might still pose a problem, but they wouldn’t be sleeping on the floor. That counted for a lot.

Cam stepped into the overwater bungalow with a thatched roof first. “Oh shit, there’s only one tiny bed!”

“What?” Fab squeezed in through the doorway behind her.

“Just kidding.” She laughed.

Fab glared at her over her shoulder and walked to the center of the small, round room.

“Sorry, I couldn’t resist.”

The cabin was tiny. A pitched wood ceiling over two single beds on either side of the room. At one end, a small café table sat in front of a tiny kitchenette with a microwave, sink, and narrow fridge. On the other end, a sliding glass door opened out to the circular deck wrapping around the bungalow. A few feet from the sliding glass door, steps led them into pristine, clear Caribbean waters.

Unless Fab was willing to sleep in the sea, she’d have nowhere to escape Cam.

When Fab stepped out of the modest bathroom with nothing but a toilet, sink, and stall shower, her expression was tight and displeased.

Her disappointment was a cannonball fired into Cam’s stomach. Six years ago, Fab would have loved to be trapped together in paradise. Secluded from the rest of the cast with nothing to do but each other. They’d managed to keep their relationship hidden from the cameras by finding little pockets of privacy. If they’d been here, could they have resisted slipping into each other’s beds?

Glancing around the round room, there would be no where to hide. A camera on a circular track sat like a halo on top of them, producers could

move it to capture every angle. Microphones were suspended on all sides, so at least they wouldn't have to wear the mic packs all the time. The bathroom was the only place they'd be free from surveillance.

Fab claimed the bed near the bathroom, leaving Cam with the one near the kitchenette. Not that it really mattered. No matter where they stood, they wouldn't be more than ten feet away from each other.

When a PA rolled in their luggage, Fab requested a blender for her protein shakes. Cam watched her from where she sat on the edge of the bed. Fab's ability to pretend Cam wasn't even there was devastating.

Cam surveyed the room again. How was she going to get through to her when they were always being watched?

Sighing, she collapsed her sweaty body onto the clean bed. She was going to have to come up with something.

She'd gotten another chance with Fabiola and she was determined to make the most of it.

"WHY ARE you sleeping in Long John's?" Cam, dressed in a camisole and shorts so small they might as well have been underwear, stretched out on top of her bed sheets. The thin blanket tossed to one side.

Fab ran her fingers through her hair, wet and clean from the shower. The wall-mounted fans kept the room from being sweltering, but it was nowhere near cool. She guessed that it was part of the disadvantage of being banished. Every four days or so they'd be put up against teams that had access to the gym, therapeutic massage, air conditioning, welcomed distractions, space.

They were trapped together in a space the size of a one-car garage. Survival was going to be impossible. There was no way they weren't going to break. No one could overcome this obstacle. It was designed for failure.

"Isn't it kind of hot in here to be wearing that?" Cameron propped herself

up on one elbow and watched Fab get into bed and under the covers.

What did she want Fab to say? Confess that she was an idiot and had been taken for a fool *again*? Living in her own personal sauna, Fab turned her back to Cameron and tugged the blanket over her shoulders.

“If you’re just going to give up, we have no chance.” Cam’s voice moved around the small room.

The lights went out and Cam’s bed creaked under her weight as she presumably got back in it. Fab’s lamp stayed on, casting a glow in the room and keeping it from being pitch black.

“This really isn’t so bad,” Cam continued, talking to herself. “Is it even any different from what you were doing before? Holed up in a room by yourself, waiting for the next challenge?”

Fab’s fingers clenched around the corner of her pillow as she curled on her side.

Did Cam really not see the extreme disadvantage of missing exercise equipment and a full kitchen where they could fuel their bodies effectively? Not to mention the psychological toll of being isolated with only each other. There was no way they could last under those circumstances. Not as long as they’d need to anyway.

“This could be a blessing in disguise,” Cameron continued because she was incapable of shutting up. “We can make this work to our advantage.”

Fab rolled her eyes before closing them. Putting a positive spin on their current situation was impossible and she wasn’t going to waste time doing it. They’d last as long as they could, but winning was out of reach.

CHAPTER 10



NEARLY DROWNING in a pool of her own sweat, Fab woke up with the sun streaming in through open plantation shutters. Of course there was no glass in the screened-in windows. It was never going to get cool. There was another advantage for the team still in the resort. A break from the boiling heat and humidity.

Unable to stop her eyes from traveling to the other side of the small room, Fabiola was surprised to find Cameron's bed empty. She strained her sight and looked at the time on the microwave's digital clock. It was too early to be so hot.

Fab sat up, the soreness in her thighs and ache in her back making her miss the physical therapists in the resort. The recovery shake she'd had the night before wasn't nearly as good as having a professional work on her body.

Pulling off her stifling long sleeve shirt, she decided that being seen in her sports bra was better than heatstroke. She dried her face with the thick cotton before tossing it on her pillow. How she wished the shorts and tank tops weren't only handed out for challenges. Pride kept her from asking production for a set of them. They hadn't asked about her clothing choices yet, but it was only a matter of time.

The sound of water and creaking wood drew Fab's attention to the deck

visible from the uncovered sliding glass door.

Water beading on Cameron's skin and rolling over her barely-there string bikini was too much to absorb before coffee. Over the last several years, Cam had gotten stronger. Her muscles were toned like she'd taken up Pilates and gotten very good at it.

Fab's attention snagged on the new tattoo on her thigh. The outline of an elephant's face. Its significance pulled at Fab's heart, sending it freewheeling into her stomach.

Cam had always talked about her grandmother. How she was her best friend. Her soulmate. How she'd get an elephant tattoo to commemorate her when she passed.

Fab looked away, her shoulders bowing under the weight of realization. She'd lost her.

When Cam stepped into the room with a Turkish towel wrapped around her body, Fab resisted the overwhelming urge to ask about her grandmother's passing. To offer heartfelt condolences. To ask if she was okay.

"Good morning," Cam greeted brightly, leaving the glass door open and filling the room with a welcomed, salty breeze that immediately cooled Fab's sweaty body.

"I'm glad you're having a great time," Fab snapped, confused by the competing emotions wrestling for control of her mouth. "The people coming to knock our heads off in a few days are working out and keeping themselves tight, you know."

"You and your obsession with workout equipment." Cameron laughed and strode to the kitchenette to make coffee in a little single-serve machine. "Aren't you a personal trainer extraordinaire? Or do you really just rely on fancy equipment to get ripped like that?" While the machine whirled to life, Cam picked up her wet, pink hair and tied it in a loose bun on top of her head. "We can swim. We can use our body weight. I'm sure if you put that brain of yours to work, you can think of a million things we can do to . . . *stay*

tight.”

Fabiola glared, sweat making the cotton of her pants feel like soaked corduroy. “How the hell are you so cheery?”

“How are you not?” Cameron filled a tall glass with ice. “Look at this place, Fab. We’re still in the game, and we’re in actual paradise. When else are you going to get to roll out of bed and jump in the ocean?”

“I’m glad you see this as a vacation. I suppose when you’ve already won your money and you spend your days posting pretty pictures of yourself surfing and skateboarding and traveling and generally working desperately to be the center of attention, there’s really no pressure, is there?”

Cam’s blue eyes, made brighter by the clear morning sun shining through the open screened-in window directly on her face, softened. “That’s what you think I do with my life?”

The hurt in Cam’s voice was destabilizing, leaving Fab no choice but to double down. “Why are you even here? Was a quarter of a million not enough to set you up for life?” Fab could think of half a dozen ways to invest that money and make it grow. She’d been planning to start a franchise if she won, something like *CrossFit*, but better designed to mitigate the high risk of injury. First she’d need to open her studio, something she would’ve done if Cam hadn’t stolen her money.

“Yeah . . . well . . .” Cam poured her coffee into the ice. “The government takes a lot more of it than you think.”

Fab didn’t like the way she felt around Cameron. She was too close. It was like when she’d talked to her through the earpiece. Her proximity made thinking impossible.

Without another word, Fab stepped onto the deck and let the breeze cool her. If there was somewhere to sit, she’d probably stay out there, but it was like production had thought of everything. Like they’d purposely eliminated any place of refuge. She didn’t doubt that the bistro chairs inside had been selected for their thin legs. Legs that would fall between the gaps in the deck.

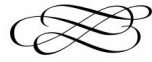
Looking out at water clear enough to see the sandy ocean floor and schools of tiny silver fish darting around, Fabiola took slow, deep breaths. Cameron was a toxin and she just needed to purge her from her system. She couldn't let her cloud her mind. She was here to play and to win.

When breathing didn't work. Fab pulled off her pants, leaving only her black, bikini briefs, and dove headfirst into the water.

Swimming hard and fast, she reached the nearly invisible mesh that separated the cove from the wild ocean beyond. Presumably there to keep out things like jellyfish and stingrays so pampered guests could enjoy a private lagoon, Fabiola wished she had something to keep her safe from her own personal predator.

Flipping on her back to float, letting the sun's unobstructed rays bite at her farmer's tan, Fabiola tried to let go. Tried to forget all the feelings being so close to Cameron stirred.

CHAPTER 11



USING one of the bistro chairs, Fabiola gripped the sides behind her back and stretched her legs, crossing them at the ankle. She wished she had more weight to increase the difficulty of the tricep dips. Being trapped with no equipment, and no access to the internet, was testing her creativity and training skills.

Dressed in a sports bra and thick joggers, Fab finished her set and moved to the floor. With one hand behind her back, she moderated her breathing and worked through thirty one-handed pushups.

After she'd used every part of the room to weight train, she needed a way to work on her endurance and cardio. Something she wouldn't have to worry about if she could have access to a treadmill like everyone else.

Stepping out onto the circular deck surrounding the bungalow, Fab was disappointed to find Cameron was no longer swimming. Instead, she was doing *child's pose* on the deck.

Fab didn't want her attention to snag on the muscles rippling on her strong back. On the endless, sun-kissed skin exposed by her string bikini. Fab wanted to ask whether she intended to wear something other than bathing suits the entire time they were there, but she didn't want Cam to know she'd noticed. She refused to feel anything when remembering that the neat script tattooed along her spine were the lyrics to her favorite song.

Annoyed, she turned on her heels and started jogging clockwise around the circular structure. In seconds she was back where she started. Where Cameron was blocking her path.

Fab turned and ran counterclockwise.

When she returned, Cameron was resting her entire body weight on her elbows and forearms. With her legs curved over her head, it was clear how *scorpion pose* got its name. It would be an impressive feat of balance and core strength if Cam's presence wasn't so damn annoying.

Fab tightened her jaw and ran in the other direction. The starting and stopping was making it impossible to build a tempo. She tried again and again.

On Fab's sixth abbreviated attempt, Cameron eased out of the difficult handstand and looked up at Fab from where she rested on her knees. A position too reminiscent of the first time they'd snuck into a production closet with no cameras.

"You want to say what's on your mind?" Cameron rose to her feet like mist, effortlessly and without using her hands.

"You're in my way," she said to the horizon, unable to keep her eyes on the flush creeping over Cam's face and down her neck.

Cam's laugh skittered across the water as still as glass below them. "Have you ever considered that you're in *my* way? Do you know how hard it is to stay balanced with you clomping around here like a deranged Clydesdale?"

Fab forced her attention off the horizon and aimed it back at Cameron. In the direct sunlight, her eyes were too blue. Her energy too bright. In the week and a half since they'd been on the island, her blonde roots were starting to break through the pastel pink dye. As if the woman she knew was trying to crack out of the persona.

"You can do yoga inside. I can only jog out here."

Cam crossed her arms and Fab's gaze shot down to her modest cleavage before high-tailing it back to her face. She was *not* going to notice her body.

“You can wait until I’m done doing yoga to run in circles.” Cam’s pink lips did something akin to a smile, but with a malevolent, devious intent. “Or. . . you can do yoga with me. We can never have too much balance or core strength for this game.”

“That’s stupid.” Fab crossed her arms. “What I need to work on is endurance. We’re due for something with long distance running soon.”

“Yeah? And how are they going to put a work-together-or-fail twist on running?”

Fab preferred to have the sun in her eyes than Cam’s face. “A relay, obviously.”

“You know what I think is *obvious*?” Cam tilted her head to the side. Always playful. Always too aware of her affect on people. Always too ready to use everything to her advantage. “You don’t want to do yoga with me because you know I’m better than you.”

“Oh please.” Fab pretended to laugh, knowing damn well she couldn’t twist herself into terrifying pretzel shapes. “There’s no athletic challenge in the world where you can beat me.”

“You think?” The gold hoop in Cam’s septum gleamed as her face lit up with mischief. “And yet I’ve beat you at every long-distance run. Every swim.” She stepped closer. Close enough for the scent of her shampoo and salty, sweat-drenched skin to slap Fab in the face before grabbing her by the heart. “And we both know flexibility isn’t your. . .” Her gaze was a solar flare searing Fab’s lips, her throat, her chest. “Strong suit.”

Fab took a step back, heat racing up her spine and snatching her composure. “Alright, I get it.”

“Come on.” Cam’s smirk added to the sweat dripping down Fab’s torso. “I promise to take it easy on you. Let’s do a little stretching or you’re going to injure those muscles you work so hard on.” She pointed at Fab’s biceps with her eyes. “Or are you really that afraid of me?”

Before Fab could respond, Cam turned, giving Fab her back. “Step your

legs a few feet apart.”

Fab didn't move.

“Put your hands on your hips.”

Fab's attention dropped to the full curve of Cam's backside.

“And bend forward from your hips. Keep your back nice and flat. Open up those hamstrings and quads.”

When Cam started to bend over, Fab took off in a sprint. Her heart was racing too hard. Old desires had responded only out of habit, but she needed to get away just in case. Jogging up to the production van several yards from the cabin's dock, Fab knew being out of breath had nothing to do with the short run.

Images of Cam's, hot, wet body tore through her mind, wreaking havoc on her pulse and mental well-being. She pounded on the glass on the backdoor harder than necessary.

“Fabiola, are you okay?” The producer pulled his headphones off his head, letting them rest around his neck.

“Can I take a walk?” Fab's voice was a screech, but she couldn't regulate it. Her body was too busy putting out other fires. “Just around here. I won't go far.”

He replied with the kind of practiced expression that said eek-I'm-sorry-I-would-if-I-could-but-it's-not-up-to-me-my-hands-are-tied-so-sorry. It involved a lot of useless blinking.

“I'm sorry. You've got the ocean and you've got the deck and you've got the room.” He grimaced as if it really pained him to trap her. “If you leave . . . you're disqualified.”

Fab gritted her teeth. This was ridiculous. “Meanwhile, everyone is back there working out. It's bad enough I can't cook for myself, if we get a running challenge I'm done.”

“It's not supposed to be easy. Technically, you lost. It's a gift that you're here at all.” His wince was so aggravating.

“Solitary confinement is cruel, you know.” Fab swatted at a bug the size of a *Micromachine* flying around her head.

The producer replied with a crooked smirk. “Good thing you’re not alone then, huh?”

Fab imagined a bunch of producers conspiring to torture her by forcing them together. “You people did this on purpose, didn’t you?”

“The power to win or lose is completely in your hands.” He laughed.

If the inability to quit wasn’t written into Fab’s DNA, she would have left right then. If she tapped-out, Cam would lose her chance to win too. There was something very satisfying about that, but she wasn’t there to lose. Not again.

Stomping back up the deck, Fab decided on a cold shower to get the layers of sweat off her body. She was so desperate to be cool, she nearly took Cam up on her offer to borrow some shorts. Refusing had been the right thing to do, despite the moment of near heatstroke when she’d considered it. She didn’t need Cam’s help and she sure as shit didn’t need her clothes.

In the bathroom, a new level of aggravation took its turn at testing Fab’s chill. A bottle of opened toothpaste had fallen into the sink.

What kind of anarchist squeezes from the middle?

An open makeup bag had spilled its guts all over the counter. A used razor sat on top of the toilet tank next to an open canister of shaving cream, the foamy white solution dried and stuck to the lid.

The real crime, however, was the bikini hanging in the shower and the towel balled up on the floor.

Furious at the offending garments, Fabiola took everything that wasn’t in its proper place and dumped it on Cam’s bed. She made sure to leave the wet towel on her pillow.

If they were going to share space, Cameron was going to have to learn how to respect it.

After wrestling the sticky sports bra off, the one she nearly tore in half to

be free from, and peeling away the pants that had left a ton of black fuzz on her sweaty legs, Fab stepped into the shower.

She was in the middle of washing her hair when she heard Cameron cursing.

As she rinsed away the conditioner, she smiled.

CHAPTER 12



“YOU KNOW WHAT I MISS?” Cameron asked from her place at the little bistro table. She picked up her knife and started cutting the steak they’d been served for dinner. “Music. I thought it would be my phone, but it’s music.”

Fabiola ignored her and focused on eating her steak and vegetables while balancing her plate in her lap. The only thing worse than the crushing silence was the sound of Cam’s voice.

“Why can’t we have some music?” She continued chatting to herself like she had all day.

Is this payback for putting her wet towel on her pillow? The punishment outweighs the crime.

“Because they want us to be completely miserable,” Fab muttered. Sitting on the edge of her bed while trying to cut her steak was proving impossible.

“You’re making yourself miserable. Why don’t you stop being ridiculous and sit at the table.”

Fab glared at her. “So you can steal my dinner too?”

“You are the most stubborn—”

“Insult me. That makes me want to share a table.”

“Stop being a baby.”

Fab made a second attempt to cut a piece of steak and caused the plate to dip between her pressed together knees. She turned her glare from Cameron

to the braised Brussels sprout splattered on the floor. It's tiny, leafy face shaming her.

“Are you ready to stop being ridiculous?”

Fab picked up the wayward sprout and tossed it in the garbage. “I'm only sitting with you because we probably have to compete tomorrow and I need all the nutrients I can get—”

“*Dios mio*. If you bitch about your macros again today, I swear—”

“Do you know how hard it is to keep muscle—”

“Do you know how painful it is to hear you lament about pumpkin quinoa risotto? I hate to be the one to tell you this, but everything you eat sounds like it belongs in one of the deeper circles of hell.” Cam pierced a chunk of meat on her fork.

“Food—”

“I swear to all that is good and holy, Fabiola Santos. If you say *food is fuel* I'm going to stab myself in the eye, and then you'll have no partner.”

Fab resisted the urge to chuckle. “It's the definition of food,” she muttered before finally taking a bite of cold steak.

“Food is music, art, romance.” Cam whirled her fork around with a sautéed onion on the end. “It's not so . . . clinical.” She bit off the onion. “That's why chefs are so intense. They're not creating something in a sterile lab, they're expressing their passion.”

“Do you really believe what you say, or are you just used to speaking in Instagram memes?”

Cameron rolled her eyes. “I recall you *loving* food. Remember the night before the final when you started crying thinking about your mom's *tamales*? I'm pretty sure corn doesn't fit your macros.”

Fab busied her mouth with chewing.

“Oh come on. Don't pretend like you don't remember that.”

“I don't.” She took a drink of water. “Mostly because they're *not* tamales. It's called *pamonha*.”

Cameron's grin gave away that she'd confused the foods on purpose. They'd exchanged a lot of Spanish and Portuguese words once . . . among other things. She hadn't forgotten, just like Fab hadn't forgotten how much she hated her grandmother's Cuban tamales but choked them down anyway. Olives and all. The urge to ask about her grandmother bubbled up, but she swallowed it down with more water.

"If you're not going to drink your ration of wine, can I have it?" Cam's hand was already on the mini bottle of rosé.

"You shouldn't drink. We don't know exactly when they'll come for us to —"

"Yes or no, JLo?"

Fab cocked her head to the side. "JLo?"

"She famously doesn't drink because it makes your skin and sleep bad." Cam paused as if thinking about what she'd said. "Maybe there is something to that. She looks absolutely incredible. Did you see *Hustlers*? Can you believe she's in her fifties?"

"Why do you know that?"

Cam shrugged. "Can I have it or what?"

Fab gestured for her to just take it already. "If it will stop you from sharing anymore thoughts on Jennifer Lopez."

"How's your mom by the way?" Cameron poured the wine into her glass. "Has Ted learned a lick of Portuguese?"

"He tries," she admitted before she could stop herself. "I think he finally understands that nothing my mom serves him is going to be spicy."

"Are they taking care of Mancha again?" Cam's attention drifted up from her plate and locked on Fab's eyes. "Or is someone else . . . watching him?"

Fab's throat tightened. "Are you trying to find out if I'm seeing someone?"

Cam shrugged, her grin sheepish. "Only if you're seeing someone you trust to care for Sir Mancha von Wigglebutt."

For a moment, Fab considered lying. She didn't want to admit that it had been several years since her last serious relationship. Certainly no one that she'd leave Mancha with for months.

"He's probably trying to share Tilo's tiny bed right now," she admitted instead.

"Tilo is still alive?" Cam screeched, her eyes wide. "Shut up!"

Fab bit back a smile. "He's going on fifteen I think."

"Man, Chihuahuas really do live forever."

"I hope he does because Mancha couldn't stand the heartbreak."

Sadness crept into Cam's eyes. She knew Mancha's terrible beginnings. "He's such a good boy. You must miss him like crazy."

Fab nodded and went back to her food. She was already too vulnerable. She didn't want to explain that it was even harder to leave him this time. He was with her nearly twenty-four hours a day. Her clients all loved him and complained any time he didn't act as her assistant during appointments. Not having him was like missing a core part of herself, but she couldn't think about it. She had to continue to compartmentalize in order to survive the long weeks ahead. If she won, the separation would at least be worth it.

"I adopted a cat last year." Cameron couldn't leave the silence unfilled. "Her name is Tangerine."

"Orange tabby?"

"Solid black," she replied with a chuckle. "She might be possessed. Not a single flip-flop in my apartment is safe."

Apartment? She didn't buy a house with her ill-gotten winnings?

"She belonged to an elderly man for like a decade, and I'm pretty sure he was as grumpy as the old dude from *Up*. She hates everybody and everything except for wild-caught tuna and unsuspecting houseplants."

Fabiola furrowed her brow. "Why did you adopt her?"

"Someone had to."

Fab nodded, getting the sense that Cameron literally rescued the cat from

a terrible fate. It was exactly the kind of thing she'd expected Cam to do . . . the kind of thing that had made her fall so hard so fast . . . but Cam's actions had proven that she didn't know her at all.

When they finished, Cameron stood, leaving the plate on the table.

"Where are you going?"

Cam was already peeling off her shirt and starting for the bathroom. "I'll clean up when I get out of the shower."

"Do you know how many bugs we'll attract by then?" Fab snapped. "You can't just leave—"

"Okay, Dad!"

The bathroom door closed and the shower started.

"So selfish," Fab muttered, grateful that Cam had given her a new reason to be annoyed. Talking over dinner had been too easy. Too comfortable. She couldn't let herself get lulled into a place of safety again. It wasn't real.

When she finished washing the plates and setting them to dry in the rack, she turned to cleaning the rest of the kitchen. Their space was too small not to keep immaculate.

The only mess left was the crap strewn across Cam's bed. Fab considered shoving it all in the closet, but then she'd have to climb over it to get to her neatly arranged things.

God forbid she couldn't reach her parka. If she hadn't spent so much money on the stupid clothes, she might consider cutting the sleeves and legs off of everything.

With nothing left to do, Fab dropped onto her mattress. She leaned on the wall it was pressed against and looked out the sliding glass door. There was just enough light left to watch the waves. The waiting between challenges was going to be a test of her mental fortitude.

The sound of Cameron singing sent a jolt through Fab's unprepared body.

As she belted the Fleetwood Mac song about songbirds and scores, Fabiola was inundated with memories. She closed her eyes reflexively,

recalling Cam's scent on her pillow.

They'd never had the chance to sleep together or even lay in the same bed. To keep their relationship hidden from the cameras, they had to be extremely discreet. To feel closer to each other, because Cam sleeping in the bunk above her might as well have been the moon, they switched pillows every other night.

Instead of holding each other as they drifted to sleep, all Fabiola had was Cam's voice. Turned away from the cameras, they'd both face the wall and close their eyes. Through the gap, Cameron would sing to her until she fell asleep.

It was the most intimate thing Fab had ever experienced. It had also ruined a shitload of songs for her.

Unable to listen to Cam's sweet mezzo-soprano voice a second longer, Fabiola sprang out of bed. She reached the sliding glass door in three long, lunging steps.

The air outside was hot and muggy after the late afternoon rain, but Fabiola inhaled it like it was a long-lost friend. Taking greedy lungfuls, she tried to cleanse herself of the churning in her belly. The painful tightness in her chest.

Pulling up the pants making her legs sweat, Fabiola sat on the steps leading into the water. She dunked her feet in the cool, clear sea. Fighting off the mosquitos was less painful than all the old wounds Cameron was trying to tear open.

Bending forward, Fabiola dipped her hands in the water and ran them over her face. Unable to take the heat, she pulled off her sweater. She didn't love parading around in sports bras, but the constant heat was intolerable. It took all of her self control not to plunge in headfirst.

If she hadn't already washed her hair, she would indulge in the cool relief of floating. Maybe then she could figure out how the hell she ended up trapped with the woman who stole her heart only to break it and then steal her

money.

CHAPTER 13



LYING IN HER BED, Cam could *hear* how hot Fabiola was in her flannel pajamas. Her stubbornness was going to give her heatstroke.

Cam was dressed in tiny shorts and a bralette and the room was sweltering. The fans kept them from suffocating, but they sure didn't cool them down. She couldn't imagine how Fab was feeling.

She'd never known Fabiola to be body conscious. Playing every sport known to man, Fabiola had grown up in locker rooms. The presence of the cameras had never inhibited her before, Cam was pretty sure that Fab liked to strut around showing off her hard work.

Is it me?

Guilt twisted like a tornado in Cam's chest, taking out her stomach and throwing a cow across her guts. It's not like Cam hadn't seen Fabiola naked . . . but those had been very different circumstances.

Does she think I'm going to get the wrong idea?

Fabiola turned in bed again. She couldn't see her face in the lamp's glow, but her discomfort was deafening. The earlier rainstorm and lack of a breeze made the room more brutal than the previous nights. The shutters were open, but there was nothing to let in.

"Why don't you let me lend you a t-shirt or something?" Cam tossed her question into the sticky darkness.

Fabiola slammed it into the wood floor with a curt, “No, thank you.”

Cam sighed. Dinner had been kind of nice . . . relatively speaking, but after that, Fab had been particularly hostile.

It could be the heat, Cam considered to herself.

For some reason Cam still hadn’t worked out, all of Fab’s clothing was for an extremely cold climate. She didn’t dare ask why, but it still made her feel bad for her.

Fabiola’s bed creaked as she rolled around and fluffed her pillow.

Is she looking for a magical configuration that will beat back the heat?

In a fit of apparent frustration, Fab’s bed squeaked much louder, as if she was getting out of bed.

Cameron held her breath. For one absurd and heady moment, she imagined Fab crawling into her bed. Her chest ached as reality set in with the sound of clothing landing on the floor and Fab’s mattress whining again.

Closing her eyes, Cam was taken back to the last time she’d heard the sound of Fab’s discarded clothes hitting the ground.

Sneaking around had been so hard. There was always a production crew or a hidden camera they hadn’t accounted for or a fellow cast member’s prying eyes.

The first time they’d kissed, against the wall near a shed full of pool pumps, they assumed they’d been seen.

Cameron was prepared to be confronted with the footage during her confessional. That’s usually how producers got the clips they wanted. They asked a question they already knew the answer to, and if the contestant played coy, they were shown the receipts of their behavior.

But two confessionals came and went and neither of them had been shown evidence of their making out.

Cam’s lips tingled at the memory. She wasn’t sure whether Fab was even interested in women at first. She’d tried to drop lines to get a read on her, but Fab wasn’t one for extraneous details.

When they'd returned after a challenge to the huge house in Turkey where they were filming, Cameron was shocked that Fabiola led them to the first secluded spot she found. In usual Fab fashion, she'd been as serious as a shark bite when she leaned her against the shed. Up until the moment Fab's lips touched hers, Cam had no idea the kiss was coming.

The kiss had been rushed and hungry and desperate. The next dozen that followed had only increased in fervor. Combining the risk of getting caught with the thrill of new attraction had led to explosive desire.

Stolen kisses had been okay for a week, which was about six months of real world time, but soon they needed more. More contact. More skin. More everything.

The closet full of production gear and no cameras had been a lucky find. The crew probably thought the meager space left unoccupied by all the extra gear was too small for anyone to misuse. They hadn't counted on their desperation.

Cameron's body reacted as her mind carried her backward in time. She was pressed against a pile of tripods, the point of one jammed between her shoulder blades. Fabiola's hand sliding under her shirt.

Still sweaty from the day's obstacle course, which had included a half-marathon run through a mountain pass, they tore at each other. Cam had never wanted anyone as bad as she wanted Fabiola. Simmering under her stoic exterior was a woman brimming with passion.

Hugging herself, shame made Cameron smaller. They'd shared so much in those weeks they'd spent together. There was no real way to fill their time off other than to talk, and talk they did. Told each other every little secret. First crushes. First heartbreaks. Coming out stories. Losses they'd suffered. Disappointments. Joys. Fears. Dreams. There wasn't a single thing they hadn't told each other.

Well . . . there was one thing.

In their stolen moments away from prying eyes. Before they hatched their

plan to get each other to the end of the final so they could win and split the money, Cameron had wanted to tell Fabiola about the financial mess she was in. About the man she thought was the real deal, but who was nothing but a con artist running a Ponzi scheme. The man she introduced to her parents. The man who took every penny and disappeared.

She'd been too ashamed to admit she'd been so stupid. That her desire for easy money had nearly cost her parents everything. Even when she'd brought the prize money home, it hadn't covered everything. Neither of her parents were going to be able to retire before seventy like they planned.

She'd never found the courage to tell Fab, and everything happened so fast after she won. Before she knew it, it was too late.

Guilt and regret were twin blades stabbing her stomach. The more time she spent with Fabiola, the more she realized how far she was from forgiveness.

But she couldn't give up. She had to keep trying to reach her. To sneak over her fortress walls and show her she was sorry and would do anything to win back her trust.

CHAPTER 14



A KNOCK on the door interrupted the sumo squats Fabiola was doing while holding a bucket of water as an improvised kettle bell. The bucket hit the floor, splashing water onto the wooden deck and Fab's sneakers.

At the bungalow door, a PA held two stacks of black uniforms. Fab dropped Cam's set on her messy, unmade bed.

She crossed the tiny cabin to inspect what they'd been given to wear.

"What do we have?" Cameron's voice smacked the back of Fab's head.

Fab didn't need to turn around to know what Cameron looked like standing at the door in her bikini, salt water beading on her skin before rolling down her tanned body, running by her scattered tattoos, and collecting in a pool at her feet. She didn't turn around.

Wrapped in a towel, Cam plopped on her bed and held up the stretchy black tank top with her name emblazoned on the back.

"Well this doesn't say much," she muttered before picking up the compression shorts.

Fab had gotten the same outfit, though her shorts were significantly longer.

"Do you think we'll have any swimming challenges, or will it only be whatever they can fit in that clearing?"

Fab had been wondering the same thing but didn't respond.

“With all the swimming I’m doing, I bet I could outdo Michael Phelps with one arm tied behind my back.”

Fab rolled her eyes in Cam’s direction. “I’m glad to see losing hasn’t deflated that ego.”

“Hey, like RuPaul says... If you can’t love yourself, right?”

Cam’s smile was too playful. Her cheeks too pink. Her eyes too blue. Her skin too wet as her hastily thrown together bun dripped water over her shoulders and down her throat.

Fab turned away from Cam and toward the shower. “We have to be ready in an hour.”

“Do you want me to make you a pre-workout shake?” Cam asked.

In the bathroom mirror’s reflection, she could see Cam striding into the kitchenette behind her. The shake was a good idea, but Fab’s mouth couldn’t form the words she wanted to say.

Instead, she said no and turned on the shower. She’d make her own damn shake and guzzle it down while Cam was getting ready.

The sun was on its way to setting when Fab jumped into the production van behind Cameron. Much to her horror, they’d both decided to braid their hair. She knew production would ask them if it was a display of teamwork when they filmed their pre-obstacle interviews.

“I wonder what we’re going to have to do,” Cam asked from her place next to Fab on the bench seat.

Fabiola forced herself to focus. How they wore their hair didn’t matter, winning the next task was of the utmost importance.

During their short ride, Fabiola meditated while taking long, deep breaths. She reminded herself that she had the physical ability to do anything. She would beat any challenge thrown at her feet.

As they approached the clearing where they’d won their ability to stay in the game, Fab craned her neck to look out the windshield. Ahead, two very long and very thin poles shot out of the dirt. The rigging around it led her to

guess that they would be suspended at the top of the poles.

“What do you think?” Cam leaned over, her eyes fixed ahead. “Remember that one in the second season where they had to stand on balance beams and throw a ball back and forth. It could be something like that.”

Fabiola nodded. It fit in the work-together-to-win box. It was very likely they’d have to balance on the microscopic platform while engaging with their partners somehow. Since the poles were several yards apart, passing things to each other made sense.

“Could it be a puzzle?” The question slipped out of Fab’s lips before she could stop it.

Cam’s head darted around as if trying to get a better lay of the land. “I don’t see anything like that, but they might be waiting until the other team gets here to bring everything out so we don’t have an unfair advantage.”

Even getting to see the erected structures was an advantage, one Fabiola was happy to have. She could start getting herself mentally prepared for being hoisted thirty feet in the air.

Out of the van and placed at the center of the clearing for the same dramatic reveal they’d been on the receiving end of a few days earlier, Cameron kept her eyes trained on the poles. They swayed ever so gently every time the wind gusted.

“Do you think they’re all going to involve heights? All of our purgatory tasks?”

The tremble in her voice made Fab’s stomach tense.

“I hope not,” she replied honestly before crossing her arms as if that could erase the concern from her voice. “You got this,” she said more stiffly.

Cam, sweat already starting to form at her pastel pink temples, turned her head toward Fab.

Reflexively, Fab met her gaze.

“Fabiola, I don’t want to lose this for you. I just—”

“Don’t let the fear creep in. Focus on your job.” Fab’s voice was harsher

than she intended. She hated knowing that Cam was afraid. Wished she could steal it from her. “Remind yourself how many times they test these things.”

Cam nodded. “Yeah, the lawsuits.”

“Take your piercing out.”

Cam’s hand went to her septum. “Damn, I thought I had.”

When the production van carrying the latest losing team started toward them, Fab stiffened. The jolt of pre-competition adrenaline hit her hard. She repeated a mantra she’d heard from one of her clients. As the race gets longer, I get stronger. Her heart raced and jaw clenched. Tension coiled in her muscles ready for explosive release.

“Well, at least someone is swimming,” Cam muttered as the pair approached. Two male competitors, their hair still wet.

This time, when Janette gave her spiel, Fab and Cam were waiting at the end of the tree tunnel. Their faces were dressed up in scowls. They were ready to fight.

“To stay in the game,” Janette gestured toward the clearing. “You’re going to have to get beyond the defending champs, Fabiola and Cameron.”

Resisting the urge to stamp her foot in the ground and blow smoke out of her nose, Fab settled for a sneer. She wanted them to know they shouldn’t bother hoping.

Once they were fitted with their safety harnesses, all four contestants were lined up in a row at the center of the clearing. Production probably wanted to get a shot of how puny they were in comparison to the obstacle.

“Tonight will test your will,” Janette continued, her attention shifting to the towering poles spiked into the ground. “When I say go, each team will have to race up this pole and stand at the top. The team that lasts the longest at the top, wins. Now, there’s a little wrinkle.” She grinned. “There is only space for three feet on the platform at any one time. You’re going to have to negotiate who is standing with two feet and who’s going to do their best flamingo impression. You can alternate who is one-legged, as long as four

feet are never touching the platform for more than two seconds. Oh, and you have three minutes to make it to the top. If you can't, you're disqualified."

"We're going on the same one?" Cameron's eyes were huge and panic-stricken.

Fab shook her head. "I don't understand how we're going to fit."

"You better figure it out," Janette said, her whistle already between her teeth. "Or you ladies are going home."

Janette didn't have to look so delighted by their torment, but Fab resisted the urge to say so.

"It'll be fine." Fab scrambled for a positive spin. For a way to keep Cam from freaking out. "Their feet are bigger than ours." She gestured over her shoulder with her head hoping that was true. "They're not going to be able to outlast us. I'll climb up first." Her mind raced, trying to work out the kinks while thinking three moves ahead. "When you're climbing, use your thighs and keep your arms bent. Move as fast as you can, or you're going to burnout your forearms."

Cameron didn't bicker, she just nodded.

"Okay, teams, line up!" Janette called after the crew did a final check of their safety gear.

Standing at the base of the post, Fab adjusted the black gloves that would help her grip the sleek metal pole. Flexing her fingers, she bounced on the balls of her feet, hyping herself up.

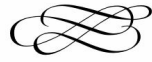
"Just focus on the top," Fab reminded, wishing Cam didn't look so terrified.

Pale and serious, Cam nodded gravely.

Fabiola didn't have time to focus on the twinge in her chest before Janette's whistle cut through the hot, humid air.

With a jump, she clung onto the pole and climbed.

CHAPTER 15



SUCKING DOWN LUNGFULS OF THICK, hot, humidity, Cameron kept her fear from spiking into a panic. Trying her best to follow Fab's advice, she attempted to take deep breaths to still her nerves. Unfortunately, she felt more like a hyperventilating chihuahua than a fearsome competitor.

Janette's whistle blew again and Cam stopped thinking about her fear. Instead, she used it like rocket fuel to launch herself up the pole. Adrenaline carried her a third of the way before she felt the strain in her biceps, her back, her forearms. Before her lower back started pulling. Before her shoulders burned.

"Keep your pace!" Fabiola shouted from where she'd sat on the perch, her legs hooked around the post to keep her secure. "He's right behind you." Her attention flashed to their competition, but Cam didn't waste time looking to her side to confirm.

Gritting her teeth, Cam pushed harder. Clamping her leg around the pole, she anchored herself and used her thighs to climb while giving her arms a break.

Every muscle in her body burned and ached like it was being torn in two, but she pushed through the pain, through the terror. She shoved aside thoughts of right now and focused on what winning would mean. More time with Fabiola. More time for redemption.

Cam was still two more pulls from the top, when Fabiola's hand appeared.

She took it.

With a guttural, animalistic shout, Fabiola took her hand and pulled her up. With her other hand, Cam gripped the safety harness around Fab's waist, using her body to climb onto the flat, round, surface that felt as small as a dinner plate.

Sweat poured over every inch of Cam's skin, but Fab's grip didn't slip as she pulled her into her arms. It was only when Fab wrapped her arms around her, pulling her into a fatigued embrace, that Cam realized how hard they were both shaking. The climb had been brutal, standing on one leg was going to be impossible.

"Don't look down," Fab's whisper was hot and shaky against her ear.

Cam clung to her, her eyes slamming shut. She'd been so focused on getting to the top, she'd forgotten just how high up they were. If she could just stay where she was, sitting on Fab's lap, her legs hooked around her waist, her face buried in her neck, she could outlast the other team. She wasn't so sure she could survive standing on the tiny platform.

The sharp trill from Janette's whistle pierced her eardrums.

"You have to get on your feet or you're disqualified!" Janette shouted from a million miles below.

Without another word, Fab leaned back, gripped Cam's harness and, in a show of sheer strength, pushed Cam to her feet like she was doing an overhead press.

Cam only had enough room to place one foot between Fab's parted thighs as she climbed up her body. Staying crouched, she gripped the shoulder straps of Fab's harness.

"Ready?" Cam primed herself for a serious test of balance. On one foot, she was going to have to hoist Fab up without falling over.

Fab's helmet rocked as she nodded and reached up to grip Cam's waist

straps.

They both cried out from the exertion of getting Fab to her feet, the vocal release a buoy helping them stay afloat.

Panting, Fab's entire body pressed against hers as she positioned her feet on either side of Cam's foot. If they had barely enough room for their three feet, she imagined the guys on the other post were having an even harder time. Cam couldn't hear them through the blood pumping loudly in her ears and she didn't dare look over. She needed to keep her eyes shut or she'd freak right the fuck out.

"Are they on?" Cam asked, focusing on the game instead of the proximity of Fab's sweaty body or the salty scent of her perspiration mixed with her perfume. There was no way to stay on the platform without embracing each other. Cam wondered how much Fab hated having to cling to her to win.

"Yeah, but they're struggling," she replied hoarsely, she still hadn't caught her breath either. "How long can you stay on one foot? I think I pulled something in my thigh."

Cam was standing on her right foot, her left hanging off to the side so there would be no question it wasn't touching the platform. If she wasn't tired from the climb, she could stand like that for hours. "A while. What's wrong with your thigh?"

"Nothing," she snapped.

"But you just said—"

"Focus on what we're doing."

Cam would've rolled her eyes if they weren't shut.

Time moved slowly while Fabiola and Cameron engaged in an awkward hug as they balanced on a frisbee glued to a fireman's pole. Cam was sure they'd been perched up there for at least an hour when Janette announced fifteen minutes had elapsed.

With Cam's leg nestled between Fab's parted thighs, she felt the tremble starting in Fab's left thigh.

“What did you do to your thigh?” Cameron asked again.

Fab shifted her weight to her right leg, as if that would conceal the obvious discomfort she was in. She didn’t respond.

“You think ignoring me—”

“I’m ignoring the pain,” Fab snapped, her roar so close to Cam’s ear it left it ringing.

“Don’t scream at me!”

Pressure and fatigue pulled at their seams, hoping they’d unravel after one, hard yank.

“I’m not screaming,” Fab shouted, the quake in her quads inching up the Richter scale.

Cam shook her head. “I told you to stretch.”

“It has nothing to do with stretching.” Fab’s teeth were gritted and her breath hot against Cam’s neck.

“Why are you so stubborn? I’m sure they taught you the importance of stretching when you were getting that degree in fitness.” Cameron couldn’t let it go. Fab’s inability to admit when she was wrong was a bear that required poking.

“I. Did. Stretch.” Fab was seething.

“Clearly not enough.”

Something rumbled in Fab’s chest like she was a dangerous predator giving off a warning.

“That’s another twenty minutes gone,” Janette shouted. “Looks like we’re going to be here all night.”

Fab’s grip around Cam’s waist tightened, and her body trembled more violently. The physiological reaction made Cam soften. Fab probably hated that she couldn’t control her body. That she couldn’t bend it to her will.

“Do you want to try squatting? Stretch it out?”

Fabiola hesitated before barking something that sounded like *no*.

Tightening her grip on the straps on the middle of Fab’s back, Cam bent

her leg. “Lean your weight on me then.”

Fab’s body stiffened instead of complying with Cam’s demand.

“You’re not going to last much longer like this. Do you want to lose?”

“I don’t need your help.” Fab’s tone was still as gentle as steel wool, but the pitch was too high. She was struggling.

“It’s not going to kill you to lean on me, *Fabiola*.” Cam tightened her arms around her torso, showing her how stable she was on one foot. “Stop being such a baby and take some pressure off.”

In the sticky, sweaty silence, Fab didn’t move. Her trembling body was begging for help, but Fab was too hard-headed to give in.

“Thirty minutes! Who is going to fall first?” Janette taunted them. “I bet, Cameron and Tony, you two are dying to shift your weight off that one foot! Is it time to switch with your partners?”

Cam didn’t consider it despite the cramp starting to bloom in her calf, its electric tendrils curling around her hamstring. Being unable to put her heel down completely was the most uncomfortable part of the exercise, but Fab needed more room on the platform than she did.

“You can’t keep pushing your body like this,” Cam warned when Fab’s body convulsed harder against her. “If you injure yourself, they’re going to boot us from the game. Get out of your own way,” she begged.

For a moment, Fab leaned forward, her sweaty upper body resting on Cam’s chest. It lasted only a second and then Fab was gone. Her echoing scream forcing Cam to open her eyes in time to watch Fab slip off the platform.

The ground below Cam warped and bent as the realization of how high she was slammed into her at a thousand miles an hour. It was enough to send her sprawling backward. The free fall before the crew holding the ropes fastened to her harness reacted was only a second, but it was long enough to send Cam’s stomach plunging.

As they were lowered onto her trembling feet, Cam kept her eyes fixed on

Fab. She was both pale and flushed.

“We’re going to have to go to the tapes,” Janette announced. “That was too close to call.”

Cam’s attention flashed to the side, she’d been so focused on Fab and then her own fears, she hadn’t realized the other team had fallen too.

CHAPTER 16



DESPITE LIMPING INTO THE BUNGALOW, Fab still found the wherewithal to throw her sneakers across the room. Behind her, Cameron sighed.

“You’re the only person I know capable of being mad because they won.”

Fab gritted her teeth. She wasn’t mad that they won. She was pissed that they’d nearly lost. One tenth of a second had separated them from the other team. It should never have been that close, and it was her own damn fault.

Limping to her bed, Fab dropped her exhausted body on the mattress. She would normally never lay down without showering first, but the pain in her inner thigh was so bad she wasn’t sure she could stand long enough to do it.

“Are you going to tell me where it hurts now?” Cam stood over her, her arms crossed over her chest.

“What are you going to do about it?” Fab snapped, bitter that a physical therapist and masseuse were hanging around the main house, but she didn’t have access to them. Not while she was trapped in prison.

“I could help you—”

“If you so much as think the word *stretch* one more time—”

“Did you always whine so much?” Cam sat on the edge of the bed.
“Move over.”

Fab had no intention of moving to give her more room. The damn bed was the only space that was hers in their miserable paradise.

“I can see where it’s spasming.” Cam continued as if Fab had complied. “I think you strained your adductor.”

Fab already knew that. She’d never hurt her inner thigh muscle quite so badly, but she knew where it was.

“A little massage will release all that tension in the muscle. I can apply some heat first. That might help get the cramp out.”

Fab stared at her. “Did you become a PT since I saw you last?”

Cam, her cheeks still flushed and her pink hair plastered to her head from where the helmet and sweat smashed it down, smiled. “I strained mine just like that while surfing.”

Taking her silence for agreement, Cam went to the kitchen. Fabiola sat up in bed, but didn’t turn around to see what she was doing. The faucet turned on and off before Cam tossed something into the microwave. Then the fridge opened, followed by the sound of pills rattling in a bottle.

Cam handed her a bottle of water and two tablets. “That’ll help with the swelling.”

Fab rolled her eyes. She knew what Ibuprofen was for.

When Fabiola didn’t immediately accept the medication, Cam propped her hand on her hip. “If you don’t think I’m capable of pinching your nose and forcing these down your gullet—”

Fab swiped the pills from her hand just to get her to stop talking.

With her eyebrows raised, Cam waited expectantly for Fab to swallow the pills. Fab did but painted a glare on her face for good measure.

Satisfied, Cam gave a curt nod and turned her attention to the beeping microwave.

On her return, she was holding a steaming hand towel. “It might be better if you take off your shorts.”

“No.” It was bad enough that Fab was suffering the indignity of Cameron’s help. She wasn’t going to make herself more vulnerable by partially disrobing.

“Can you make room for me?” Cam asked instead of demanding.

With a groan, Fab pushed over on the bed and closer to the wall.

Cam tucked one long leg beneath her as she sat on the edge of the bed again. This time she had enough room to sit comfortably.

“Can you bend your left knee and turn your leg out some?” Cam’s tone was gentle. Too gentle. Fab closed her eyes and tried to be somewhere else as she laid back on the bed.

If she didn’t know that a serious groin injury could put her out of commission, she’d tell Cam to go play nurse somewhere else. Instead, she released a long, deep breath when the hot towel landed on her aching inner thigh.

After the fourth time Cam applied a new hot compress to her thigh, exhaustion and pain killers hit her at the same time. She hated admitting that the damp heat was helping. She knew it would, but she still resented that it had been Cam’s idea.

“It’s much less swollen.” Cam removed the hand towel, but didn’t get up to refresh it like she had several times before. “If you let me work out the kink, I think it will feel a hell of a lot better tomorrow.”

If she’d strained her adductor as she feared, stimulating the blood flow around the area would help her circulation and give the muscle fibers a serious boost. It could go a long way toward healing.

Without a word, or opening her eyes, Fabiola hooked her thumbs into her tight shorts and pushed them down. Her black, athletic, boyshorts covered more skin than most bathing suit bottoms, but it wasn’t her skin that felt exposed. When the shorts were part way down her legs, Cam’s fingers grazed hers as she pulled them off the rest of the way.

Cam’s fingertips were cool compared to the heat the compress left on Fab’s inner thigh. When she started pressing slow circles low on Fab’s thigh, it took all of Fab’s practiced self-control to hold still. Her tired instincts couldn’t decide whether they wanted to run in or away, so she didn’t move.

The higher up on her thigh Cam went, the more tender Fab's muscle became. When she landed on the spot causing her pain, Fab gasped.

"Sorry," Cam whispered, too low, too husky, too pained.

Cam lessened the pressure but she didn't move away. With her hands balled up into fists, Fab dug into the mattress and endured.

Focusing on the pain was easier than thinking about Cam's deliberate, cautious touch. Her hands had never been hesitant before. They'd always known the way. Moved with confidence. Greedily took ownership of every part of Fab's body.

Fab ordered herself to stop reacting. To cool the heat slowly gathering beneath Cam's touch and thumping up her femoral artery.

"Does that feel good?" Cam's question was breathy and hot. It mixed with the sweltering air and sent a fresh flood of sweat trickling over Fab's overheated skin.

Fab's mouth couldn't form an answer. She wasn't sure that if she parted her lips, a moan wouldn't sneak out, so she tightened her jaw instead. Kept the truth clamped down and safe.

Using the heel of her palm, Cam rolled over the strained muscle. With all the satisfying pleasure of pressing a bruise, pain skittered and dispersed beneath her touch. Her extended fingers brushed Fab's hip as she neared the top of her injury.

Reflexively, Fab exhaled hard, a confusing combination of conflicting sensations battling for control of her body.

Cam did it again, applying a fraction more pressure as she slid over the aching muscle. Fab's lower back arched off the bed before she slammed it back down where it belonged.

"I feel it loosening," Cam said, her whisper filling Fab's ears as her hands, hot from friction, roamed higher up Fab's thigh.

It wasn't high enough. The ache growing between Fab's thighs was even worse than the one Cam was helping. An unhinged, stupid part of her wanted

Cam to take advantage of the confusion. To run her hand higher, under the thin, black fabric, and fill the space she'd claimed so long ago. To ease the ache she'd created.

“How's that?” Cam whispered, her touch retreating.

Fab opened her eyes to meet Cam's bright gaze.

“Thanks,” Fab managed, her voice as thick as the humidity in the room.

Cam's blue eyes lingered on hers. Fab knew she wanted to say something. Could almost hear what she was thinking, but couldn't make out the edges of her words.

“You should take a hot shower,” Cam suggested. “It'll help a lot now that it's loose.”

Fab would bet every dollar she'd saved over the last six years that Cam had intended to say something else. She considered reaching out. Taking her wrist. Stopping her from walking away. But her hands remained in sweaty fists at her sides.

CHAPTER 17



SUN FILTERING in through open plantation shutters greeted Cameron first and the crushing heat throttled her second. With a groan, she turned away from the wall and craned her head to the kitchen behind her.

“How is it so hot so early?” She whined at the microwave clock.

It didn’t have the nerve to explain why it was six in the morning.

The bathroom door creaked open and Fabiola hobbled out. Her limp was much better than the night before, but not completely gone.

“How are you feeling?”

Fab pushed her long, wet hair out of her face. “Fine.”

Cam resisted the urge to laugh when Fab straightened and tried to walk smoothly. Dressed in jeans and a sweater, Fab looked ridiculous. If Cam had brought a whole bunch of winter clothes to the Caribbean in the summer, she’d live in her underwear.

When the clean scent of Fab’s freshly showered body and washed hair filled their little bungalow, Cam breathed it in greedily.

Rubbing the remaining vestiges of sleep out of her eyes, Cam yawned and got to her feet. “I need coffee,” she murmured, feeling every single muscle in her body ache as she moved. “Want some?”

Fab turned toward the kitchen, letting out a little, involuntary yelp when she moved.

Cam put down the canister of coffee and rested her hands on her hips. It was the same pose her mother adopted when she meant business.

“I don’t want to hear it,” Fab snapped.

“Well that’s too bad because you have no way of escaping me.” She shot back, undeterred by Fab’s dark brown eyes or the daggers whizzing past her head. “If you do some gentle stre—”

“Don’t say it, Cam—”

“Stretching,” she finished, unafraid of Fab’s threats, “and then some light cardio. Maybe a swim. The water’s warm. It’ll be good for you. Unless,” she shrugged, “you want to make your injury worse and get sent home.”

The gears in Fabiola’s head were obviously grinding and churning, as if desperately searching for a reason Cam was wrong. Fab knew more about muscles and injuries than Cam did. She had to know she was right.

Cam resisted the urge to smirk. It was probably driving Fab crazy that she had to agree with her.

When Fab didn’t reply, Cameron pressed the attack. “You should warm up—”

“I walked around the deck for twenty minutes,” she snapped, managing to sound angry while signaling that she was going to accept Cam’s help.

“Good.” Cam nodded. “We can’t stretch cold muscles, can we?”

Fab rolled her eyes, her energy shifting as if she was changing her mind.

Cam didn’t give her room to run. “Take off your jeans or you won’t get enough range of motion. Do you want to borrow leggings?”

Dark eyes shifted as Fab appeared to consider the offer before shaking her head.

“Or you can change into your bathing suit. A swim after the stretch would do you good. Low impact. Get all that lactic acid moving.” Cam pulled her own arm behind her back. A swim would help chase the ache from her sore muscles too. “You have three or four days at the most to get back into fighting shape,” she reminded, hoping that would prompt her into action.

To Cameron's shock, Fab retreated back into the bathroom with minimal complaints and just enough muttering to sell that she was accepting under duress.

While Fab changed, Cam threw off her tank-top and undies and slid into a blue, one-piece bathing suit. Maybe the athletic look would put Fab more at ease. Like they were just a couple of contestants working out without a mountain of unopened baggage on their backs.

By the time Fab emerged in a black one-piece, Cam had layered a bunch of towels on the deck. It wasn't as good as a yoga mat, but some cushion was better than none. And the floor was safer than the bed. Cam's nerves had barely survived the night before. This was about helping Fab, not getting lost in a fog of lust.

"Are you sure you're warm enough?" Cam's eyes drifted to Fab's exposed thigh, the muscles defined like they'd been carved to perfection instead of developed with sweat equity.

Fab's response was to step onto the deck and sit on the towel with one leg curled in and the other injured one extended.

Cam sat on the edge of the towel, the absorbed heat of the deck warming her backside. "Lay on your side."

"I know what to do," Fabiola snapped.

As if it pained her soul, she turned on her side. Crossing her left leg over her right, she planted her left foot on the towel. She winced.

"Don't lean into the pain," Cam couldn't help the warning. "Don't push."

Fab lessened the intensity of the stretch until her face wasn't marred in discomfort.

Together, they worked through a few stretches, each one appearing a little easier than the last.

From her deep lunge, Fab turned her attention to Cam, her dark eyes luminescent in the bright, morning sun.

"I can't quite get what I need," Fab confessed as if the admission tasted

like rancid oysters on her tongue.

Cam eased out of the lunge that mirrored Fab's, albeit hers was much deeper. "What do you need?"

Sitting on her butt with her legs extended on either side of her, Fab held out her hands. Cam copied her pose, touching the bare soles of her feet to Fab's, and sliding her palms over hers.

Their callouses from climbing matched in the most pleasing way, but Cam tried not to focus on it. She had a job to do.

Gently, Cam leaned away from Fab, helping her get her chest as close to the ground as possible. As soon as she met with resistance, she stopped.

"Flatten your spine more. You're arching."

Instead of complaining, Fab corrected her posture. A moment later, Cam leaned back a little more, pulling Fab's chest closer to the towel.

"Take a deep breath," Cam instructed. "Send lots of oxygen to those poor muscles."

Cam took a deep breath first and held it for a second before releasing it fully out of her mouth. Fab followed her lead.

When she had pushed Fab as far as she dared, they eased back into a sitting position.

"Lay flat on your back," Cam said softly. "So I can stretch your hamstrings too. They're super tight." She'd noticed Fab struggling to keep her legs down during the stretch. "If they're—"

"I know," Fab interrupted.

Cam shifted to her knees and moved between Fab's parted thighs.

Turning her head to face the water, her slim cheek against the impromptu yoga mat, Fab closed her eyes.

The sight of her, so still, so relaxed, was a defibrillator sending a current into Cam's constricted chest. She was too aware of her own body. Of her racing heart. Of the perspiration building like a film over her skin. Of the mild tremble nestling between the joints in her fingers.

With a calming breath, Cam slid her hand over Fab's smooth calf and lifted her lower leg. Moving as carefully as an art restorer repairing an original Kahlo, she rested Fab's ankle on her shoulder.

Fab's abdomen stilled. She was holding her breath.

"Is that too much—"

"No," Fab insisted without opening her eyes or exhaling.

As Cam pushed closer, her chest pressed flush against the back of Fab's leg.

"Breathe," Cam whispered, as much to herself as to Fab.

After two long, deep breaths, Fab's resistance waned. Cam pushed further. One hand on Fab's muscular thigh and the other on the ground to keep her stable.

A tiny groan rumbled and bobbed in Fab's throat. It was a burst of heat pulsing through Cam's nervous system and testing her grip on her suppressed desire.

"Is this okay?" Cam placed the question a foot from Fab's cheek, her gaze fixed on Fab's long neck.

Fab nodded, her forehead creasing. Cam had seen that expression before. In the stolen moments where she tossed her head back and relinquished control, giving herself to Cam without restraint.

Forgetting the purpose of the activity, Cam lost herself. She wanted to be closer. To feel the heat of Fab's body close enough to smolder. To singe. To scorch.

Cam wasn't prepared when Fab opened her eyes. When she turned her attention from the horizon and aimed it at her. She was suddenly too close, but Cam couldn't will herself to retreat. She was entranced. Frozen.

"Cameron." Fab's tone was low and husky.

Cam's lips parted, wanting to say something, to keep Fab's dark gaze on her, but nothing materialized.

"I can't . . ." Fab's voice, unusually thin and unsure, trailed off.

“You can’t what?” Cam wanted to dive into her full lips, to show her that she very much *could*.

“I can’t do this,” Fab whispered, leaving the *again* implied.

Cam needed to talk to her without the intrusion of cameras and microphones. “Let’s go for a swim.”

The tension Cam hadn’t noticed building between them snapped like a cut power line.

Easing out of the stretch, Cam rested on her legs. “It’s low impact and it’ll help.” Her eyes widened, hoping Fab would understand that she needed to talk to her in private.

“I don’t—”

“Please,” Cam begged, not caring about her pride or ego.

Fabiola propped herself up on her elbows. She stared at her as if trying to read Cam’s thoughts. Thoughts she was more than happy to share if she could just have a few minutes alone.

“Okay.”

CHAPTER 18



TO AVOID SUSPICION, they swam several laps between the barrier creating their little cove and the wooden stairs leading from the water to the deck. Fab hated to admit that both the stretching and the exercise had improved the pain in her thigh considerably.

Cameron didn't have to voice her plan for Fab to know what she wanted when she flipped on her back and started to float. If they looked like they were having a conversation, it would only be a matter of time before production flew a drone over them or sent in a camera operator in a scuba suit. Anything to capture the moment. To record every word they said.

Following Cam's lead, Fab flipped onto her back letting the warm, clear water hold her up as the mid-morning sun warmed her skin. Weightless, Fab closed her eyes, forgetting for a moment that she was there to do anything but bask in paradise.

"I'm ashamed of what I did," Cameron confessed, her voice amplified by the silence of their surroundings.

When Fab tensed, her lower body sunk beneath the surface. Taking a deep breath, she forced herself to relax. To keep her eyes closed and her expression neutral.

Water rippled around Fab as Cameron propelled herself over the water. Her hand touching hers as she floated next to her.

“I’m ashamed of what I did to you,” she repeated as if Fab’s silence was a product of not having heard her the first time.

You should be, Fab wanted to say but didn’t. That sounded too wounded. Too hurt.

“I don’t want you to think I’m making excuses, but I want to tell you why —”

“Why you lied to me? Why you played me?”

Fab could almost hear Cam swallowing hard, trying to find the nerve to continue.

“Yes,” she replied more softly than the water gently lapping against Fab’s body.

Fab knew why Cam had done it. It was obvious. Greed. She’d gone on a reality show to win money by any means necessary. Fab had seen plenty of double-crossing treachery on the show. She was just too arrogant to consider she was being played for a fool. It had been her fault for trusting a competitor. For not anticipating that someone would use her feelings like a weapon.

“Does the *why* even matter?” In the echoing silence of the water, the harshness of Fab’s words were sharpened and amplified.

“I hope so,” Cam’s were soft and slathered in hope. “My parents were in a really bad way financially. They were going to lose their house. They’d already lost their retirement fund. Their savings. Literally everything. As a twenty-three-year-old college dropout, I didn’t know how to help them.” She sucked down a breath. “I let that cloud my judgment and I can’t tell you how much I regret it. I made such a massive mistake, and I’m so scared that I’m not going to be able to fix it.”

Fab didn’t want the sound of her crying to soften her. She knew better than anyone how good of an actress Cam could be. She hated the ache in her chest. The pain of resisting the instinct to reach out and take Cam’s hand. To pull her in and comfort her and tell her it would be okay.

“I’m so sorry, Fabiola. I don’t know how to make this right.”

Gritting her teeth, Fab wished they could just forget about the past and start over, but there was no reset button. The best they could do was tolerate each other enough to get to the finish line.

Kicking her feet, Fab transitioned from horizontal to vertical. Treading water with her neck just above the surface, she waited for Cameron to do the same.

Between the sunlight and the irritation from crying, Cam’s eyes were so many shades of blue they looked like gemstones. Fab resisted the urge to look away. She needed her to understand that she couldn’t keep doing this.

“You can’t make it right, Cameron.” Fab intended to sound resolute, but the tremble in her voice robbed it of any bite. “You lied to me. You used me. You pretended—”

“I was never pretending.” Cam swam closer, invading Fab’s personal space. With unshakable conviction, she held Fab’s gaze and said it again. “Never once was I faking what I felt about you. What you meant to me. What you still mean to me. I fucked up big time, and I’m not going to stop trying to show you that it was a one time mistake, but please don’t think that I didn’t love—”

Cam’s eyes widened, her tangled confession stopping her short as it snatched the air from Fab’s lungs.

“How can I ever believe you?”

Cam furrowed her brow, her desperation to be believed palpable.

“Just give me a chance,” she pleaded. “Let me remind you of what we had, and prove to you that I would never do anything like that again. That you can trust me.”

It was too much to ask. Cam wanted something Fab couldn’t give. Even if she wanted to, and as much as she hated to be made a fool of twice, she did *want* to.

“I’ll do anything,” Cam promised.

“Then focus on the game. That’s all I want from you.”

Wounded, Cam nodded.

They’d already started swimming back to the bungalow when the distinctive sound of a buzzing drone appeared above them. Its red lights trained on them as they moved.

CHAPTER 19



“THEY DIDN’T WASTE ANY TIME.” Cam stood in front of the screen keeping the mosquitos out and the breeze in.

“With what?” Fab brushed her hair into a tight bun while she walked to the open sliding glass door, making sure not to limp.

Cam pointed toward the horizon while she took a sip of her protein shake. Dressed in matching black tank tops and compression shorts, they were nearly finished getting ready for the afternoon competition. For Fab, that consisted mostly of not thinking about their conversation from the day before. It was too much to consume. To process. To believe.

In the water, a crew was building a floating platform. Fab’s outward silence did not match her internal irritation at the sight of a camera going up at the edge of their cove.

She reminded herself that this was what she signed up for and they shouldn’t have risked being so far for so long. They were there to win, not repair their shattered relationship.

“Did you drink enough?” Fab sat on the edge of her bed to finish securing her hair. “This time we’ll have the sun to deal with. I don’t want you gassing out because you’re dehydrated.”

“Thank you for reminding me of the dangers of heatstroke.” Cam’s smirk blunted the sarcasm in her tone. “How are you feeling?” Her gaze dripped

like candle wax down Fab's body and stopped at her thighs.

Dropping the hairbrush onto her made bed, Fab stood. "Fine."

"I hope we don't have a running task." Cam pulled a jug of water from the fridge. "You need more time to heal."

Fab's attention cut to the cameras suspended on the track above them. She didn't want production to know she was still injured. In past seasons, people had been sent home after failing medical clearances. She didn't want to take the risk.

"God, I hope it's not another heights challenge." Cam filled her water bottle and then Fab's. "I don't know how many of those I can take."

An hour later, they were standing at the base of a platform staring up at a simple rigging contraption. Another heights challenge. The kind with steel beams and crossbeams that didn't give away what specific torture it intended to mete out.

Next to her, Cam sighed. Using her hand to shield her eyes from the sun, she already looked exhausted. "This is impossible."

Fab shook her head, unwilling to let doubt creep under Cam's skin. "Mind over matter. It's not that high, and remember—"

"Not just this." Cam turned to her, her eyes dim and defeated. "All of it together." Anxiety slithered into her voice, heightening it and speeding it up. "We have to win over and over again. That's what . . . like nine. . . ten times we have to play *perfectly*. It's just not possible."

Before she could stop herself, Fab put her hand on Cam's partially bare shoulder. The sunblock mixed with sweat making her skin slick. "You can't think like that. We have to focus on what's in front of us right now, yeah?"

"It's too—"

Fab squeezed her shoulder, dragging Cam's attention back to her when it drifted up to the overhead platform. "Nothing is impossible."

Cam's smile pulsed into Fab's body like a sonic blast. "You sound like a sportswear campaign."

Fab swallowed her smile before it took control of her lips. “Yeah . . . well . . . it’s true. We have to keep our heads in the game. One fight at a time.”

After a long, cleansing breath, Cam nodded. “Thanks for the pep talk.”

When the light returned to her eyes, Fab retracted her hand like Cam’s skin had turned to lava. Clearing her throat, Fab struggled to make her face neutral and emotionless again.

The opponents that appeared from the tunnel of doom were covered in caked-on dry mud. Judging by the state of their stretched and disheveled uniforms, they’d had a hell of a morning.

“They’re exhausted,” Cam whispered, the clean scent of her lotion invading Fab’s senses as she leaned in close.

Fab nodded. If they stayed focused, they had a good chance at winning.

After Janette did her thing, explaining the twist to their latest victims, Fab followed Cam to where the crew was setting up under a long, narrow scaffold suspended from two massive cranes.

“Which one of you is going up?” A crew member walked toward them with a harness in his hand.

“We don’t know what the game is yet.” Cam shifted her weight between her feet.

Fab resisted the urge to wince. Cam knew as well as she did that part of the challenge was having very little information when making decisions like this.

“I’ll go up,” Fab declared.

Cam’s gaze burned into her cheek. “You don’t know what you’ll be doing. If it’s climbing, you’re going to hurt your—”

“I’m going.” Fab stepped toward the crew member without looking over at Cam.

As soon as the teams made their choices, they were separated. Cam joined the female member of their opponents’ team near one of the cranes. Fab and her male opponent stood near the other crane roughly a football field

away.

Straining her sight, Fab wished she could read lips. A producer was obviously explaining something to Cam. Something Fab wasn't supposed to know yet. She craned her neck, stretching, as if that might offer an advantage.

While they waited, a dozen crew members swarmed the dusty clearing like ants blanketing a dropped ice cream cone. Ignoring her opponent's inane chatter, Fab's brain worked fast to figure out their task.

With shocking speed, crews built a pair of towering billboards suspended from either side of the structure floating twenty feet above them. Where an ad for a personal injury attorney might be, a sheet covered the display.

Gripping the straps of her neon green, full body harness, Fab figured out the task. She'd be hoisted up to the billboard, that much was obvious by the ropes and pulleys being put in place instead of something for her to climb. She guessed that behind the sheet strapped to the billboard was something she would have to arrange, or more likely rearrange.

Because teamwork and communication were critical to the season's challenges, she guessed that Cameron would have to relay information to her.

Given the relative simplicity of the set up, speed would be important.

Fab reached for one of the bottles of water lined up at the base of the crane. The sun was going to act like a vacuum sucking out every bit of her energy.

On Janette's signal, Fab and her competitor stood under their respective billboards. Ropes and clips were tested and yanked while Fab kept a vigilant, unblinking eye on Cameron.

Cam and her mud-covered opponent were being led to a pair of drafting tables several yards away. One for each of them.

As soon as Janette hit her mark in the dirt and the black-clad-crew fled to the sidelines, Fab's adrenaline kicked in. Her pulse roared in her ears. The muscles in her thighs twitched in anticipation. The harness would press against her sore groin, pinching her skin and cutting into her flesh, but it

could be much worse. Pain was more tolerable than fear.

Speaking into the camera, Janette, with her pristine, white gauzy dress mocking the morning's losers, explained the game. "One team member will be raised thirty feet in the air." She gestured to the structure above Fab's head. "Up there, a puzzle will be revealed."

Fab nodded even if Janette wasn't speaking directly to her. Her suspicions were fairly accurate.

"The suspended person will have to relay what they see to their team member on the ground." Janette's expensive smile gleamed, her straight, white teeth more blinding than the sun starting to give Fab a headache. "Sounds easy, right?"

Fab resisted the urge to groan.

"There are a couple of little wrinkles." Janette's grin was downright Joker-esque.

Steeling herself, Fab's gaze flicked to Cameron. A member of the production team handed Cameron and the woman next to her a pair of blacked-out goggles.

Blindfolds? How the hell is Cam supposed to put a puzzle together while blindfolded? While I'm doing my pathetic piñata impersonation, I can't see all the way down there to tell her if she's doing it right.

"First, you'll put on those blindfolds and make your way to your partner as quickly as you can."

Fab resisted the urge to scream *blindfolded? Who is crazy enough to run blindfolded?*

She settled her hammering heart and listened to the rest of Janette's insane terms.

"Second, the blindfolded person will grab a hold of that rope and pull their teammate up to the puzzle. While they're up there, they'll be shouting down whatever information you need to take back with you and assemble the puzzle. Now, you can only remove your blindfold once you're back at your

station. Oh . . . and teams can only communicate while the blindfold is on. Once it's off, it's mouths shut or you're disqualified." Janette's maddening grin didn't dim. "Because I'm very generous, you are free to make as many trips back and forth as you like. First team to complete their puzzle wins the right to fight another day. Losers go home immediately and their shot at half a million dollars is D.O.A."

Janette placed her whistle between her teeth. Above Fab, the covering over the billboard fell away. It revealed a series of colorful tiles baring a variety of geometric shapes. Five rows by five columns.

How the hell do I begin to describe this?

Fab tilted her head as if that would help her figure it out. All she could see was a mass of lines and squiggles and shapes only varying in size by tiny fractions. There were at least six tiles that looked like nearly identical interlocking upside down triangles on a pale blue background. Explaining which went where would be almost impossible.

Janette primed herself to blow the whistle and Fab bent her knees like she was the one about to take off running.

"Oh . . . and one more little detail." Janette's grin was absolutely maniacal. "Teams assembling the puzzle, you'll have double the amount of pieces than you actually need, so make sure you listen carefully while you're holding your partners up there and running into the darkness."

The sound of Janette's laughter was abruptly cut off by the sound of the whistle.

CHAPTER 20



FLOATING in the warm Caribbean Sea was starting to become Fab's favorite activity. Not that she had that many activities to choose from.

Apart from winning, which they'd managed to do again thanks to her newly discovered ability to tell the difference between Robin's Egg blue, turquoise, and sea foam while the dude next to her couldn't go beyond ROY G. BIV, there was nothing to do.

Fab's thoughts drifted along with her body. Cameron had been absolutely fearless. The blindfold hadn't so much as slowed her down. As soon as Janette blew the whistle, Cam sprinted. Following Fab's guidance, trusting it, she'd barreled to the other side of the clearing without hesitation.

There was no doubt in Fab's mind that she wouldn't have been able to move with such confidence. In the dark. Forced to rely on anything other than her own senses. It would've been a nightmare. She'd considered herself lucky to be dangling in the rock-splitting heat. The various bruises she'd acquired from her extended time in the harness were well worth it. They'd won before the other team identified more than a handful of pieces.

She was a big enough person to give credit where it was due. Cameron was unstoppable. Fab didn't doubt that she could've won with a hand tied behind her back. The way she'd taken control of the rope and hoisted Fab up there like it was effortless, was a masterclass in technique. It was like having

been saved from the heights part had driven Cameron into superhuman strength, speed, and general badassery.

Casting aside thoughts of Cam, Fab engaged in another newly acquired source of entertainment — telling herself the plots to her favorite movies.

That morning it was *Imagine Me & You*. The beginning was hazy, but *you're a wanker number nine* was pop rocks spiked in soda, effervescent and bright in her gray mind.

When the morning slid into afternoon, Fab flipped over and swam back home. She could've laughed at the strange thought. A secluded ocean bungalow with Cameron Herrera was her *home*.

The sun was clearly making a western omelet of her brain. Cameron was *not* home. Atlanta and Mancha and her mother were home. A home that was painfully far away. She didn't let herself feel the sadness. The longing. She was there to do a job, and she needed every ounce of focus to accomplish it.

As she moved in long, smooth strokes, Fab tried to visualize winning. Tried to visualize what she would do with the money. Thoughts of opening her state-of-the-art fitness studio that she could turn into a franchise were interrupted with the sound of her mother's voice, of Mancha's massive body cuddled next to her in bed. She shut her eyes tight and kept swimming. She would not let the isolation break her.

After toweling off on the deck, Fab walked in to find Cam sitting at the bistro table. One of the blank notebooks they were allowed to have stood open. Its guts were torn out, cut in half, and organized into a stack.

There was a much shorter stack next to the blank one. From what Fab could tell, it looked like the three of hearts had been drawn on the scrap of paper at the top.

“What are you doing?”

Cam looked up from where she was drawing. Her hair, less pastel pink than when they started, fell in long waves over her tank top covered chest. Her eyes were raw, fiery aquamarine gems flecked with the faintest gold.

Fab regretted asking the question. Regretted coming inside. Regretted getting out of the water at all.

“The plan is to play solitaire,” Cam explained, her heart-shaped face pink where the sunblock had sweated off making the outline of the blindfold visible. “I was going to make tarot cards, but I can only remember Death, The Hanged Man, and The Lovers.”

Fab raised a brow but resisted the urge to laugh. “Bleak.”

Cameron laughed. She had obviously been joking.

“Do you believe in that stuff?” Fab found herself sitting at the table instead of heading for the shower as she’d intended. Cam had interrupted her plan. Scrambled her frequency.

Cam shrugged, her smirk mischievous but noncommittal. “My grandma, a church-twice-a-week Catholic, always said she didn’t believe in *brujería*, but she respected it.” She chuckled to herself. “Meanwhile she kept her small *Santa Barbara* statuette supplied with Red Delicious apples, rum, and cigars. Not exactly Pope sanctioned.” She laughed like she’d pointed out the incongruous beliefs before.

Fab had spent hours listening to Cameron talk about her grandmother. One of the first things they’d planned to do when they finished on the show was have Fab meet the person who meant the world to Cam. Like all of the plans they made, it never materialized, and now Fab would never meet her.

Ignoring her feelings of dejection and regret, Fab asked the question that had been weighing on her mind. “I saw the tattoo.” She forced down the lump in her throat with a hard, decisive gulp. “When?”

The light always blazing inside of Cam dimmed before it vanished. Fab was torn between wishing she hadn’t brought it up and wishing she knew how to comfort Cam without dismantling her castle walls.

Cam stopped her doodling and put down her pen. “Last year.”

Her voice was too soft, too small. Icy fingers wrapped around the column of Fab’s spine and squeezed. She wanted to ask if it had come back, but she

couldn't say the word. Intellectually, she understood it was just a word. That she couldn't breathe it into existence by speaking it, but it languished in her throat just the same.

"Was it . . . Did it come back?"

Cameron nodded. She knew what *it* was. The C-word to top all C-words.

A pang thundered in Fab's stomach and threatened to split it in two.

"She didn't want to go through the treatment again." Cam's eyes were fixed on the edge of the journal she'd started picking at. "She said she wanted to enjoy whatever time she had left."

Fab nodded. She knew how the cure could ravage a person nearly as badly as the disease. She'd watched her father, his huge, strong body, wither and waste while enduring the pain and misery of various aggressive treatments.

"They gave her three months," Cam's voice regained some of its body. "And she laughed in their faces and lived another really good two and a half years." She smirked, pride joining the sadness in her eyes.

"Was it hard?" Fab cleared her throat and tried to speak above a whisper. "Watching her not seek treatment?" She failed.

"I wish I could say I was all enlightened and supportive about it." Her nose wrinkled when she winced. "I begged for a while. Pledged. Bargained. All of that." She sighed, her shoulders unfurling. "But when she didn't budge, I realized I was the one that was going to have to accept it. I went to therapy. Got help letting go of what I wanted and accepted that she was making an informed decision for herself. I didn't want to waste the time I had with her worrying, so I made peace with it and got busy living every last minute with her."

Fab's chest throbbed like a sore thumb. Cam must have needed a massive amount of therapy to accept her grandmother's choice. With all the fight Cam had in her spirit, accepting defeat must have been horrific.

"You know, I used to tell her it wasn't fair that I missed the first fifty

years of her life.” Cam wiped away a tear. “I just always thought I’d get so much more time with her. She was so active, you know? So strong.”

The crack in Cam’s voice was a wrecking ball to Fab’s foundation. She found herself standing. Her sore legs primed to close the small space between them. To scoop Cam into her arms and suffocate the sadness before it could roar to life.

A sharp knock on the door stopped Fab before she could reach for Cameron.

“Lunch!” A PA announced as he crossed the threshold.

Irritated at the intrusion, even though they had zero expectation of privacy since the door’s lock had been disabled, Fab glared at him. It was useless. The PA didn’t make eye contact with her, and Cam had already dried her face and gotten to her feet.

“Thanks!” Cam called after the PA who dropped a tray on the tiny kitchen counter and disappeared.

With her sweet expression in place once again, Cam lifted the cloche and smiled. “Fish tacos.”

Fab didn’t know how Cam was capable of hiding so much under such a light, bright exterior. Despite her previous treachery, she knew Cam’s love for her grandmother was genuine, or at least it was the truest of the lies she’d told her. How could she hide it all away so quickly? Was her mask always so accessible?

A sour, queasy feeling choked Fab from the inside. Her ability to be so sweet, so disarming, it’s what fooled Fab the first time. It was the wedge that parted her with her rightful prize money.

Fab tried to access her rage, to remember the lies, the humiliation, the theft. It was more useless than when they’d tried to light a match one-handed. The spark flashed and sputtered but it just wouldn’t catch.

CHAPTER 21



CAMERON BUCKLED her life jacket while Fab did the same. In their matching black one-piece bathing suits, they were nearly ready to take on the latest pair of bewildered challengers.

This time, they were meeting their opponents on a long dock snaking into the still, clear ocean. At the end of the pier was a tall platform leading up to two zip-lines. The long, sloping cables connected to a structure floating what seemed like several miles off shore.

Another million miles beyond the floating dock was an orange buoy with an orange flag flying out of its top. Unless some kayaks materialized, it was going to be a hell of a long swim.

Nerves raced and replicated in Cam's body, but she hid the trembling in her fingers by fidgeting with her safety gear.

Could they really beat another test? And another? And another? As the contestants dwindled, they were going to start coming up against the best. Those people who lost by chance or misfortune — not because they lacked skill.

"He's hurt," Fab whispered while pretending to adjust one of her straps. "The taller one. He's laying off that right foot. It could be his ankle."

Cam nodded. She understood the purpose of the information. If she saw a chance to use that injury against him, she would.

The afternoon was cloudless and extremely hot. The longer they stood under the blazing sun, the more eager Cam was to get in the water. She didn't care if they had to spend all day swimming, she just needed to get out of the sun before she sweated off all her sunblock and burnt up like a bagel forgotten in the office toaster.

She was wishing for a breeze when Janette materialized from one of the crew tents. In a broad, oversized straw hat the color of her coral dress, she was stunning.

“Are we ready?” Janette asked, her skin smooth and perspiration free.

It wasn't a real question, but Cam smiled and straightened.

Next to her, Fab was motionless. Her expression nearly cold enough to drop the temperature below heatstroke levels.

A warmth Cam couldn't blame on the sun spread across her chest. She loved the ridiculous persona Fab took on for the show. It was so over the top serious and intense.

No one would guess that beneath that cutthroat, icy exterior was a woman who loved sappy romances and had a huge heart for anything covered in fur. That she was terrified of the dark and scary movies. That she'd rather jump out of a plane than endure being tickled.

The warmth turned into a tingle spreading over her reddening skin. Only Cam knew what lay beneath Fab's shell. Knew the woman who loved to fall asleep to the sound of her soft singing. Knew how fiercely and completely she loved.

When Cam snapped back to what was going on around her, Janette was already talking to the camera, explaining their mission to the future audience.

“To stay in the game, your team will have to reach that buoy five *thousand* meters from the starting point.”

Cam's eyes widened. A roughly three mile swim was longer than what she'd had to do to complete the Ironman Triathlon. Two and a half miles had taken her over ninety minutes to finish. When she'd clawed her way onto the

sandy Panama City Beach, she was sapped. Like her bones had been replaced with boiled spaghetti.

“Any way you slice it, this is going to be a serious test of your endurance.” Janette grinned. “But, if you work together, you can cut down that swim considerably.”

The zip-line handles gleamed in the sunlight.

What’s the catch, Janette?

“The teams will have a choice of diving off the pier, or electing one member of the team to hold onto the zip-line while the other clings to them as best they can. Choose wisely. Your time only stops once both team members reach the buoy.”

Cam imagined doing a baby koala impression while holding onto Fabiola. She had to admit Fab had the superior upper body strength and the better odds of hanging on as long as possible. But the strain of carrying Cam’s body weight plus the risk of getting hurt while falling didn’t make the zip-line immediately attractive.

“That’s a long swim.” Fab pretended to scratch her face so she could shield her mouth while she whispered.

The doubt in Fab’s voice was audible.

Zip-line it is.

Cam scratched her nose with her thumb, concealing her lips. “Backpack?”

The shake of Fab’s head was so quick it was nearly imperceptible. She wanted Cam to climb on the front. Knowing Fab, she’d already run through every scenario in her mind and figured out the pros and cons.

Trusting her judgment, Cam was ready to jump on her and go. No time wasted.

“Let’s find out who will survive this elimination, shall we?” Janette blew her golden whistle.

Without a moment’s hesitation, Fab sprinted down the dock with Cam

right behind her. Their male opponents were only a second behind, but it was enough for Cam and Fab to block their path down the dock. Unless they were willing to shove them out of the way, the guys weren't going to get to the zip-lines first.

Cam didn't know how good their challengers were at swimming, but she didn't want to take any chances. They were tall and looked strong and that's all she needed to know. A swim like this required more than sheer strength, but they could cover a lot of ground even with less-than-perfect technique.

Fab didn't need to say a word for Cam to follow her onto the platform at the end of the long pier. As if there weren't any cameras watching them, Fab squatted a little before grabbing Cam's butt with both hands and jerking her off her feet.

Before their opponents could finish arguing about their tactics, Cam was wrapping her arms around Fab's neck and her legs around her waist. It wasn't the first time Fab had picked her up like this, and Cam wondered if it showed.

Closing her eyes to ignore the fact that they were easily ten feet above the water, Cam buried herself in Fab's neck. The scent of her sunblock mixed with the sheen of perspiration covering them both.

God, she smells so freaking good.

"Hold on tight," Fab whispered, her voice low and husky against the shell of Cam's ear.

When Fab stretched her arms to reach for the handles, Cam locked her ankles and adjusted her grip on the back of Fab's life vest. She tightened her core and prepared for the jerk when they dropped onto the line. The transition to the zip-line was going to be a crucial moment. One they had to survive if they wanted to shorten their marathon swim.

Fab jumped off the platform before their opponents agreed on who was going to drive and who was going to play human tick. Their cursing faded as Fab and Cam sliced through the thick humidity like a knife into a wedding cake.

“You good?”

Cam was so securely ensconced around Fab’s body that she could hang on for the full five thousand meters if the cable stretched that far.

“I’m good. How are your arms?”

“Just fine.”

Cam heard the smirk on Fab’s face even if she couldn’t see it.

“We’re halfway there,” Fab said as if she knew Cam’s eyes were shut tight. “When we land, wait until I have my balance before you jump off.”

Cam smiled. “You just want me all over you as long as possible. All that top energy. Some things never change.”

Fab tensed. “We will waste time if you fall.”

“Sure, that’s why.” Cam laughed.

Fab didn’t protest as they continued zipping through the air. She probably appreciated the breeze as much as Cam did. Cam couldn’t help but wonder if she enjoyed the proximity, too.

Close enough to graze Fab’s neck with her lips, she wondered if Fab was still sensitive there. If running her teeth along her skin could still make her moan. If it could still unravel her resolve.

“We’re almost there,” Fab said softly, almost wistfully. “Get ready.”

Cam tightened her core again and prepared not to get knocked off by the sudden change in momentum.

When they hit the bottom of the zip line, Fab swung forward, her body jerking as she released a loud *huh*.

Cam opened her eyes and hopped off Fab before landing on the small platform. “They’re halfway down the line.”

Without turning around to confirm for herself, Fab dove headfirst off the small, floating dock and into the water. Cam shook out her legs and jumped in after her.

The water was refreshing and invigorating and cool. As Cam glided through it, she was sure no one was going to swim better than her.

“Slow down!” Cam called to the tornado kicking up an obscene amount of water ahead of her. “You’re going to gas out with those quick, short strokes! Keep your stroke long and steady!”

Instead of shouting at her or arguing, Fab stopped and looked back at her. Her silence made it clear she was waiting for Cam to show her what she meant. Fab might have the strength of a Navy Seal, but Cam was much better at both swimming and endurance. This was her wheelhouse.

“Like this.” She demonstrated the technique that had gotten her across more than one triathlon finish line.

With surprising grace, Fab mimicked the breathing pattern and body position that would get her much further than raw power.

In minutes, they were moving like synchronized dolphins. If their opponents ever made it into the water, Cam and Fab were too far away to hear it.

CHAPTER 22



LAYING on her bed like a discarded starfish, Cam was too tired to move. She wasn't the only one. Judging by Fab's similar position on her own bed, she still hadn't recovered from the marathon swim the day before.

"How is it already so hot in here?" Cam moved nothing but her eyes as she checked the time on the microwave. "It's barely ten in the morning." She wondered the same thing nearly every morning.

Fab, wearing a blue one-piece bathing suit instead of her usual winter-wear, groaned as if she was too weak to verbalize a response.

Thanks to the rain, they'd had to close the windows. Without the salty, ocean breeze, the fan was just not enough to cool the room.

"Why am I so sticky? I just showered." Cam touched the thigh exposed by her smallest shorts, her elephant tattoo staring back at her. Even in just a sports bra and running shorts, she was drenched. The bungalow was like a sauna.

Every muscle in Cam's body ached when she sat up. "You wanna go outside? It has to be better than this."

Fab furrowed her brow as if to say *it's raining*.

"Come on." Cam grumbled like an old man plopping into his favorite chair as she straightened. "There's not any lightning. Sitting in the rain has to be better than baking in here. I feel like I'm in a convection oven."

Dark eyes studied her while she stood at the edge of Fab's bed awaiting a verdict.

At least she's considering it. That's progress.

"You're already in your bathing suit." Cam always found it best to appeal to Fab's reason.

"Only because I might actually die in here." Fab rolled onto her side without complaining about the pain, but Cam was sure she was hurting too.

"You'd think with all the times we've won, we'd earn a visit from the physical therapist." Cam pulled open the sliding door to get pelted by thin, needle-like rain drops. The rush of wind was an absolute miracle.

"Or one of those massage guns," Fab agreed, taking a deep breath when she stepped onto the deck behind Cam.

Immediately, Fab crumpled onto the wooden deck as if standing was too much effort. Cam did the same, but there wasn't enough room for her to lay next to her like she'd like. Instead, she laid facing the opposite direction, her head a foot away from Fab's head.

"This feels so good." Cam sighed, the light but steady rain peppering her overheated skin and cooling it in the most amazing way. "I might just sleep out here."

"I might join you." Fab tilted her chin, putting her long, smooth neck on display.

"I swear I'll never complain about being hot in Miami ever again. At least everywhere you go there's AC blasting." Cam closed her eyes and relished the feeling of steam fleeing her body. "It's like the first time I've been able to breathe since we got booted from the resort."

They laid like that for so long, basking in relief, that Cam started to drift off to sleep.

"I was positive it was going to be a cold-climate setting," Fab whispered. "Obviously, I was wrong."

Cam smiled, turning her head to look at her again. "And it didn't occur to

you to bring a mix of clothes in case that hunch was off?”

Fab’s eyes were closed and her expression neutral. She looked so very at ease. “It was a very convincing hunch.”

“Well, no one has ever accused you of doing anything half-assed. You’re full-ass or bust.”

The corner of Fab’s lip twitched.

“I wasn’t prepared to battle the boredom,” Cam confessed. “I’m usually so consumed by the social game time just flies by, but now, it’s like every second feels like a freaking hour, and I would kill for fifteen minutes of crushing candy.”

Fab shrugged, leading Cam to wonder whether she knew she was looking at her. “Extroverts usually have the advantage here. This isolation is difficult, but less taxing than navigating a house full of personalities all trying to play a role. Trying to wrestle away the most camera time.”

“Well . . . I don’t know how many introverts sign up for reality television shows.”

“Maybe fewer just get selected.”

“True. I don’t think shy plays great on TV. You have to be okay with all your business being out there and half the world seeing your naked bits blurred out.”

Fabiola made a sound that Cam took as a chuckle. “Being shy and being an introvert are not the same thing. Extroverts never understand.”

“Explain it to me then, Dr. Santos.”

“Anyone can be shy. That’s more about having anxiety in social situations or being more easily embarrassed or having a fear of the unknown. Being an introvert means interacting with people drains me while it gives you energy. I recharge by spending time alone or with people who don’t deplete me.”

“Oh.” Cam closed her eyes again. “That makes sense.” After a while, Cam couldn’t resist the urge to talk. “If you were a dog, what kind of dog

would you be?”

“What?”

Cam winced at Fab’s tone. The one that said grow-up-this-is-dumb-you’re-about-to-turn-thirty-who-asks-these-questions.

“Never mind. I saw the opportunity to play a game or something. You know . . . in case they do one of those trivia things where they suspend one of us a million feet above the water, ready to send us plunging to our deaths if we don’t know enough about each other.” The lie came together while Cam’s mouth moved.

“And you think they’ll ask me what kind of dog you think you’d be?” Fab’s matter-of-fact question landed like a plate shattering on the floor.

“Well, when you say it like that . . . it sounds ridiculous.”

Focusing on how good the rain felt on her exposed skin, Cam gave up on trying to make conversation. Fab could probably go the rest of the day without saying a word and not mind. She’d always known she was reserved, but never realized she found interacting with people exhausting.

“Jack Russell Terrier.” Fab’s voice yanked Cam out of the nap she was happily drifting into.

Cam turned her head to face her. “What?”

Fab was already looking at her. Her dark ponytail black and her tanned skin covered in beads of rain. “Dog breed.”

Rolling over to her side, Cam propped herself up on her elbow, ignoring the pain in her body. “You think I’m a terrier? Aren’t they all yappy and annoying?”

Fab tucked her hand behind her head, her well-defined bicep bulging. “They are intelligent, lively, happy, and very athletic.”

Cam cocked her head to the side. It was an unconventional compliment, but one she would happily accept. “I think you’d be a German Shepherd. Protective as hell, smart, confident, and loyal.”

Appearing satisfied with the comparison, Fabiola nodded. Her expression

was so relaxed, her eyes the boundless brown they used to be without the simmering rage. Maybe the stifling heat had broken her resolve to hate her.

Laying back on the wet deck, Cameron smiled.

CHAPTER 23



AFTER THREE STRAIGHT days of constant rain, their sixth challenge was upon them. Competing at night meant they didn't have the unbearable heat to contend with, although the bugs could be even more of a pain.

Fab liked their odds better at night. Their opponents would've had a long day. They'd be physically and mentally drained. More likely to make mistakes. She wouldn't admit it aloud, but Cameron wasn't wrong to be concerned. Winning so many tests and obstacles in a row was not going to be easy. They had to play perfectly. Work as a unit without making a single misstep.

While Fab sat on one of the bistro chairs tying her shoes, the sound of Cameron's singing floated out of the shower. Fab took a deep breath and absorbed the hit to her chest.

Cam knew Dolly Parton's *Jolene* was one of her absolute favorite songs. Especially when Cam sang it in that raspy, bare way she did.

Fab closed her eyes and let the chorus wash over her. Even filtered through the door, it still made the fine hairs on her arms respond with a standing ovation.

She imagined Cam, her eyes closed as she rinsed shampoo from her hair. Her face scrunched up while she sang. Fab hated missing her, but there was no use in denying that she did. That she loved the sound of her voice, the

softness of her touch, the comfort of her embrace.

By the time Cameron emerged from the shower in nothing but a towel, Fab was dressed in the long compression shorts and black t-shirt production dropped off that afternoon.

“Man, you’re quick,” Cam said as she crossed their small, shared space. Her hair was a little less pink each time she washed it.

Fab gritted her teeth to stop the flutter in her chest. The sight of Cam’s tattoos, the ones she used to trace with her fingertips, was always hard to swallow. She fled to the bathroom, leaving the door open to dissipate the steam.

In the mirror, she tried to focus on picking up her long, dark hair, but her attention kept drifting. Cam’s bare back. Perfectly muscular and well-defined was her Achilles heel.

Her eyes followed the letters etched along her spine. She couldn’t read the flowing script from across the room, but she remembered what it said. Her favorite Radiohead lyrics about growing useless wings.

They fit her perfectly. Cam had such a restlessness, Fab could easily imagine her sprouting massive, feathery wings and taking off. She should’ve known that Cam could never be caught.

“Do you need a hand?” Cam appeared behind her in nothing but her underwear. “With your hair.”

Fab hadn’t realized that she’d drifted off in her mind, leaving her hands uselessly at her side holding a brush and hairband.

“No.”

Cam replied with a little shrug. “Okay.” She grabbed a jar of hair product and went to the other mirror near the front door.

Focus, she chastised herself, staring at the thin, gold septum piercing Cam left in the little dish by the sink.

An hour later, they were standing in the clearing that had become their arena. Rested after their endurance test, Fab was ready to take on just about

anything the producers had to throw at her.

Standing together, the two teams had been placed in front of two very long and relatively tall objects covered by equally long sheets of canvas.

“What do you think it is?” Cam whispered.

Fab shook her head, unsure of what obstacle lay beneath the sheets. “A tunnel?” She wasn’t confident in her guess. That didn’t fit the work-together-or-fail theme. She shielded her mouth with her hand and whispered again. “Maybe one person has to move through it while blindfolded and taking direction?”

Cam wrinkled her nose. “Another blindfold, you think?”

Fab tilted her head to the side. Production usually liked variety. They’d already done two challenges blindfolded.

“No safety gear,” Fab observed, her attention focused on trying to divine what the canvas was hiding.

Next to them, the pair of female opponents went from bickering to outright shouting.

“If I go home because of you, I swear to God, Tina—”

“You swear what? It’s not my fault you can’t shut your mouth for more than ten freaking seconds. If you just listened to me—”

“I’m happy to listen to you. If we’re tasked with how to sleep with everybody’s boyfriend.”

“That was two years ago, Kelly! Let it go! Or better yet, why don’t you take it up with your ex-boyfriend since he’s the dirtbag who broke your trust, not me!”

Fab glanced at Cam, silently asking *is that what we look like? Wasting valuable time fighting about the past while ignoring the present?*

With a roll of her eyes, Cam agreed that they sounded ridiculous.

“Welcome ladies,” Janette said when she appeared in the clearing. “This is our first all-female elimination. Tina and Kelly, you’re going to be facing Fabiola and Cameron tonight. If you beat them, you live to fight another day.

If you lose, you go home and these two continue a rather impressive winning streak.” Janette tipped her head in their direction.

Cam straightened, making her two inch height advantage appear wider. She was proud of what they’d managed.

“If each team would take their places, please.”

Fab followed Cam to their marks. Standing together at either side of one of the obstacles, Fab could only see the top of Cam’s head. Was the obstacle itself obscuring their view so they didn’t need to be blindfolded?

Janette gave a signal and a crew member jogged up to them. With a pull, he yanked the canvas before running off. Behind him, the heavy fabric created the ugliest wedding gown train.

What he revealed was a twenty-foot long maze fit for a mischief of rats.

“What the hell is this?” Cam muttered.

Fab didn’t have an answer. The only thing she could think of was the *Mouse Trap* game she’d seen on TV as a kid. There was a series of tall spires connecting a strange collection of hurdles.

“Each team will have to get two of these,” Janette held up a small, white ping pong ball, “from one side of the obstacle course to the other. To do that, you’ll have to use the tools provided.”

Fab glanced down at the table where a long, thin stick with the tiniest disk attached to the end was waiting. Balancing a ball on the end of it would be hard enough, but to keep it on there while moving was going to be a nightmare.

“A couple of rules,” Janette continued with a grin. “You cannot move on from a section without your partner. Sections are divided by these funnels where you place the ball when you complete each obstacle. Think of them as checkpoints to save your progress. If you get ahead without your teammate, you must start again from the beginning. If you drop the ball, you must go back to the last checkpoint. First team to get two balls across the finish line wins.”

She made it sound so simple that Fab knew to be concerned. Flexing her hands, she looked at Cam through the gaps in the first obstacle that looked like an abacus with spaces on alternating ends. Balancing a ball while moving down and around without tipping their hands was going to be difficult.

“Steady breaths,” Cam said, apparently picking up on Fab’s anxiety. “One bite at a time, yeah? Don’t look at the whole elephant or you’ll get overwhelmed.”

“When I blow the whistle,” Janette explained from her place between the two mazes. “You will drop your ball in the first funnel and catch it when it gets spit out at the bottom. The only time you can touch your ball is to drop it in the funnels. If you touch it before you complete a section, you’ll have to start all over.”

Cam and Fab exchanged concerned looks. This was going to be a test of focus, dexterity, and patience.

“Ready?” Janette put her whistle between her teeth.

They each grabbed a ball. Solid and heavier than expected, Fab hoped that would make it easier to keep on the flat surface at the end of the long stick.

“You first,” Fab whispered.

Cam nodded, obviously aware that she had superior balance and steady hands.

When Janette blew the whistle, Cam dropped her ball in the long, vertical tube and prepared to catch it at the bottom. It proved to be impossible. Attempt after attempt, neither of them managed to catch the ball on the flat disk, much less get the chance to balance it.

Twenty sweaty minutes later, they were no closer to getting out of the starting line. Behind them, their opponents weren’t fairing any better. By the sound of it, they’d stopped trying and elected to scream and insult each other instead.

“This is impossible.” Cam dropped her stick on the table and used the

bottom of her t-shirt to dry her face.

Fab took a step back, putting her stick down too. She knew the obstacles were always vetted by several people. It was meant to be difficult, but not unachievable. They had to be missing something.

Resting her open palms on the edge of the table, Fab leaned in. Through the frame of the first obstacle, Cam held her gaze. “We’re not working together.”

Cam’s eyes darted from side to side as she re-evaluated the obstacle between them. Her quick mind was churning the data.

“Janette didn’t say we had to get the balls across at the same time. Just that we had to do it twice.” Cam picked up her stick.

Understanding, Fab ran through Janette’s rules. They’d made assumptions.

“Cover the end of the funnel.” Fab grabbed her stick too.

With her eye on the producer in charge of the game, Fab dropped the ball at the top of the tube. He didn’t stop her.

Instead of the ball flying out of the end unable to be caught, Cam kept it at the end of the funnel.

“Hold it on that side,” Cam said, her blue eyes wild with excitement.

When they sandwiched the ball between their paddles, the producer didn’t stop them. Quietly, so the other team wouldn’t catch on that they’d figured out the trick, Fab and Cam moved through the obstacle. With the ball secure, they didn’t need to worry about balance. All they had to do was maintain the right amount of pressure and move together.

Using the right technique, they flew through the obstacles.

“That’s one for Fabiola and Cameron!” Janette called when they dropped their ball into the final funnel and it landed in a black cup with a satisfying *plop*.

Their opponents looked up from where they hadn’t managed to get out of the first obstacle. Fab resisted the urge to cheer. It wasn’t done until Janette

blew her whistle.

CHAPTER 24



POUNGING rain escorted them from the production van to the bungalow. The lightning show and percussive thunder didn't start until after they were in their beds coming down from the high of winning.

"It sounds like a hurricane out there," Cam decided, rain and wind assaulting the closed shutters in an unrelenting and unnerving barrage. "You think they'd come get us if we were at risk of blowing away?"

In the low light of the lamp Fab kept dimmed all night, Cam could only make out Fab's outline. Her covers were bunched up at the bottom of her bed and she was laying in her underwear sprawled out trying to get cool.

"Maybe after they captured some moment of high drama destruction," Fab replied in a tone Cam couldn't decipher.

Ambivalent? Playful? Irked?

"I can't wait for it to stop storming so I can lay outside again," Cam mused.

Fab groaned. "Bugs. We're going to need a mosquito net."

Lightning filled the dark room with a flash of bright, white light before thunder boomed like a cannon had been shot outside their door. Their fan stopped whirling and the light from Fab's lamp disappeared.

Plunged into total darkness and complete silence, Cam cursed.

The heat accumulated quicker than the lightning flash. Like an enemy

wronged, the thick, night air saw its opportunity to pounce. It's hot and sticky hands curled over Cam's body, gripped her chest, and squeezed.

"A power outage? Really?" She complained before registering that Fab hadn't made a sound. It wasn't her normal stoicism, she wasn't even breathing.

Scrambling out of bed, Cam crossed the room in a few leaps. Unable to see, she crashed into Fab's bed, slamming her knee into the footboard. Pain shot up her thigh, but she didn't stop.

"You're okay," Cam said as she slid in next to her in the small space.

Fab didn't move. Her hot, sticky body motionless where she lay on her side facing Cam.

"It's so dark," Fab whispered, a tremble starting in her shoulders.

"Hey, you're okay. You're not alone. Shove over. Feel the wall against your back."

Fab wiggled back and Cam occupied the newly empty space with her body. Both in their underwear, their skin stuck together uncomfortably, but Cam still pressed completely against her, nearly crushing her, despite the heat. Despite the awkward proximity.

"Close your eyes," Cam whispered, her arms around Fab's upper body in a move that was more straitjacket than cuddle. "I got you. Let's do some breathing exercises while we wait for them to get the power back on, yeah? I'm sure they'll find a generator or something."

After some long, deep breaths, Fab stopped shaking. "I hate this shit."

"At least the cameras are out too." Cam wanted desperately to get Fab's mind on something other than the dark. She took a risk. "Imagine what we would have done to get five minutes away from them *and* in a bed?"

"Cameron, are you seriously bringing that up right now?"

There was a playful edge to Fab's voice. It was hard to find, but Cam knew where to look.

"What?" She smirked. "Are you saying you wouldn't have traded gym

equipment and air conditioning for a moment like this? For time alone anywhere but that production closet?”

Fab was quiet, but it wasn't the same terrified silence as earlier. She was thinking, and as she did, her body relaxed in Cam's arms.

Rain pounded the shutters in unrelenting waves so intense, Cam imagined the water coming up from the usually calm sea and swallowing them. She softened her vice grip, but kept her chin propped on the top of Fab's head.

“Doing *everything* standing up did get a little . . . tedious,” Fab finally admitted, keeping her tone as tight and veiled as a world class poker player.

Cam grinned. Taking a massive gamble, she ran her fingers through Fab's hair. Since it was in a ponytail, she couldn't do more than smooth it back.

“The sneaking around was kind of exciting though. Remember that time we almost got caught?” An image of her kneeling in front of Fab rushed to the front of her mind turning the stifling room another degree warmer. “That Lucy was so nosey and always looking for you.” She recalled the blonde that nearly blew their cover. Instead of giving up when she couldn't find Fab, she searched every inch of the house. They'd heard her voice through the closed door and held perfectly still until she left.

“You sound jealous.” Fab's tone finally betrayed something . . . her amusement.

“And so what if I was? Lucy needed to back the hell up. She didn't know who she was messing with.”

Fab chuckled, the sound easing the tension in Cam's shoulders. “Were you going to tell her that if she found us in the closet?”

“Well. . .” Cam smiled again before leaning back and scooting down to lay her head on the pillow. Even if she couldn't see Fab in the dark, she still wanted to face her now that she seemed a little more relaxed. “If I recall . . . I was a little busy to talk.”

Cam could feel Fab's smirk, even when she couldn't see it. She apparently remembered the moment as well as Cam did.

Sliding her hand down Fab's face, she ran her fingertips along her jaw. "Would you endure a cyclone to be back in that closet?"

"Cam. . ."

Cam's heart did a jumping jack and expanded in her chest. She'd said *Cam*. Not Cameron with the hard *r* that punched her in the gut. *Cam*.

"What?" The question came out in a rasp so soft she wasn't sure she'd said it out loud.

"We can't. . ." Fab's whisper was tentative, unsure.

"Why not?" Cam leaned closer, feeling the warmth of Fab's breath, the gravitational pull of her lips.

"*I* can't." Fab corrected herself, her voice pleading.

Cam gripped the back of Fab's neck where her hair was damp with sweat. "You can." She hovered so close to her mouth. A place she never thought she'd be again, but that she needed more than air.

Footfalls on the deck shattered their bubble. The sound of voices shouting over the rain and heavy equipment landing outside their window. A hard knock from production sent Cam leaping out of Fab's bad.

A second later, a flashlight blinded her.

"Don't worry ladies, we're getting a generator installed. We'll have power back in no time," a man shouted into their room, letting in rain and disappointment.

"Great," Cam lied.

CHAPTER 25



THE EVENING SKY was dark and foreboding. It matched the strange vibe coming from the crew milling around the clearing.

Everything in Fab's body was on high alert. Too aware of her surroundings. Too primed for fight or flight.

"What do you think its going to be?" Cam's voice was low and warm against the shell of her ear.

Fab shook her head without shifting her eyes from where the obstacle should be. There was nothing in the clearing but a thick, blue tarp on the ground. Nothing to indicate what they would have to do to survive another few days. All she could imagine was an Olympic-sized swimming pool under the tarp.

The male-female pair of opponents they were competing against didn't seem to have the gimmick figured out either. From their spot across from them on the sidelines, they looked just as confused.

Fab was about to start working out the problem aloud, hoping that puzzling it out with Cam would help, when a producer sauntered toward them.

"We need to take one of you," he said, a black cap casting a shadow over his face thanks to the bright, stadium lights.

"For what?" Fab snapped.

“Can’t say.” He averted his eyes.

“Jim—” Fab started, but he didn’t let her finish.

“I can’t tell you,” he insisted, his gaze flashing to her and then away. “I suggest Cam,” he mouthed soundlessly before striding away. “Let’s go!” He called over his shoulder.

Cam started after him, but Fab reached for her arm before she could get away.

“Wait. You don’t know what the task is.” Fab didn’t like the tightness in her chest or the churning in her stomach. She didn’t like making a decision without all the facts.

“It’s okay. I doubt its a heights thing.” Cam looked up at the sky, and pointed out the absent scaffolding.

“What if its jumping out of a plane or cliff diving or—”

“Then they’d probably be taking both of us. Jim is a good guy. I trust him.”

Fab’s attention darted between Cam’s brilliant blue eyes and the back of Jim’s head. She didn’t like the sober expression on the crew’s face. Something was off, amiss, wrong.

“It’s gonna be fine.” Cam squeezed the hand Fab left clamped around Cam’s arm. “Trust me.”

Cam and the male half of the other team were taken to the center of the clearing. With each step Cam took, Fab’s breath turned more and more shallow. By the time Cam hit her mark on one end of the enormous tarp, Fab was nearly panting.

Janette appeared in her bright, yellow dress, but it was the dimness in her expression that Fab zeroed in on.

What the hell are they going to do to us?

“Here we are again.” Janette addressed the camera, turning on her presenter energy. Fab could still see the hesitation in her eyes. There was an alien awkwardness. “Tonight, our new challengers are going to try their hand

at toppling the undefeated champions of these elimination games.” Janette smiled but it went no further than her lips.

With the tip of her head, the crew pulled on a pair of ropes to drag the tarp off screen. Squinting, Fab tried to make sense of what it revealed. There was nothing but a couple of pits in the ground.

Are they filled with something?

She stood on her toes trying desperately to gather more information.

The sudden roar of an engine demanded everyone’s attention. Everyone except for Janette looked toward the sound. From the darkness of the surrounding trees, a dump truck appeared. A dump truck carrying a massive mound of dirt. A dump truck driving in reverse toward the holes that were starting to look like graves.

A shock of cold ravaged Fab’s body before she went numb. There was no way they were going to do what it looked like they were going to do.

Another truck, this one a flatbed, appeared from another dark corner. Its cargo was more horrifying than the dirt. Long, rectangular crates. Coffins.

“To survive,” Janette continued, “one team member will be buried alive.” She paused and looked off to the side as if giving someone a cue.

What the hell else—

The thought was decapitated by the appearance of a third vehicle. A pickup truck bringing an unknown fresh hell to a nightmare scenario.

Fab’s thoughts were a tangled rush of fragmented and increasingly frantic thoughts. How the hell was she going to get Cam out of there? What was the game? It couldn’t just be how long they could take it. That didn’t feature a teamwork element.

“Buried alive,” Janette repeated, her eyes wide as if she couldn’t believe what she was going to say next. “Inside one of these coffins,” she gestured toward the flatbed truck where the boxes were standing on full display. When they opened it, a set of bindings became visible. One set for the hands and one for the feet. “And inside the coffins, you will have your hands and feet

shackled for safety.” She nodded again and the pickup’s tailgate dropped dramatically. “Not for *your* safety, but for the friends you’ll be sharing the space with.”

Glass tanks, at least a dozen of them, were full of snakes. Colorful, huge, terrifying snakes.

“No.” Fab left her mark, not caring about ruining a shot, she marched toward the production tent prepared to do battle. “Absolutely not.”

She’d started a revolution. Behind her, the opposing team was shouting. The male half who was set to be bolted down and lowered into his grave sounded like a crazed banshee. Fab didn’t check to see what Cam was doing. She didn’t need to know. Putting anyone in this situation was actual lunacy.

Jim, the producer who’d suggested Cam play living corpse, was the first person in charge Fab found.

“What the hell?” Fab charged toward him.

Gripping his walkie-talkie like a stress ball, Jim met her halfway between the clearing and the tents.

“It’s safe,” he insisted before Fab started voicing her complaints. “This is more mental than physical. You know we wouldn’t—”

“Tying someone down and burying them alive with a box full of snakes is safe? Are you absolutely insane?” Fab’s pulse was thumping so hard in her throat she didn’t recognize her own voice.

“Listen, they’re not venomous,” he whispered, his eyes sweeping the surroundings as if evaluating whether the shitshow was going to turn into a rave. “The only way the animal people would sanction our use of the snakes was to ensure y’all couldn’t hurt them. Only way we can do that is by keeping y’all immobile. They’re afraid one of you will panic and kick ‘em or something. They’re real docile, *Fabiola*. There’s nothing to worry about.”

“Nothing to worry about?” Fab gestured behind her. “Have you actually seen this?”

“We test everything. Over and over. We wouldn’t put y’all in harm’s way

—”

“And how is she supposed to breathe down there?” Fab shrieked, incredulous that Jim was pretending not to understand how their design crossed the line.

“They’ll have oxygen, okay? And we’ve got monitors in there to make sure no one is going to suffocate. There’s even shit in there to keep the snakes breathing.”

Fab shook her head instead of shaking Jim. “Absolutely not—”

“Y’all don’t have to do it, but if you refuse, you forfeit. You might want to talk to your partner before you go making decisions for her.” He looked around again. “I did you a solid, alright?”

Rage turned Fab around like a rudder. Tearing off into a sprint, she joined the chaos around the twin pits. Their opponents were still shouting, mostly the guy tasked with doing a dry run of his funeral. Producers and crew members were trying to get him to calm down, but they might as well have been trying to put out a fire with kerosene.

Cam was absolutely silent. Her blue eyes wide as she stared at the snakes.

“They’re not venomous and apparently friendly,” Fab said abruptly as she jogged up to her. “You don’t have to do this. We’d have to forfeit, but—”

She shook her head, her pale, pink braid resting on her shoulder. “I’m not going to give up. They’ve got lawyers, remember? I’m sure they vetted the hell out of this.” Cam’s face was pale but determined. She was scared but brave.

“It’s going too far,” Fab insisted. “I don’t want you to do this.”

Cam’s lips eased into a tiny smile. Just the corners of her lips. Just enough for Fab to see. “There’s no way I’m going to quit on you.” She reached out and squeezed Fab’s hand, pulling away before Fab could really register her touch. “We got this, okay? This guy is about to shit his pants.” She gestured at the opponent still throwing a tantrum while surrounded by production, Janette included.

“He and I both,” Fab confessed.

“We just have to work together, no matter what, okay?” Cam flashed a smirk. “Plus, I’ve always wanted to be tied up.”

Cam’s weak attempt to defuse Fab’s fears by flirting was a haymaker to the heart. Fab didn’t want her to be worried about her, Cam needed to be thinking about herself. She was the one facing an incredible challenge.

“I don’t know what I’m going to have to do to get you out of there—”

Cam’s hand, warm and steady clutched her hand again. This time, Fab felt every nerve-tingling second of her touch. “No matter what it is, I’m sure you’re going to get me out faster than humanly possible.”

Her eyes were so open, so vulnerable, so trusting. How could Cam be so sure that Fab would move heaven and literal earth for her? She could punish her now. Choose to take her time. To make her squirm and suffer. After all the years she’d spent calling her a snake, letting her roil around with them would be poetic justice.

But there was no satisfaction. No just desserts. All Fab had was a sick feeling in her stomach and a pain in her chest so extreme she wasn’t entirely sure she wasn’t having a heart attack.

“You’re going to get me out, okay?” Cam raised a blonde brow. “I know you are. And I’m going to be just fine.”

It was nearly an hour before the teams took their places again. Janette had to explain again to the audience about the coffins, and the shackles, and the snakes, and the mound of dirt that was going to be dropped on top of them.

Just the thought of complete darkness and the suffocatingly small space was enough to make Fab’s skin feel claustrophobic. There was no way she could do what Cam was doing. Absolutely no way.

“How will these two get out?” Janette asked the camera a rhetorical question. A crew member, who couldn’t bring himself to make eye contact with anyone, appeared with a pair of shovels. “They will have to answer trivia questions. Some will be general knowledge. Others will be about their

buried partner.”

Fab looked at Cam and prayed they were going to ask what kind of dog she would be. Cam felt her eyes on her and looked at her from across the clearing. She smiled as if trying to encourage her.

“The only way you can dig out your teammate is by answering questions correctly. Answer the first, get the shovel. Answer the next, you get to dig one shovel-full of dirt. Now, the amount you will get to dig will double each time you’re correct. First time you shovel it will be one. Then two. Then four. Then eight. Then sixteen.” Janette tipped her head to the side. “You get the picture. If you miss a question, you will be knocked back down to two scoops and you’ll have to work your way back up.” She paused. “It’s simple, but it won’t be easy.” She grabbed her whistle. “Let’s go.”

Fab couldn’t stand to watch Cam get secured in the coffin, a monitor strapped to her chest, an oxygen mask on her face, and a bright green tank nestled at her side. She kept her eyes on her feet while they piled in the snakes. She resisted the urge to puke when they lowered her into the hole, and nearly fainted when the dump truck screamed its hideous metallic screech as it tipped an endless ocean of dirt where the tarp had been. Where Cameron now lay in complete darkness several feet below the surface.

An itch started in Fab’s fingers and ran up her arms like a lightning storm. Cam was right, she would do absolutely anything to get her the hell out of there.

Fab and her opponent were positioned at the foot of the mound standing several feet high. Thankfully, it hadn’t been flattened. The fresh, dark soil was loose and easier to move. Even though it looked damp and heavy, at least it hadn’t been packed into the ground. She knew exactly where to dig, had made a mental note of where Cam’s pit was. She flexed her fingers, imagining heaping piles of dirt on the end of her shovel. She would make each shovel-full count for three.

Janette’s whistle trilled into the humid, night air.

CHAPTER 26



FAB STOOD PRIMED AND READY, her knees bent so she could run to the shovel sticking out of the dirt mound. She wouldn't waste a second.

"First question is for Beatriz," Janette said.

The woman next to Fab nodded. She didn't look upset or terrified. Fab considered that a calm demeanor might serve her better than the anxiety hijacking her own brain.

"Beatriz, what city was your partner born in?"

The petite brunette didn't answer immediately. Fab gritted her teeth, she didn't like having to wait for the other player's turn. She didn't have time to waste.

"Boston?" she guessed, looking like the shrug emoji.

"That's incorrect." Janette looked up from her cue cards and made eye contact with Fab. "Fabiola, same question. Where—"

"Nassau in the Bahamas." Fab didn't wait for confirmation before darting for the shovel. She knew the story of Cam's mother having gone into labor while on a cruise.

"Correct. Beatriz, name the seven continents."

Fab gripped the shovel's handle and prepared to dig in when it was her turn. She was not going to allow herself to get a question wrong. When Beatriz called Russia a continent, Fab bent her knees and got ready to bite a

huge chunk of dirt out of the crushing pile.

“Fabiola, what four presidents are carved into Mount Rushmore?”

“Washington, Jefferson, Roosevelt, and Lincoln.”

Janette laughed. “And in order too.”

Slicing into the soil, Fab heaved as much dirt as she could fit on the blade. When she dumped it behind her, a disheartening amount tumbled down from the top and took its place.

“Beatriz, your partner said *this* was his biggest weakness in the competition.”

The woman shook her head. “Swimming?”

Do you even know each other?

“I’m sorry, no. Fabiola, same—”

“Heights.”

Two more overloaded shovel-fulls of dirt left the mound.

Sweat poured into Fab’s eyes, stinging her as she kept her core muscles tight while shoveling. After half a dozen questions, Fab’s back and legs burned while her task remained daunting.

“*La Gioconda*, is the name of what famous Italian painting?”

Janette’s question whirled around Fab’s head like the bugs buzzing near her face. She had absolutely no idea. She was scouring every corner of her memory, but she couldn’t recall ever hearing that name before.

Panic choked her, acidic bile rising from her stomach. Italian. Famous. Those two facts should help her make an educated guess.

La means feminine. *Put a que pariu!* Come on!

Her brain spun but she didn’t know where to land.

Instead of reminding Fab that she had limited time to answer the question, Janette pressed her finger to her ear and trained her eyes on the mound.

Fear coiled like a cold, wet serpent in Fab’s stomach. Was Cam tapping out? Fab had answered every question as quickly as she could, but there was still so much earth left to move.

Drying her face with her dirty t-shirt Fab resisted the urge to cry. She couldn't falter. She had to remain strong. Steady. Dependable.

"Are you sure?" Janette asked as a camera operator moved in closer to get a tight shot of her concerned face.

A pause large enough to fill with eighty dump trucks elapsed. Fab chewed the inside of her cheek, her heart hammering so hard she imagined it breaking free from her chest and taking the shovel from her maddeningly still hands.

"Okay. Yep." Janette turned back to them, her expression dire. "Beatriz, your partner has informed us that he does not wish to go on. I'm sorry but this ends your chance at a half a million dollars."

Beatriz responded in a string of colorful curses so vile and vitriolic, Fab stood stunned for a second. But only one.

"Can I get her out?" Fab shouted to anyone who would answer.

No one replied. The crew descended on them, making a mad dash for the still large pile of dirt. In a sickening flash, Fab realized they didn't have a machine to get them out.

Without waiting for confirmation that the game was over, Fab started shoveling dirt like she'd been possessed by a badger. Engaging her entire body in the act of digging, she heard panicked voices from the crew.

"He's freaking out!"

"He says he's hyperventilating! I hear him gasping! Get the damn excavator!"

"The excavator is having mechanical trouble! They're working on it!"

"His vitals are through the roof! We need to get him out of there now!"

The last voice Fab recognized. It belonged to one of the paramedics.

"Help me! Cam is in there too!" Fab shouted at the dozen people using their hands to get to the guy's casket. No one was helping her rescue Cam.

"She's more stable than he is!" The paramedic shouted back, her arms deep in the dirt. They were all crazed dogs hunting for bones. "We're keeping her calm!"

“I don’t give a shit! Someone help me or I swear—”

“She needs help, assholes!” The camera operator on the other side of the slowly diminishing mound dropped her equipment. “Let’s go!” She shouted to the film crew who was trained to never get involved. It took seconds for them to abandon their positions and descend on Fab’s half of the pile.

“Tell her we’re coming!” Fab shouted at Janette, who she guessed might have access to Cam’s earpiece. “Tell her I’m getting her the hell outta there!”

Janette’s eyes were wide and dazed as if she was getting too much information at once. Like it was creating a traffic jam in her brain. After a beat, she nodded. Her finger to her ear as her mouth moved slowly.

Good. Don’t freak her out more than she already is.

Damp earth caked beneath Fab’s fingernails. It got in her hair, in her clothes, filled her sneakers and her nose and her mouth. But she didn’t slow until she was thigh-deep in the hole. Not even when the dirt seeped into her eyes along with the sweat running like a river from her forehead did she stop. Not even the pain in her back and shoulders could slow her down.

“I found it!” The camera operator who’d left her post first shouted when her nails scraped the wood of Fab’s coffin.

After another moment of aggressive shoveling, Fab cleared the area around the handle.

“Jump out!” The camera operator was already being pulled out of the hole when she shouted.

Grabbing blindly at a pair of arms reaching down to help, Fab vaulted out. She didn’t waste a second. Laying on her stomach, she reached into the pit, took hold of the handle and pulled.

Straining, Fab unleashed an animalistic scream as she tried to open the box. It wouldn’t budge.

“It’s stuck!” she yelled, desperate to free Cam.

More hands reached down to help. It took three of them, but with another full-body heave, the cheap plywood crate gave a satisfying crack.

In an instant, the snake handlers appeared, removing their wards before Fab could even get a good look at Cam.

As soon as the snakes were gone, Fab eased herself into the coffin. Cam was drenched in sweat like she'd been dunked in water. The oxygen mask on her face was fogged up and her fair skin flushed a troubling shade of dark red.

"You're okay," she promised Cam, even if she wasn't sure it was true.

With filthy, trembling fingers she unlocked the bands around her hands first. Cam ripped off the mask and sat up.

A heart shattering sob broke free from somewhere terrifyingly deep inside Cam's chest. Before Fab could untie her feet, Cam lunged her upper body forward, capturing Fab in something less like an embrace and more like a drowning person's frantic attempt to stay above the surface.

Dropping to her knees and straddling Cam's lap, Fab wrapped her arms around her and held her so tight, she was sure she was crushing her.

"It's okay, babe. You're out," Fab promised while Cam cried into her dirt-covered neck. The tears mingled with the sweat dripping down Fab's chest, making her itch, but Fab didn't move a muscle.

Cam's response was to cry harder. Her fingers digging into Fab's shoulder blades like she was trying to climb her way up a sheer cliff face.

Fab's festering rage at production's negligence took a backseat to the ache in her chest. She'd never wanted to absorb anyone's emotions before, but if she could, she would have happily swallowed the fear still causing Cam's body to shake so violently.

Unconcerned with the cameras, or the cramps building in her thighs, or the bedlam still going on somewhere above the pit, Fab held Cam until she stopped crying and then, for another few minutes after that.

CHAPTER 27



SHOWEDED AND STILL A LITTLE SHOCKED, Cam lay in Fab's bed, wrapped in Fab's duvet. Her scent. Her warmth.

A mild throb in her head still lingered, but Cam expected it to ease once she fell asleep.

Outside their bungalow door, Fab's voice thundered like a tropical storm. Cam winced at the sound of her shouted threats.

"Turn these cameras off until tomorrow, or I will sue every last one of you!"

Fab was indiscriminately throwing around terms like *duty-of-care* and *recklessness* and *damages*. Fab had probably talked more in the preceding twenty minutes than she had in the last year. She'd definitely cursed a lot more.

Cam didn't have the energy to strain to hear what the other person, or people, were saying in response. There was only Hurricane Fabiola and she was a category get-out-of-the-freaking-way.

When the door creaked on its hinges, Cam opened her eyes. The light was a stab through her optic nerve.

Fab, dressed in sweats and a long-sleeved T-shirt, was free from the dirt that had covered her head-to-toe when she pulled Cam out of the hideous coffin.

Compared to the sweltering crate she'd been trapped in, the breeze filtering through the open cabin windows made the room cool. Not cold enough to support Fab's winter wear, but comfortable.

"They're off." Fab pointed to the cameras suspended from the ceiling. The usual red light was gone. They weren't recording. "They'll stay off until tomorrow." She paced the small space between the two beds.

"Can you turn off the lights, please? And . . . will you lay down with me?" Cam's question came out much softer than she intended, but she didn't take it back. She waited, her gaze on Fab's dark eyes. The eyes that were shifting, scanning, assessing.

Clinging to Fab after she appeared out of the darkness with a halo of floodlights behind her had been the safest Cam had ever felt in her life. She wanted more of that. Just for a little while.

Fab nodded before kicking off her spare pair of sneakers and turning off the main light in the room. Without a word she slid into bed.

Cautiously, Cam inched closer. "Is this okay?"

Understanding what she wanted, Fab slid her arm under Cam's head. She drew her in close. Close enough for Cam to snuggle into the crook of her neck. To wrap her arm around her chest. To hook her bare leg around Fab's thigh.

She smelled so good, the perfume of her body wash filling Cam's nose. She closed her eyes again, hoping she could delete the image of a dirt covered Fab from her mind. It was really the terror in her eyes that she wanted to forget.

"Thank you," Cam whispered against the soft, smooth skin of Fab's neck, even if she didn't need to keep her voice low. Old habits. "You put Prince Charming to shame today. I can picture you digging a tunnel to me using your bare hands."

Fab ran her hand along Cam's back in long, soothing motions. Heat from Fab's open palms bled through the thin material of her tank top, reaching into

her tense muscles and uncoiling them.

Cam wished they could freeze this moment. Live in it for a year or two.

“I can’t believe we’re laying here, without the cameras, and all it took was a little panic attack.”

Fab’s hand stopped and her arm stiffened. “This doesn’t change anything.”

“Doesn’t it?”

Cam propped herself up on her elbow. In the low light of Fab’s lamp, she could only see the main features of Fab’s face. Her big, almond-shaped eyes. Her long, straight nose. Her strong jaw. The face she’d never stopped thinking about after all these years.

Fab’s full lips parted but she didn’t speak.

Wishing she knew what Fab was thinking, what she was *really* thinking, Cam leaned in a little closer. She waited for Fab to move away. To create space between them. She didn’t.

“What I did,” Fab’s gaze dropped to Cam’s lips and back to her eyes. “I would’ve done for anyone.”

There was no conviction in Fab’s tone. No truth in her words.

“Maybe,” Cam agreed. “But the way you held me.” Her mind jumped to the sensation of Fab’s arms around her body, how she’d engulfed her like she was shielding her from danger. “Would you have done that for *anyone*?”

Dark eyes were even darker than usual. Hiding, concealing, obscuring.

“Why won’t you admit it?” Cam’s question was a husky shadow falling on Fab’s cheek.

“Admit what?”

The truth thumped in Cam’s throat, a pulse beating the rhythm of the words Cam was afraid to say. Over the last few weeks she’d been making progress with Fab. Getting closer to where they used to be. A time before Cam made the mistake that cost her Fab’s love. If she pushed too fast, Fab would run. It was all so delicate. So unknown.

Cam took a deep breath. She had to take the gamble. She couldn't risk losing the chance to speak openly. Couldn't risk losing the time with her. They were always one elimination obstacle away from being sent home, and she didn't trust that she'd get this opportunity again. Fab might never again be this close or captive.

"Admit that you still feel something for me . . . the way I feel something for you." Cam's confession was so quiet, she wasn't sure that Fab heard it over the breeze.

Fab's expression softened, her eyes glistening with the truth she didn't dare say.

Cam neared another inch, every fiber in her being aching to feel Fab's lips again. To get lost in her all-consuming kiss. Fab couldn't deny their lingering connection then. Not if she felt the electric rush one more time.

"Even if I could forgive you." Fab's hand dropped away from her back. The loss of her touch leaving her cold. "How could I ever trust you?"

There was nothing left to lose. No reason to hold back. Swallowing her pride, Cameron spoke her shameful truth without looking away from Fab.

"When we . . ." Cam looked up at the cameras. Could she really trust that production wouldn't be listening?

"They're off," Fab said with conviction.

"When we decided to win together and split the money, I had no intention of backing out on that."

"So you're just a thief and not a liar?" Hurt shown through Fab's tone instead of her usual anger.

Cam winced. When they say truth hurts, they never say just how much. "I know I deserve that. That and so much more."

"What changed? Why did you do it?" Fab asked the questions like she'd been keeping them loaded in the chamber for six years.

"Remember when I told you that I needed the money to save my parents from very literal financial ruin?"

Fab nodded.

“I left out the fact that I’m the one who caused it.” She dropped onto the pillow next to Fab who turned onto her side to face her. There was no more hiding from this. “I was approached by this guy. A financial advisor, or so he claimed. He promised this incredible opportunity. Gave me references that I followed up on and they all checked out. I invested five grand, which was every penny I’d saved working in the coffee shop. Three months later, he’d doubled my money.”

Fab furrowed her brow.

“Too good to be true right?”

Fab tipped her head to the side, which was kinder than agreeing that she was an idiot and naive and greedy.

“It was the answer to everything. I could make enough money to start my t-shirt business without it taking another million years of slowly hoarding away my pennies. It takes money to make it, right?” Cam swallowed the knot of guilt and remorse spreading at the base of her throat. “So I introduced him to my parents. They could double their retirement accounts, get out of the excruciating rat race and live comfortably, plus they’d be able to invest in my little venture.”

“Did they give him all of it?”

“Every. Single. Penny. Took out a second mortgage on the house.” Cam closed her eyes, but tears slid out of the corners anyway. “I had no idea what a Ponzi scheme was. Not until the investigators showed up at our door.”

The unwelcome memory flashed in her mind. Her mother pressing her palm to her chest while wailing. It had taken them a lifetime of hard work to build something that could be consumed in moments.

“We were one of many. So many lives destroyed.” Cam shook her head. “All I could think about was rescuing my parents from the mess I made. And when Janette told me I’d won two hundred and fifty thousand dollars. . .” She sniffled. “I took it and ran like a shitty, lying, coward.” She forced herself to

look at Fab again. “I’m so sorry. I didn’t think I had a choice. I couldn’t see any way out. At least I could save their house.”

Fab’s face betrayed some sympathy. “All those stolen moments together . . . you never once mentioned this.” Her jaw bounced, she was clenching it so hard. “You don’t think I would have helped you win the money? You didn’t have to steal what I would’ve given to you.”

The truth, so plain, so shattering, split Cam right down the middle. She hadn’t planned to take the money until the huge prop check was in her hands, and then everything moved in a rushed blur.

“You *chose* to take the money without a word about it for all these years.”

Cam nodded. It was true. As cold and awful as it sounded, that’s what she’d done and she couldn’t go back and change the past, no matter how badly she wished she could.

“I didn’t think I could ever face you again, but I wanted to make it right. When I tried to reach out, it was already too late.” She sighed. “*I’m sorry* doesn’t even begin to cover how I feel.” She dried her face and steeled herself. “Is there *any* way you can forgive me?”

Fab was so quiet for so long that Cam started to lose the shape of her in the dark. She blurred and faded until she responded with a long, drawn out, sigh.

“It’s not forgiveness that’s impossible—”

A tiny spark of light in the abject darkness. Cam threw herself on it to keep it alive.

“I can show you the police investigation stuff. I can prove that I gave them every penny after taxes, and all of that went to the bank—”

“Call me insane, but I believe you didn’t intend to deceive me.” Fab’s shoulder jerked into a shrug. “I may even be able to forgive you,” she added, sounding surprised by her own admission. “But you destroyed my trust. When you took the check and never looked back, you betrayed me. All these years I’ve felt used and cheated and stupid. I don’t know that you can undo

that. Some broken things just can't be mended."

Fat tears sprang from Cam again. She hated that she couldn't stop crying. Couldn't stop drowning in shame and regret.

"I still . . ." Cam stopped herself from saying love. "I still *feel* the way I've always felt about you. Do you still have anything left for me?"

Fab was quiet again and it took every ounce of Cam's self control not to pounce on her and beg her to divulge her thoughts.

"You know I do," Fab whispered, sounding exhausted by the confession. "I *hate* that I do, but that doesn't seem to matter."

A smile erupted on Cam's face. There was that fledgeling little spark again. A reason to hope.

"Will you give me a chance? Just one opportunity to prove to you that I made a colossal, gargantuan, epic mistake and that I've regretted it every single day. Can you give me a shot to earn back your trust?" Cam heard herself pleading, but she'd put her pride aside. "I'm more than the worst mistake I've ever made."

Fab closed her eyes. "I don't know."

"That's not a no," Cam pointed out, trying not to sound eager and brimming with hope.

"That's not a no," Fab repeated without opening her eyes.

CHAPTER 28



A KNOCK on the door startled Fabiola out of a deep sleep. She woke up dazed. Confused by the small space and the warm body curled up next to her. In the light of day, the breeze was hot and her overly clothed body was already sweating.

Fab resisted the urge to brush a strand of faded pink hair from Cam's damp forehead. Had they spent the entire night in that position? With Cam tucked into her nook so tightly that they were both covered in a fine sheen of perspiration?

The events from the night before were so extreme, Fab would've thought they were a dream if it wasn't for Cam's presence in her bed.

Heaviness, strange and achy, settled into the base of her gut. She believed Cam about the con artist. Almost believed that she hadn't intended to take the money and run when they decided to break the rules and work together. She just wasn't sure it mattered. Even if she wanted to give Cameron another chance, was that even possible?

Fab wished she was the kind of person that could let things go. That she could forget the past and pick up where they left off like nothing happened. As irrational as it was, she did *want* to give Cam a chance to redeem herself, she just didn't think she was capable.

After the second knock, Cam stirred in her arms.

“I could talk them into giving you a full twenty-four hour break from the cameras,” Fab said instead of *good morning*.

Cam seemed to consider it for a moment and Fab found herself wishing she would ask for more time. Like a coyote so enamored with the idea of catching the roadrunner that she continuously endured falling anvils and malfunctioning rockets, Fab yearned for just a little more Cam. Maybe this time she wouldn’t be lured off a cliff. Maybe this time would be different.

The third knock was more insistent, but production didn’t bust in. They knew better than to test her. She wasn’t throwing out empty threats the night before. What they had done was unconscionable.

“We might as well get up.” Cam rubbed the sleep out of her eyes. “Thank you.” She looked up at Fab, her face soft and vulnerable. “For getting us a break from them. For letting me sleep in your bed.”

Fab couldn’t wrestle back the smile that flashed on her lips, but she extinguished it as quickly as possible. “Don’t mention it.”

Before Cam could respond, Fab rolled out of bed and started for the door.

“Fabiola, good morning,” a producer greeted when she opened the door. “I trust you slept well.”

“No thanks to you,” she replied without adjusting her sober expression.

The man in the black baseball cap had the decency to look embarrassed. “I just wanted to give you the heads up that the equipment is coming back online this morning.”

“After breakfast.”

He squinted, adjusting his hat. “Well, we need the tech team—”

“After breakfast.”

When his shoulders dropped, Fab closed the door on him.

Cam swung her long, bare legs over the edge of Fab’s bed.

Part of her didn’t want Cam to leave. Once Cam was gone from her bed, Fab knew she’d never be back. She wished she could keep their insulated break from reality a while longer.

Cam stretched, exposing a sliver of bare belly. “They didn’t turn the cameras back on?”

Responding with a shrug, Fab turned toward the kitchen. “How are you feeling?”

“You know.” She shrugged. “Like I was buried alive with a bunch of terrified snakes.”

“Those poor snakes.” Fab reached for a container of plain yogurt and bowl of berries in the fridge.

“They must have been freaked out. Most of them stayed where they were placed by my feet. Only one kinda wrapped around my leg and stayed there. Squeezed the hell out of me.” Cam slid behind her, her hand resting for a moment on Fab’s hip before she stopped in front of the coffee machine. “Coffee? Black?”

Fab nodded and continued preparing breakfast for both of them. Their rhythm was easy, comfortable. As if they’d been singing this song for years.

“Are you ready to borrow some shorts now?” Cam took Fab’s bowl once she’d finished eating the yogurt and berries. “You have to be hot.”

“Or . . .” Fab drank the dregs of her coffee. “We could go for a swim. Get some endurance training in. The win . . . it’s so close.”

Cam rinsed the clean dishes before setting them to dry on the rack. “Why do you sound so shocked? Nobody is going to beat us, babe.”

She tossed out the term of endearment like it was nothing. Fab was transported to the night before, when she’d called Cam *babe*. The word had been weightless on her tongue.

“But if you want to lose racing me,” Cam smirked, “I’m always happy to oblige, Ms. Santos.”

Fab couldn’t stop her smile in time. “Such confidence.”

“I know my weaknesses . . . and my strengths.” Cam dried her hands on a kitchen towel and sauntered toward Fab.

Fab’s muscles tensed, her fingers twitched, and her jaw clenched. She

tried so hard not to take the bait, to resist the enticing lure floating by, but she couldn't. "Weaknesses?"

With a quick glance at the cameras, she leaned over the bistro table. "Dark eyes, strong arms, stoic pains in my ass."

Fab's attention drifted down to Cam's soft lips. The ones curving into a dangerous question. "Then I hope we don't meet any of those."

CHAPTER 29



CAM HAD BEAT Fab for a third time when she stopped swimming and started floating. The newly installed cameras on the dock at the edge of their enclosure stared down at her. Their glassy black eyes made them look like unnatural birds.

While she waited for Fab to reach her, she wished she'd taken her up on the offer for more time alone. She'd been thinking strategically when she declined.

Pissing off production could lead to them facing adverse scenarios later on. Cam couldn't prove it, but she'd watched the show long enough to know things weren't always left up to chance. If production liked someone, or they were ratings gold, they often found themselves tasked with favorable circumstances. Production being annoyed with her could mean the difference between an endurance test and a heights nightmare.

Fab swam up to her and started treading water. "Tired?"

The muscles in Fab's arms and shoulders flexed as she kept herself afloat in the clear, blue water. With her black hair slicked back and her dark eyes fracturing into a thousand shades of copper and honey and bronze in the sunlight, Fab was stunning.

Cam couldn't remember what she'd been thinking about. "What?"

Fab raised a brow. "Tired?"

Moving her arms, Cam kept her upper body above water. If they weren't being watched, she would have swam closer to Fab, but she didn't drop her guard.

"No. Are you?"

"I'm not the one who stopped." Fab tilted her head as if it helped her read Cam's mind.

Cam looked around, desperate for somewhere to hide. They were painfully limited. There was nothing but the water and the cabin she knew so well she could recreate it from memory. While she stared at their home perched above the ocean, an idea whirled into existence.

"We should do more upper body," Cam suggested, her tone serious and professional.

Fab didn't miss a beat. She obviously knew Cam was plotting. "Never hurts."

"The beams under the deck should be more than sturdy enough for pull-ups." She hoped she sounded innocent enough not to tip off the crew and prompt them to come looking for them. Technically, they weren't breaking the rules. No one ever said they couldn't go *under* the bungalow — only that they couldn't leave it.

"Especially while the tide is low," Fab agreed with the sincerity of a nun. "More resistance."

It took every ounce of Cam's self-control not to laugh. Despite Fab's probable guess to the contrary, Cam wasn't a very good actor.

Swimming around the steps they took to get out of the water and onto the deck, Cam continued to the space beneath the deck. Dark and cool, they were shielded from both the brutal midday sun and the cameras.

Standing on the compact sand, the water came up to Cam's waist. Without waiting for Fab, she reached for one of the cross-beams holding up the deck structure and tested its suitability.

"How many pull-ups can you do?" Fab slipped under the deck, her voice

echoing along with the sound of water lapping against the wood frame.

“So forward,” Cam joked. “You’re just going to come right out and ask a girl that?”

The corner of Fab’s mouth twitched. Her equivalent of a belly laugh.

“I bet I can do more than you,” Cam decided.

Fab’s chuckle was a low rumble bouncing off the water’s surface. She waded toward Cam, unable to resist a challenge.

“What do I get if I win?” Cam asked, standing next to Fab beneath the long beam she’d already tested.

“You’re not going to win.” Fab reached up, letting herself hang to check the large, rectangular beam’s sturdiness.

Cam slicked back her hair and shaped it into a quick braid to keep it out of her face. “If you’re so confident, then you shouldn’t have any trouble making a friendly wager.”

Fab shook her head. “It wouldn’t be a fair fight.”

“So honorable,” Cam pretended to swoon. “My hero.”

Fab rolled her eyes, but they retained their amused glint, even in the shade. “What do you want?”

“I thought there was no way I could beat you. Why do you care what I want?” Cam let a devilish smirk play on her lips, hoping Fab understood that there was only one thing on her mind.

“You want me to make a wager without knowing the stakes?” Fab pulled herself up in a single, graceful motion. Her head touched the underside of the wooden deck as her chin cleared the beam.

“If you’re worried about what you have to put up, then maybe there are ways I can beat you.” Cam did her own test pull-up. The resistance from the water was greater than she expected. It was like the sea was trying to drag her down. To sabotage her efforts. She was sure Fab was right, she couldn’t beat her at this. Too bad it didn’t keep her from running her mouth.

“Hard, huh?” Fab’s full attention was on her. Studying her.

Cam couldn't back down. "I like it hard."

Fab's lips curled into a momentary smirk. "I remember."

Heat blazed in Cam's body. She hadn't expected for Fab to flirt back. It stunned her for a second. Knocked her off course.

Fab exploited the moment of hesitation. "You've always talked a bigger game than you can play."

Cam stepped in closer to Fab, displacing the cool water between them as she moved. "I'm not the one afraid to step up to the challenge."

Fab didn't back away. Tilting her chin upward, her eye contact didn't waver. It might have been intimidating if Cam didn't want every piece of Fab. Her intense gaze included.

"Tell me what you want, Cameron." Fab's voice was a low, husky thing.

Cam's body responded before she moved her mouth. The steady beat in her chest quickened, the muscles in her body tensed. She wanted to live in the gray a little longer. To flirt with possibility before Fab shut her down. Before Fab told her that last night was an anomaly. A fluke not to be repeated.

"What I want isn't really the question." Cam inched closer until her chest nearly touched Fab's. Until her lips hovered inches away. "It's what you're willing to risk."

Fab's attention dropped to Cam's parted lips. Her expression was hungry, yearning, but she didn't make a move.

Cam's hands floated in the water, drifting toward Fab's waist like she had her own gravitational pull.

"Say you don't want to," Cam challenged, her mouth dry and begging to be quenched by Fab's kiss.

Fab didn't respond. Her body had gone rigid like she was playing host to an internal wrestling match and was too focused on who was going to win.

Her silence spurred Cameron on.

Cam bent her neck, getting just a little closer. "Tell me you don't want to kiss me as bad as I want to kiss you."

Fab couldn't tear her gaze away from Cam's lips, not even when pain flashed in her face. It mirrored the ache pulling at Cam's body, the desire blocking her access to her brain.

"I don't . . ." Fab trailed off like she'd forgotten what she was going to say, but Cam knew better.

She smirked before moistening her lips. "You've always been a terrible liar."

"You're the one who lies," Fab whispered back, but it lacked any conviction.

"Yeah?" Cam leaned in, stopping just short of Fab's mouth. "Then resist me."

CHAPTER 30



FOR A SINGLE MOMENT, Cam held her breath. Then Fab's hands were gripping her sides, jerking her forward, hard against her body. In the weightlessness of the water, Cam glided, her legs wrapping effortlessly around Fab's waist, her arms around her neck, her lips smashing hard against hers.

Fabiola's kiss was salty and wild and messy and desperate. This was the woman Cam knew. The one that lived beneath the well-ordered and highly controlled surface. The one who'd pushed her up against that shed so many years ago and left her dizzy.

Cam clawed at the back of Fab's neck, her fingers sliding through the wet base of her ponytail. She needed to deepen the kiss. To feel Fab's tongue deeper in her mouth. She wanted to feel claimed and owned and possessed.

As always, Fab obliged. With a guttural sound somewhere between a moan and growl, Fab tightened her grip on Cam's ass as she bit down on Cam's bottom lip, pulling it hard before kissing her harder.

Cam made a fist in Fab's hair, yanking it back forcefully, but Fab's kiss didn't falter. She wouldn't be thrown off course by a little pain. Dogged determination was something Fab never lost.

"I need you," Cam confessed while she tilted her head to the other side, kissing her at a new angle.

Fab's hand slipped inside the back of Cam's bikini. "Need me where?" Fab tore her lips from Cam's mouth and sunk her teeth into Cam's neck.

"Fuck," she cried, but the word stayed lodged in her throat as her eyes slammed shut.

There was nothing but Fab's sharp teeth and the addictive rush of the pressure she was creating with her mouth.

"Don't stop," Cameron whispered, knowing she should shut up, but she couldn't help herself. She needed Fab to keep going. To mark her in the most undeniable way. "Please," she whimpered for good measure. Fab loved when she was submissive almost as much as she loved when Cam fought her for control.

Indulging her pained request, Fab bit down and sucked so hard Cam was sure she'd drawn blood. It only made her need more dire. Turned the dull ache between her thighs into a sharp, pronounced throb.

What she wouldn't give to be back in their little production closet. To be safe from prying eyes so she could rip off Fab's clothes. Feel her strong, naked body against hers.

Throwing her head back, Cam rocked her hips against Fab's abdomen. She was so turned on she didn't need much friction to ease her pain.

To prove just how in control she was, Fab gripped Cam's hips and moved her away without letting up on the bruise she was painting on her neck.

Letting out a frustrated cry, Cam's desire sharpened to a dangerous point. She loved being denied, having her release kept just out of reach. Fab hadn't forgotten.

After a final scrape of her teeth, Fab let go of her neck. Her lips were swollen and her face flushed. Cam kissed her again, wishing they could go inside to one of their beds. She wanted, more than anything, to show Fab just how badly she'd missed her.

"I don't want them to come looking," Fab whispered against Cam's lips, her words covered in the same lusty haze consuming Cam.

Cam pressed her forehead to Fab's, her fingers still tangled in her hair. "I'm not ready to let you go." She dove into Fab's lips again.

Fab couldn't resist. She slammed against her hard and hungry. A greedy, penetrating kiss that left Cam spinning and breathless.

Reading Cam's mind, understanding everything she wanted, Fab slid her hand into Cam's bikini again. Her finger dipping between her tight muscles and pressing against the sensitive place that instantly rocketed Cam's desire to new and unstable levels.

Cam's hushed curses echoed in their stolen spot beneath the deck. She didn't want to play anymore. She wanted out of the water and on to solid ground.

Yanking down the straps of Fab's bathing suit, she roughly exposed her chest. As she ran her palms over the newly exposed skin, Cam bit down on the sensitive spot near her collarbone.

Fab rewarded her with a gasp. She pulled her closer, signaling to Cam that she wanted more.

In a single motion, Cam slid off Fab, her bare feet hitting the compact sand, as she pushed Fab against the support post on the back of the steps.

Catching her off guard, Fab lost her hold on Cam. Without wasting a second, she pounced. Keeping Fab on her heels, she cupped her small breasts before taking the stiff point of one nipple between her teeth.

When Fab groaned, Cam couldn't help but grin. She remembered what Fab liked too.

Running her tongue along the peak hardening in her mouth, Cam moaned.

Fab's breath hitched in approval. Her hands finding the back of Cam's head and making a fist in her hair.

Cam dipped lower, the water covering her chin as she debated how long she could hold her breath underwater.

Wooden boards creaked overhead, sending a pang of disappointment slithering into her gut. Production had come looking for them.

CHAPTER 31



IT HAD BEEN a full twenty-four hours since Fabiola lost control of her good sense. Twenty-four hours since her entire body had blazed to life in a way she'd forgotten was possible. Twenty-four hours since she'd been able to think about anything other than the taste of Cam's lips, the sound of her moans, the feel of her body on hers.

After production sent them scurrying like teenagers whose parents arrived home from dinner earlier than expected, Fab had hardly been able to look at Cameron. The loss of control was as embarrassing as it was confusing.

For the rest of the day, she'd sensed Cam's eyes on her. It was obviously killing her not to be able to talk about it, but, for once, Fab was grateful for the cameras. She needed to sort out what she was thinking. What she was feeling.

It was no use. It was like her mind and body were at odds. Her brain constantly reminded Fab how badly she'd been hurt the last time she was lulled by Cam's touch. Replayed the pain and shame of discovering she'd been lied to and used. But somehow those memories felt more distant. Remote. Like they'd happened to someone she knew, or that the crimes had been committed by someone else. Not Cam. Not the woman who set her on fire.

Her body yearned for Cam. Her fingers itching to reach for her. Her lips

tingling to kiss her.

Uselessly, her heart insisted on sitting on the sidelines. Content to wait for the other two to duke it out before deciding what she wanted.

Laying on the towel unfurled on the deck with the sun warming the skin left uncovered by her bathing suit, Fabiola still hadn't figured out what to do.

She considered doing nothing, pretending that the kiss hadn't happened at all, but she doubted Cam would let it go. She was going to want to talk about it. Understand it.

How could Cam expect Fab to make sense of it when she still couldn't believe it happened? If not for the shocking dark purple blotch on Cam's neck, Fab might have convinced herself it was a fever dream. The game had a way of messing with her head, add to that their near solitary confinement, and no one could blame her for questioning reality.

“Do you want to work out with me?”

Fab opened her eyes, using her hand to shield them from the sun.

Cameron was standing over her. Her toned body on display in a lime sports bra and tiny shorts. She had random cuts, blisters, and bruises in various stages of healing. The mark on her neck, still visible under the pale pink ponytail she'd used to disguise it, was the freshest.

“I was thinking we can make it interesting.” She propped her hands on her hips, her mouth curved in a mischievous grin. “Since we didn't get a chance to finish our bet yesterday.”

Everything Cameron said sounded like a dare. One Fab couldn't stop accepting.

“Interesting?”

Cam moistened her lips, making Fab jealous of the tip of her tongue. “Whoever wins gets something they want.” She tilted her head to the side, her sapphire gaze rolling slowly over Fab's mouth, over her chest, and between her thighs.

She left a scorching ache everywhere her attention touched, rendering Fab

unable to do anything but clench her muscles and try not to react. The act consumed all of her energy, making it impossible to resist the bait.

“And what do you want, Cameron?”

A wicked smirk made a thousand unspoken promises. Most of them filthy.

“I don’t know,” she replied innocently. “I might want your dessert.” She paused, looking up at the sky as if seeking inspiration. “Or maybe your ration of sauvignon blanc, but since you never drink it, that doesn’t seem like much of a prize.” Cam held out her hand. “Or we can live dangerously and wait to see who wins.”

Knowing that without a doubt she was going to regret it, Fab took Cam’s hand. Tacit agreement to her games yet again.

With one strong yank, Cam pulled Fab to her feet.

“I’ll change.” Fab turned to the sliding glass door.

Cam was close enough for Fab to smell her sun block. Close enough to kiss. “You don’t have to do that.”

Fab looked down at herself. She wasn’t eager to exercise in a bathing suit.

“We’ll do pull-ups again,” Cam explained, her expression bright.

You could sell shit to a turd, couldn’t you?

“Didn’t I already beat you at that yesterday?” Fab crossed her arms, waiting for Cam to spin her web.

Cam raised a brow. “What can I say? I really want to make up for what I couldn’t do yesterday. Actually . . . since I lost so bad, I haven’t been able to stop thinking about it. It kept me up all night. Practically tormented me.”

Fab struggled to keep her poker face. She wanted to know what Cam had thought about and whether she’d gotten as painfully turned on as she had. Tossing and turning half the night, Fab had almost considered taking a late night shower for a little privacy. In her half-asleep state, she’d imagined Cameron following her into the bathroom.

“And you want me to give you a chance to . . . ease that torment?” Fab

tried to sound like herself. To sound annoyed with her. She hoped that any crew watching them wouldn't become suspicious.

Cameron cocked her head to the side, causing her braid to slip off her shoulder. Fab's gaze fell on the shocking mark on her neck. The memory of leaving it sent a rush of desire through her unprepared body.

"I can't ease it myself now, can I?"

Fab's pulse started a breakdance routine in her neck. She hated herself just a little for wanting to throw Cam on the bed and ease everything for her.

Without a word, Fab started down the wooden staircase leading into the water. Cam followed.

The moment they were out of camera sight, Cam leapt into her arms. Reflexively, like her arms had been made for one purpose, Fab caught her and kissed her hard. Around them, water rippled and splashed as they clawed at each other. It would've been embarrassing if Cam wasn't just as needy as her.

"We can't keep doing this," Fab whispered, her hands dropping down Cam's back, into the water, and over her shorts.

"Why not?" Cam's hot mouth slid over Fab's neck and tickled the shell of her ear. "Don't you want me?"

Fab's eyes rolled into the back of her head when Cam's hand dipped into the top of her bathing suit. She forced herself to resist the aching pang of desire too ready to bind and gag her rational mind.

"I never said I trusted you again," Fab whispered.

Cam took her hand out of her bathing suit but stayed wrapped around her, something Fab was strangely glad for. She liked having Cam this close, even if it made it harder to think.

"I didn't ask if you trusted me, I asked if you wanted me."

Fab bit back a grin.

"Listen, this is obviously going to be a joint prize this time. We're playing in pairs, and it's twice as much money as usual," Cam explained,

making perfect sense with her full lips and long, elegant neck crying for the return of Fab's mouth. "Since I can't *screw you over*, maybe . . . I don't know . . ."

Fab shook her head, but this time she couldn't hide her amusement. "That doesn't undo the past."

"This could also be good for your game," Cam suggested in an apparent change in tactics. "We still have a few weeks to go. A couple of really important challenges with probably the best players in the game since they've managed to stay this long."

Fab nodded in agreement. The salt and sea and lust had to be getting to her. Cam was making sense.

"Our partnership needs to be as strong as ever," Cam continued. "This game can be as hard on us psychologically and emotionally as it is physically. Harder probably." She ran her fingers up and down the back of Fab's neck in a lazy, mindless way that made Fab's heart beat faster. "The closer we are, the more connected, the better our chances of making it to the end."

It sounded perfectly reasonable, but it wasn't the first time the game had done strange things to Fab's decision making abilities.

"We don't have to go beyond the physical if you don't want to." Cam leaned in again, her lips brushing over Fab's jaw while making Fab feel like she'd already agreed. Like she'd accepted the fruit in the Garden of Eden. "But I promise I'm not going to hurt you, Fabiola."

Fab hated how much she wanted to believe her, how badly she wanted to give in. "We can't keep coming down here." She couldn't think of reasons why this was a bad idea, not with Cam draped all over her, and not since they'd been broken apart the day before.

"So . . . we hide under the covers . . . we go into the shower." Cam's response was so quick it was obvious she had it prepared and at the ready. "It's primetime, network TV. It's not like they can really use anything that's

not G-rated.”

That made sense too, and this time things were different. Six years ago, she wasn't closeted, but she wasn't exactly *out* either. Now, she had her established clients, her sterling reputation in her community. Apart from generally being a private person, she didn't care if anyone knew she and Cam had gotten close in captivity. She'd never told a soul about Cam breaking their deal, so its not like she expected anyone to judge her.

“They won't use the footage,” Fab agreed. Despite the title, Cutthroat Island was billed as a family show, safe for all ages. They weren't going to show anyone getting hot and heavy. “Or you're hoping they will use it so you can capitalize on a showmance for your socials.”

“I make sense, don't I?” The tip of Cam's tongue flicked over her earlobe. She didn't take the showmance accusation seriously.

Fab didn't want to admit it. Letting herself get close to Cam felt dangerous, but she was right that she didn't have anything to lose this time . . . no money on the line . . . just her heart. She knew herself well enough to know that giving in to Cameron wouldn't just be friends with benefits. For starters, they weren't friends, and on top of that, no-strings-attached sex could only work if they weren't already tangled in the world's biggest ball of yarn.

“I need to know.” Fab pulled away, holding Cam in her gaze. “I need to know right now if you're playing with me, Cameron. I can't just *do this* with you.”

Cam's flirty expression disappeared, her eyes turning sincere. “I swear on my grandmother. On everything I love and value. I'm not here to play with you, Fab. If physical is all you can give me, I'll take it.” She cupped Fab's cheek. “But I wasn't lying when I said I wanted to earn your trust back. That I want to prove myself to you and repair what I broke.” She slid her hand down Fab's throat and over her chest, pressing her palm to her heart. “I want every single part of you, but I'll take what I can get.”

Placing her hand over Cam's, Fab tilted her head up and kissed her. Parting her lips with her tongue, Fab moved in slow, purposeful movements. She didn't know how to tell Cam that she would try to give her that chance, so she showed her instead.

Cam held Fab's face, matching the suddenly slow pace of their kiss. Each gentle swipe filled Fab's chest with an impossible to name emotion. A tightening. An uncontrollable swell that was equal parts exhilarating and terrifying.

Wrapping her arms around Cam's torso, Fab held her close, but it wasn't close enough. Not while they were still in the water and wearing clothes.

The distant sound of a high-pitched, mechanical whirling stopped them. Freezing like deer at the sound of a twig snapping in the woods. Fab strained her hearing until she confirmed her fear. A drone was hovering somewhere above the deck and getting closer.

CHAPTER 32



STIRRING BENEATH THE SHEET, Cam tried to fall asleep. After a brief but intense rainstorm, the breeze coming through the open shutters was cool and pleasant. Compared to the sweltering heat of other nights, it was practically chilly.

And yet, Cam couldn't sleep. She couldn't stop thinking about Fabiola. About the taste of her lips. About how close Fab was to forgiving her. Cam could feel it like an electrical pulse in her body. Every moment they spent together, she was closer to getting her back. Closer to seeing the woman she was before Cam made the biggest mistake.

Across the dimly lit room, Fab flipped on her side, facing the wall and giving Cam her back. It was the third time in ten minutes that she'd tried to find a comfortable position. She obviously wasn't sleeping either.

How serious had Fab been earlier? When they were hot and wet and sneaking under the deck. The same dark, echoey space that now had multiple cameras installed on all sides.

Fab was a woman of her word, but she hadn't exactly said she'd give her another chance.

Cam's lips tingled. What Fab hadn't said with her mouth she'd said with her lips. She closed her eyes and remembered the gentle insistence of her kiss. It lacked the fire of their previous kiss, and yet it was somehow

scalding.

Did she mean what she said about the cameras? About getting under the covers together? About getting close without giving production anything they could use on TV? Not that Cameron cared whether they were captured together in grainy, night vision cameras. She didn't have anything to hide, and this time, Fab didn't seem like she did either.

In a burst of do-it-before-you-chicken-out energy, Cam slipped out of bed. At the sound of her bare feet on the tile floor, Fab turned.

Cam stopped short of getting into her bed, her heart hammering like a tone-deaf kid beating on a snare drum. She couldn't make out the details of Fab's face, not that she'd trust herself to read it in a moment like this.

She was going to slink back to her bed, embarrassed that she'd misread their conversation earlier, when Fab moved. With a swift jerk, she lifted her sheet, the universal sign for *get in*.

Cam slipped beneath the thin cotton. With the flourish of a mustache twirling victim unfurling his cape, Fab flicked her wrist, sending the sheet sailing over them and covering them completely.

The thrill of discovering Fab was wearing nothing but a sports bra and tiny compression shorts sent a flood of aching desire pulsing through Cam's body. It made her wish she was wearing even less than her tank top and soft, loose shorts.

Fab didn't speak, but the message sent by her tongue swiping Cam's bottom lip was unmistakable. Fab's hands were strong around her hips, pulling her in as she locked her smooth leg around Cam's bare thigh. As if she was afraid she might float away.

"It was so hot how you rescued me," Cam whispered between rushed kisses. "You were so sweaty and dirty and angry." The combination of the memory and Fab's open palms gliding down her body turned the once cool room suffocating. Part of her wanted to fling the sheet off of them, but she didn't want Fab to stop.

“Yeah?” Fab’s voice was a low rumble. Her hand slid over Cam’s ass, gripping it hard like it belonged to her.

Cam groaned against Fab’s lips before climbing on top of her, using her knee to part Fab’s legs before insinuating herself between them.

Holding herself up, Cam hovered over Fab’s mouth, wishing she could throw the sheet to the ground and take a lungful of fresh air. The discomfort was worth it to be so close to Fab. To be horizontal and on a soft surface with her.

“What do I get if we win tomorrow?” Cam whispered, keeping her lips just out of Fab’s reach. “I’m very motivated by rewards, you know.”

She felt Fab’s eyes burning into her, even if she couldn’t see them in the darkness of their little impromptu tent.

“You get to stay another week and compete to win half a million dollars.” Fab’s hands slid under the front of her tank top. Her touch sent goosebumps skittering across the skin of her abdomen as she raked her blunt fingernails over it.

When Fab discovered that Cam wasn’t wearing a bra, she moaned.

Cam closed her eyes, all her attention fixed on the sensation of Fab’s hands over her chest. Fab’s touch was confident, controlled, circling her most sensitive points without actually touching them. She was probably waiting for Cam to beg. Something she wasn’t too proud to do, but not yet.

“I think we both need more motivation,” Cam whispered, her hips swinging slowly as she started grinding against Fab. “To make sure we don’t lose.”

In a single motion, Fab yanked Cam’s tank top over her head. With an animalistic pounce, Fab flipped Cam onto her back and landed on top of her.

“Are you afraid of choking, Cameron?” Fab’s question was accompanied by her hand pressed to Cam’s throat.

“No.” Cam’s back arched off the bed, wishing Fab would squeeze a little instead of just teasing her. “Are you?”

Fab's lips crashed into hers again, her kiss hard and hungry. "What do you suggest?" Fab asked before sliding down the column of Cam's neck.

The moment Fab pressed on the bruise she created with her tongue, Cam bit down on her bottom lip to keep from whimpering. It was the best kind of pain and she didn't want Fab holding back.

"We could wait," Cam blurted, breathless from the stifling heat building beneath the sheet. "Make it a prize."

Fab didn't stop adding to the mark on her neck, instead she increased the pressure. Her hand gripping Cam's thigh as she pulled it up. With a moan, Cam hooked her leg around her thigh, digging her heel into her hamstring and pulling her in, needing to feel more of her.

Sliding her fingers through Fab's loose hair, still damp from her shower, Cam pulled her close, encouraging her to bite down harder. Each hard pull on her skin made her body ache, pushing her desire to the brink.

Cam alternated between grinding into the firm mattress and straining against Fab's slowly gyrating hips.

Fab released her neck and hovered above her lips. "Still want to wait?"

Cam's plan melted out of her body with the sheen of sweat coating her skin. Waiting suddenly seemed very stupid and unnecessary. All she wanted was Fab, in every possible way.

"It may be a good idea," Fab whispered, intentionally grazing Cam's lips before sliding off of her.

"I was just kidding." Cam followed her, turning on her side to stay connected to her. "It was a stupid idea."

"No." Fab pulled her in, prompting Cam to rest her head in her chest. "I like it. I'm a better reward than money. You'll work harder."

Cam laughed, eased by the pounding of Fab's heart against her cheek. "You're a terrible person."

The sound of Fab's soft chuckle was as exhilarating as her kiss. Well, almost as exhilarating. She loved having this side of her. The one most

people never saw.

Cam lifted her head, propping her chin on the hand she laid across Fab's chest. "Can you grab my shirt so we can throw this sheet on the floor then? I'm freaking dying here."

"Or . . . you can sleep like that. Since it's so hot."

Cam raised a brow. "Maybe, if we win tomorrow, I'll sleep over in the nude."

Fab didn't give any indication that she was going to look for Cam's tank top. "I'm not the one who responds to external motivators."

Laughing, Cam shook her head. "I can't sleep under this freaking thing all night, Fabiola."

"If you're topless, there is no way they're going to use any of this footage. Not even pixilated."

"How reasonable." Cam pecked her lips. "But you're not getting anything until I do. Gimme the shirt, Santos."

Rummaging behind her, Fab produced the tank top.

"Will you stay?" There was no playfulness in Fab's voice, just a soft, genuine request.

"What about the cameras? They're not going to have a problem showing us cuddling if they feel like making it a storyline."

Fab nodded. "I know."

Her gentle sincerity was a jolt to Cam's unprepared heart. "And you're okay with that?"

"They may not show it," Fab countered reasonably.

"On a show about rivals? When we've won an insane number of elimination games in a row? It might be too good to ignore completely."

If they had gone home after an episode or two, their tryst might end up on the cutting room floor, but the longer they stayed, the more likely they'd be the focus of the season.

"The odds have been in our favor so far." Fab yanked down the sheet,

flooding them with cool, fresh air.

The gesture was as good as Fab shouting from the treetops that they were . . . together? Whatever they were, it was something other than enemies and that was something Cam hadn't thought possible.

After slipping on her top, Cam turned around. They didn't both fit on the small bed unless one of them was on their side. Driven by instinct, Cam assumed the little spoon position.

Fab's arms around her felt too right. She closed her eyes and let her chest expand. Let herself feel happy, high, full.

"Is this okay?" Fab nuzzled against the back of her neck, her hold just shy of crushing.

Cam slid her arm on top of Fab's, interlacing their fingers. "More than okay."

CHAPTER 33



“I’M GOING IN THE TANK,” Cameron declared with unwavering confidence as they emerged from the tunnel entrance and onto the clearing lit by stadium lights in the moonless night.

The tank was a massive, vertical glass construction. Something Fab imagined Houdini might plunge into while bound to prove his magical ability.

Two identical tanks stood next to each other on elevated platforms. The rigging above the chambers filled with water made it obvious they were going to get dunked.

“No.” Fab shook her head.

Even without knowing what the task was, there was no way she was letting Cam get tortured again. If someone had to be submerged, it was going to be her.

“Okay, Prince Charming.” Cam chuckled, glancing at her while they walked toward the production tent to get fitted with safety gear. “Let’s be logical here. This is probably going to involve holding our breaths. I can do that a hell of a lot longer than you. Don’t set us up to go home.” Her fingers curled around Fab’s wrist, sending a small jolt up her arm and into her chest. “But I appreciate you trying to rescue me.”

Fab’s spine snapped into a rigid, straight line. “I don’t care about rescuing

you. I just don't want to lose the money. Not after I've been forced to endure you all this time." Her lip twitched, giving away that she was playing.

Cam laughed, her bright, blue eyes sparkling in the flood lights as they approached the tent. She hadn't believed Fab's blustering.

"Then it only makes sense that I'm the one in the tank, Fabiola. Assuming the tanks aren't for both of us."

Fab nodded. They shouldn't make any assumptions. "What could the task be if it's tandem dunking?"

Turning serious, Cam's eyes cut through the humidity and focused on the tanks. "It has to be more than just holding our breath. How is that a team thing?"

"Maybe they'll add jelly fish," Fab replied, only half kidding.

Cam chuckled. "I doubt they're rushing to throw us in with animals so soon."

"There haven't been many brain teasers. Math perhaps?" Fab cocked her head, thinking about all the implicit assumptions she was making. "Could it be temp? The water could be freezing or very hot."

"It could be a test of who makes it in there the longest," Cam agreed. "Or, answering questions does get hard when you're too cold to think."

"How does that test the strength of our partnership?"

Cam considered the question while they waited next to the production tent for direction. With her arms crossed over her chest, her black tank top showed off her biceps and scattered tattoos. Fab didn't let herself think about what would happen if they lost. What they had felt shapeless and fragile. It wasn't ready to be tested by reality. She needed more time in the cabin that had become their incubator.

"Blindfold?" Cam shook her head. "Maybe you have to give me clues? But for what?"

"A memory game?" Fab mused, running through a mental list of prior obstacles.

“In teams?”

Fab raced through possible tasks, but they didn't match the gimmick of the season.

As they had so many times before, Fab and Cam followed a PA to their marks. New were Fab's nerves making her fingers twitch, her stomach tense, her heart race.

“We're going to win,” Cam whispered when the lights from the production van carrying their opponents flashed at the end of the partial tunnel shaped by trees and tropical vegetation.

“So confident.” Fab shifted her weight between her feet, getting into her game-mode rhythm.

“Yup.” Cam looked over at her, a smirk on her pink lips.

“Did we ever nail down the prize for winning?”

Cam's eyes glistened, brimming with mischief. “I guess, now, we're going to have to wait and see.”

As soon as they heard the distant sound of the van's door slamming closed, the clamor of shouting voices tore through the night like commercial fireworks.

Fab's upper lip twitched into a momentary grin. It boded well that their opponents were angry and unfocused, but she wouldn't let herself get comfortable. Arrogance led to mistakes.

Their competitors argued the entire way from the van to the clearing.

“They might kill each other and disqualify themselves,” Cam joked.

“Stay focused.” Fab's jaw tightened.

Winning was hard. It took complete dedication, focus, and a touch of luck. Losing was easy. A single mistake could cost them everything.

The whirlwind of curses and blame kicked up sand for their male-male pair of opponents to shove in each other's eyes. Fab's shoulders relaxed against her will. If they kept this up, she had a good chance of sleeping with Cam tonight.

Just the thought sent her heart into a sprint. She didn't let herself ponder the consequences. Didn't think about the past or the future. All she had was this single challenge. And if she won, at least a few nights with Cam. That was all that mattered. The only thing that was real.

"Good evening, folks!" Janette sauntered into the clearing like she should be wearing an extravagant ball gown. Marie Antoinette addressing her courtiers, promising a night of music and dance and poetry. Instead, she was in a white dress introducing pairs of people crazy enough to compete on reality TV.

After her usual introductions, during which the men next to them couldn't stop bickering, Janette turned to the game at hand.

"Tonight, all you have to do to stay in the game is complete a puzzle," Janette gestured toward the tanks behind her, pretending that made any sense.

"Shit, you're better at puzzles," Cam whispered, trying not to move her lips as she spoke.

"Oh," Janette covered her mouth. "You want to know where the puzzle is?" Her dark eyes gleamed in the artificial light. "It's in the tank."

Fab and Cam exchanged worried glances. Fab was better at puzzles, but Cam could hold her breath like a mermaid on steroids.

She needed more information to decide whether it was worth letting Cam get in the tank.

"What's the catch?" Janette grinned. "The puzzle is at the bottom."

Okay, not bad. Fab could solve the puzzle quickly. As long as she could get to the bottom and stay there, she was sure she could finish before their challengers figured out that they had to stop fighting and work together.

"Oh, the water is also just a hair above freezing, so you'll need to finish before hypothermia sets in." Janette's smile was truly horrifying. Did she really enjoy torturing them? Even after what happened just a few days ago?

Fab thought about all the ways *the show* really did go on. It was an unstoppable bulldozer unconcerned by the prospect of flattening every last

one of them.

“Teams, please select one player to go into the tank.”

Cam turned to her. “I’m going.” Her conviction was unshakable.

Fab opened her mouth to remind her that she’d been buried alive just a few nights earlier, since she’d apparently had a lobotomy. It was too soon. She needed to recover from being trapped in the claustrophobic contraption.

“Trust me,” Cam added as if it was just that simple.

Fab wanted to trust her, but her desire to protect her was stronger. “Cameron—”

“I’ll be safe. I promise.” Cam’s smile could sell anything, but it did nothing to dislodge the roots growing around her larynx and dropping into her stomach to twist her guts.

Powerless to force Cam to stay, she watched her go. Crew members swarmed her. She held up her tight tank top, allowing the crew to fit a thin strap at the base of her sports bra.

Fab watched the crew member in charge of audio. She was putting an unusual set of headphones in Cam’s ears. That was where the teamwork came in. Fab would have to communicate with her while she was in the water. Maybe relay an answer key?

Sweeping the clearing with her eyes, Fab didn’t find any clues. There was no table or billboard or station ready to be unveiled when Janette blew her whistle. She scrutinized her surroundings while a PA strapped a microphone and battery pack under her shirt. Instead of Cam’s odd headphones, she got a normal ear piece. They’d definitely have to talk to each other to get the job done.

“You two need to make a decision,” a producer snapped at the pair of men still arguing. It looked like they were more interested in mauling each other than deciding who was going to take the dip.

When they started accusing one another of being the weakest link, Fab followed a crew member to one of the tanks. They’d started shoving each

other by the time she was set on her mark a foot away from the suspended tank. One crew member pulled on a rope, dropping a thick chain into the water, while another used some crazy looking spear to slip the end over a hook affixed on the bottom third of the glass.

Ignoring the drama behind her, Fab scoured the obstacle in front of her. It contained the entire challenge. The sooner she figured out the trick, the sooner she could start performing the task in her mind, looking for pitfalls, and devising contingency plans.

She realized first that there had to be a good reason for perching the tanks on top of elevated platforms. It was an extra layer of complication they wouldn't add for no reason. She couldn't imagine how many gallons of water were in there, but it must have been insanely heavy.

A small pit of anxiety bloomed in her stomach like a wart. A contagious blemish spreading up her chest.

She was going to have to go *under* the tank.

Everything in Fab's body screamed that this was a terrible idea. One small crack. One missed brace or buttress could cause the platform to fail. The picture of being crushed under the weight of glass and steel and a million gallons of water played over and over in an unending loop of horror.

Her face went cold. Her hands numbed.

From her periphery, she saw Cam. Her blonde hair, with only wisps of faded pink, was no longer in a braid. She'd tied it in a tight bun at the back of her head. Fab guessed she wanted to avoid the braid getting in her way as she floundered around the tank.

Fab took a deep, steadying breath. She thought she'd be saving Cam from the worst of it if she went in the tank, but realizing that at least she couldn't die that way gave her comfort.

She found her focus. Half of the challenges were designed to distract them with fear and the other half distracted them with fatigue. Fab had learned how to manage both, and she wouldn't let the prospect of being

crushed upend her.

They held each other's gaze while the crew produced the kind of ladder used to get on roofs and set one up against each tank.

"You got this," Fab mouthed silently.

Cam's smile was confident, unwavering, sure. She winked as if to say *I know*.

Fab couldn't stifle her smirk. She could hear Cam in her head. Her voice shifting between sultry and playful as she teased her about claiming her prize. A prize neither of them had identified because they didn't need to. In her haze, it seemed obvious that there was only one thing worth winning.

Reaching the top of the tank, Cam sat on the ledge before throwing her legs over and into the water.

She didn't make a sound, but her shocked face made it obvious that the water really was freezing. Without complaining, she doggy paddled to the chain, ready to pull herself down to the bottom and resist her body's instinct to race to the top.

Fab's stomach clenched like a snapping mousetrap. She hated to watch Cam's discomfort. She'd rather be the one getting submerged.

Janette appeared with her attendant aura of cameras. She faced the tanks before sending them off to test their luck yet again.

"I did say this was a puzzle, didn't I?" She offered a coquettish grin like she was flirting with them instead of antagonizing them. "Players in the water, at the bottom of your tank is a sliding block puzzle. Well. . . it's the back of that puzzle anyway. Your teammate will be under the tank and looking up at the image. They will direct you which way to slide the tiles. The first team to solve the puzzle wins." She smiled. "Easy."

The sound of Cam's teeth already chattering set Fab's heart racing. They had to win and fast. The longer she was in the water, the shorter her trips to the bottom would have to get. Efficiency was going to be critical. Good thing the obstacle was tailored to their strengths, a bit of luck Fab guessed the

producers manufactured.

“Players,” Janette gestured to Fab and her opponent. “When I blow the whistle, get under the tank and start helping your partner complete the puzzle.”

Fab nodded. Her body primed and ready to bolt.

The sharp trill from Janette’s whistle rang in her ear. She flung herself under the tank like a deranged mechanic desperate to finish an oil change.

Despite landing awkwardly on her back, Fab was mentally locked in. *Cutthroat Island: Unfinished Business* was painted across fifteen scrambled tiles.

In Fab’s ear, the sound of air bubbles reminded her of the time she went scuba diving. She imagined Cam using the chain to pull herself to the bottom of the tank.

Fab wiped her sweat before it dripped into her eyes and stung. “Don’t worry,” she said with confidence she hoped Cam could feel. “We got this.”

CHAPTER 34



“HOW AM I STILL COLD?” Cam held the reflective, mylar blanket around herself as they trudged down the pier and toward their bungalow. The place that would be home for another few days yet.

Fab, her arms around Cam’s shoulders, rubbed her aching muscles. She was doing her best to get Cam warm. Something she never imagined she’d need help with on a tropical island in the summer.

“I might have to borrow your parka,” Cam joked.

“I can’t believe you stayed down there so long.”

Cam smiled. “I told you I can hold my breath like a champ.”

Fab shook her head. “It was dangerous. What if you passed out?”

“But I didn’t,” Cam reminded, eager to get back into their secluded paradise. “And we won. You really are the puzzle queen.”

Fab glanced at her as they walked over the wooden planks, huddled together as if she wanted to transfer all the warmth from her body. “Without oxygen—”

“We won, okay? Let’s celebrate that instead of worrying. I got the all-clear from the paramedics.” She didn’t add that her body felt like she’d been hit by a train, and her head was pounding like a baby velociraptor was trying to hatch from her skull. “Didn’t I win your dessert? When are they sending dinner?”

Cam had barely finished her joke when Fab spun on her heels and started jogging toward the production van parked at the end of the dock.

“I was kidding,” she muttered, speaking only to herself since Fab was already halfway to the van.

Even without being able to hear her, she knew Fab was aggressively procuring food for them. With her hands across her chest and her body still and rigid, Fab had to say very little to get her point across.

Cam couldn't control the swell in her chest lifting her off the pier like a hot air balloon. Behind Fab's stoic, woman-of-few-words, unblinking-looks-that-can-kill exterior was the most ferociously protective and loving person she'd ever met.

More than once she'd imagined Fab like a battle-scarred shield-maiden rushing into battle. Her eyes fierce and focused. She was silent while her warriors-in-arms were shouting war cries. She didn't need anything other than her approach to strike fear in the heart of her enemies. Watching Fab unfurl her protective energy like feathery Valkyrie wings, Cam was sure nothing bad could touch her.

“It's on its way,” Fab announced as she jogged up to her. “They're sending three of those white chocolate mousse things with extra blackberries and—”

Cam dropped her reflective blanket and threw her arms around Fab's waist, pulling her in. Fab allowed herself to be moved, folding like silk into Cam's arms. Aware of the prying eyes, Cam couldn't help herself. She was tired of the hiding. Of the sneaking around.

The space between them was so small. So infinitesimal. Close enough for Cam to feel the warmth of Fab's breath, smell the scent of her dried sweat and lingering perfume, see the quiver in her lips.

Without giving a shit about the cameras hidden all around them, or the crew in the van, or the producers watching everything they did. Fab tilted her chin up, her lips parted. A soft offering. The ultimate olive branch, the

dropping of armor and weapons and defenses, an exposed underbelly.

Fab moved first, traversing the small gap that might as well have been the other side of the world a month ago.

Her arms were warm, steady, sure as they curled around Cam's neck. They were the anchor keeping her from floating away. When Fab applied the smallest amount of pressure, bringing her in, Cam devolved into something incorporeal.

There was nothing but Fab's lips on hers. The fingertips pressing against the back of her neck. The warmth of her kiss driving out any lingering cold from her muscles.

Fab was the sun after a deluge. A raft on a choppy sea. She was life and refuge and hope.

Cam was grateful that Fab's slow, methodical kiss consumed her. If it hadn't, she would have let the moment carry her away. Would have let it crack open the six-year-old seal on her heart and confess the words she'd never gotten to say. The words she'd never thought she'd get to say.

Without Fab's tongue taking possession of her mouth. Without her lips claiming ownership of her breath. Cam would have stupidly let the secrets slip.

I've missed you.

I love you.

Fab pulled away from her slowly. "Dinner will be here soon."

Resting her forehead against Fab's, Cam was reluctant to let her go. Being near her was like sitting in front of a roaring fire. The flames snapped and cracked, penetrating her skin and warming her bones.

"I thought you were hungry." Fab's tone landed somewhere between amused question and devilish accusation.

Cam pulled away just far enough to look Fab in the face. She kept her arms securely around her waist as if to keep Fab from running away.

The deep autumn of Fab's dark eyes melted the remaining shards of ice in

Cam's body. Their softness, a softness reserved only for Cam, turned Cam's muscles to jelly.

"Oh, I'm starving," Cam agreed, her gaze falling to Fab's lips.

"Food first," Fab warned like a stern and intolerant headmistress.

Cam smirked, a rush of new blood pulsing up her spine. "And then?"

Fab's expression remained fixed, stern. She didn't respond to Cam's flirtatious tone, but Cam didn't need her too. She could read the subtle shift in her energy. The momentary spark in her eyes. The unspoken promise. The dare.

CHAPTER 35



REMNANTS of their chicken and veggie wraps sat in open containers between them on the bed. Cam was laying on her side, her head propped up on one elbow, as she picked at what was left of her sweet potato chips.

Her pose reminded Fab of an oil painting. A modern Roman goddess captured with her fingertips creating tiny ripples in an otherwise still reflecting pool.

The serene image was a world away from the earthquake thundering inside Fab. Her body was buzzing from their kiss. Its weight still pressing on her lips. It was the first one they'd ever had out in the open. The first kiss neither of them could deny. Not to themselves or anyone else.

It had felt like a declaration. A proclamation. A line that couldn't be uncrossed. What they had was out in the open now. Offered up for public consumption.

Fab was too scared to ask Cameron what it all meant. She liked labels and order and clarity, but she was also afraid to talk about what they were out loud. As if mentioning it might shatter it. Whatever it was, Fab was sure it was porcelain thin and just as delicate.

Good, Fab decided, quieting her anxiety. Whatever it was . . . it felt good.

Her mother was the only person whose opinion Fab cared about. She wasn't going to be thrilled about Fab's on-camera PDA, but she also had

never seen her and Ted share more than a chaste peck on the lips on New Year's Eve. Something she was infinitely grateful for.

Fab started an imaginary conversation with her mother while she absentmindedly popped a sweet and salty chip in her mouth. It ended with her telling her mother that she was twenty-seven years old and perfectly capable of making her own decisions.

When the quake started to rumble in her belly again, Fab reminded herself that the show was G-rated. They were not going to show anything overly intimate. Depending on the way they edited the story, they might not show anything at all.

Fab knew that wasn't true. The turn from enemies to this was too interesting to ignore completely.

"You okay?"

Cam's voice pulled Fab out of her head. Her bright blue eyes had dimmed, but it was the drooping that made it obvious she was sleepy.

Dressed in Cam's tank-top and loose running shorts, Fab was much more comfortable in the thin, light clothes. She unfolded her legs and slid off of Cam's bed.

"We should get to sleep," Fab replied, starting to clean up the evidence of their dinner and the two and a half desserts Cam inhaled.

Cam groaned. "I'm not tired," she insisted like an overstimulated kid staying up beyond her bedtime. "Tell me more about what you've been doing for the last six years."

Fab glanced over her shoulder while she opened the garbage can. Cam was tucked into bed and waiting for a bedtime story. It was hard not to let a smile bloom on her lips. She'd never been so content to have such simple moments.

"I've been working," Fab replied when she turned to the glasses in the sink. "Building up my training clientele."

"That's it?"

Fab shrugged. "I live a simple life. I work. I spend time with Mancha. I see my mom and Ted every other weekend. Sometimes I do a little networking."

"What about friends?"

Fab rinsed a water bottle and placed it upside down on the drying rack. "I have acquaintances. Clients I socialize with from time to time. But I don't have much spare time." Working for herself meant that she was always on the clock.

Cam went quiet for a while as if selecting her words with extreme care. "And dating?"

Fab turned and leaned against the counter while she dried her hands with a dish towel. Unsure how to explain that nothing eventful had occurred in her love life for a while, she shrugged.

"Oh, come on." Cam sat up, her back to the wall as she crossed her legs underneath her. Her hair, still damp from her shower, fell over the collarbone exposed by her off-the-shoulder T-shirt. "You haven't dated at all?"

"Nobody worth mentioning." She shrugged. "You?"

"I've been spending a lot of time on my T-shirt business." Cam flipped her faded pink hair to the other side. "It's just online now, but I really want a brick and mortar place." She suddenly became very interested in the seam on the white sheet. "I want to do something tangible, you know? Not just trading on my face."

Cam didn't usually look so small. So unsure. Did she think her attractiveness was all she had to offer? Fab couldn't imagine that was true. Cam was so smart, so clever and brave and tenacious.

Of their own volition, Fab's legs animated themselves and moved across the room, carrying her to Cam's side. She eased onto the bed next to her, holding her hand to keep Cam from picking at the loose thread.

"Did you bring any of your shirts?"

Cam looked up, her face flushed with color. Scarlet dripped down her

long neck and over her chest. “Why?” Her laugh was a nervous tangle. “Are you ready to throw away your long johns and turtlenecks?”

Fab smirked. “You missed the opportunity for free advertising.” She pointed at the cameras suspended from the rigging in the ceiling.

“Great minds think alike,” she replied with a smirk. “I tried. When they searched my bags, they pulled them out.”

Fab cocked her head to the side. “Did you offer them a percentage?”

“Heck no.” She laughed, grabbing Fab by the wrist and pulling her close. “I’m about to blow up. Social media is so much bigger than the last time we were here.”

Allowing herself to be moved, Fab landed next to her. Laying on her back, there was only space for Cam to lay on her side, curled around Fab.

“Are you going to sell something other than t-shirts?”

“I don’t know.” Cam sighed as if she’d burned the last drop of gas in her tank. “Maybe stickers.”

Fab chuckled. “Stickers?”

“There’s a lot of money in vinyl stickers,” she replied with faux defensiveness. “I know this guy that draws these opossums with flower crowns. He bought a nice studio on Lincoln Road.”

Fab nodded as if any of what Cam had said made sense.

“Will you stay with me tonight?” Cam asked abruptly, her voice gentle like the salty breeze coming in through the open shutters.

Instinctively, Fab wrapped her arm around her, holding her close. “Are you feeling okay?” She wasn’t convinced that Cam wasn’t having some lingering issues after being in a tank of freezing water. The way her lips and nails had turned blue had been absolutely terrifying.

Cam snuggled against her chest before sliding her hand up Fab’s shirt, resting her hand on Fab’s bare belly. “I’m okay.” Her voice had grown softer and more distant. “I just want to be warm.”

Fab closed her eyes, wishing she’d turned the light off before she sat on

the bed.

“I’ve missed you,” Cam whispered.

The confession was microscopic. Three syllables uttered in the unhurried cadence of a yawn. It might as well have been a C-4 explosive detonated at the base of Fab’s defenses. The blast unleashed a swarm of thrashing creatures, winged and strange, fluttering out of her stomach and up her chest.

Fab couldn’t stop the rush of heat flooding her face. Couldn’t slow the thundering of her heart. Didn’t stop her lips from parting and confessing the unfortunate and terrifying truth.

“I’ve missed you, too.”

CHAPTER 36



COVERED IN MUD, hands blistered and sore, Fabiola stood at the end of the obstacle course. Her back rigid and her eyes stinging from the sweat dripping from her forehead in sheets, she could barely breathe while she waited for either Cam or her opponent to come bursting out of the woods.

They'd started the elimination challenge early that morning. So early that they were still eating breakfast when a PA knocked on the door. The last thing Fab expected to see was a woman holding a stack of folded black uniforms. Until then, noon was the earliest they'd been summoned.

Forty minutes later, they were ushered into a helicopter. It was a relay race. Fab and her opponent jumped out first. Their partners couldn't jump until they swam to shore and rang a bell.

Jumping out of the helicopter had been the easy part. Landing in the water had felt like a sledgehammer to her tailbone. Despite Fab's best effort to keep her legs straight and her feet pointing down, her form had obviously been imperfect. She'd landed hard and wrong, and the pain was still radiating up her spine.

When she'd hit the bell before her opponent, Fab waited at the foot of a rough, rocky trail. She knew it was a terrible idea to let her muscles cool down after the fast, furious swim, but she needed to make sure Cam was okay.

Pride erupted in her chest as she watched Cameron throw herself off the hovering helicopter. There was no hesitation. Fab was too far to see Cam's face, but she was sure that Cam had a determined scowl when she jumped, despite her fear of heights. They were both too focused to let their phobias overwhelm them. Not now. Not when they were so close to the end they could practically feel the pain of the government taking a chunk of their winnings in taxes.

As soon as Cam started swimming, Fab tore off down the trail. It didn't take long to overtake her opponent. The three mile path was treacherous and the male-female pair of opponents looked like they'd been up all night.

Fab's opponent, a tall, lean woman with a buzz cut, was prioritizing not breaking her neck over speed. Fab made no such reasonable decision as she blew past her, leaping over raised tree roots.

Fab pushed herself. Ignoring the pain in her body to reach the next bell stationed at the end of the trail. As she rang it, she imagined someone three miles behind her giving Cam the go ahead. Fab prayed for Cam's feet to be sure and her eyes sharp.

While Cam was just starting her run, Fab was on to a 3D puzzle. She'd already figured out it was a huge bird and was nearly finished with it by the time her opponent stumbled off the trail. Scraped up and dirty, she looked like she'd taken at least one serious tumble. Fab almost felt bad for her when she slapped the bell next to her puzzle and moved on.

If Cam had gotten out of the water first, like Fab was sure she had, she'd have a good head start. Cam's opponent looked strong and fast; she'd need every advantage to beat him. Fab meant to give it to her, no matter the cost.

The last leg of the course, an exhausting and long trek through chest-high mud while holding a rod with two buckets of water on either side, showed Fab just how much her body could hurt. When she dragged herself out of it and across the finish line, she smacked the bell and collapsed onto her back.

Now, with her part of the work done, Fab stood with drying mud caked to

her body, using her shaking hand to shield her eyes from the painfully bright afternoon sun. She didn't want to blink and miss the moment Cam came barreling out of the woods.

"Come on, come on. You can do this," Fab muttered.

She strained her hearing, desperate for any sign of Cam's progress. She wouldn't be able to see anyone until they broke through the trees thanks to the location of the mud pits, but she was hoping she might hear her.

If Cam hit the bell before her male opponent, that was it. They'd win. If she lost, they would have to race again and win best of three.

Fab's attention drifted to the production tent where her opponent was still laying on the ground with two huge fans pointed at her. Her tanned skin was pale and wrong. There was no way she had another race in her. If Fab beat her once, she was confident she could beat her again.

Pain gnawed at her coccyx. Thin tendrils of electricity curled around her spine and sliced into her bones and muscles and nerves. Fab told her body in crystal clear terms that she did not have time for this. It had to shut up and cooperate.

Every second she waited increased Fab's anxiety by a factor of a thousand. What if Cam had gotten hurt? That damn trail was a death trap. There were a thousand ways she could've broken a leg or her neck.

No. If she'd gotten hurt, the paramedics wouldn't be sitting in folding chairs in their tent. She was still running.

Fab started jogging in place, willing her muscles to stay warm. She thought she'd given Cam enough time, but that guy was so fast. The producers were usually pretty good about neutralizing any advantages one gender might have over the other, but a single puzzle at the center of three physical challenges wasn't enough of an equalizer.

Paranoia turned Fab's belly to ice. Maybe they'd won too many elimination challenges. They wanted to stack the odds against them. Force them to lose.

Fab sneered, her blood pumping hard in her neck as she wound herself up.

Mentally, Fab started preparing to run the course again. Thinking about ways she could be more efficient. There was no way she was going to let Cam do it. She was objectively the better choice given that she'd had the chance to rehydrate and rest.

Doubt was a cold, steel blade pressed to her jugular. What if they didn't win? It wasn't fair to go home now. Not after how hard they'd worked. How far they'd come.

Fab swallowed hard but she couldn't clear the sticky knot in her throat. She wasn't ready to leave Cam. To sleep without her when they'd only just started building something. To put their nascent relationship to the reality test.

Just the thought of saying goodbye made her want to puke.

No. She flexed her hands while she kicked her knees up higher as she jogged in place. Even if Fab had to run the course again and again, she wasn't going to let them get sent home. She wasn't going to let anyone tell them it was over.

Twigs snapped and leaves rustled. Fab's heart vaulted into her mouth like it had taken a running leap onto a trampoline. It was three eternities before the figure emerged from the woods.

Panting. Covered in mud. Exhausted.

Fab's heart dropped right along with the guy collapsing under the bell. Sweltering heat bent and blurred the world around her.

She didn't have time to feel the full weight of despair. The ringing from the bell Goliath slammed into was still echoing when Cam broke through the tree line. Seconds behind her competitor, Cam's eyes were wild and disoriented. From the neck down she was covered in wet, red-brown mud.

As Cam fell to her knees in front of the bell, she hit the edge with her fingertips. The faintest clank was evidence that Cam had finished the course.

So close to winning.

Fab tore off in a blind sprint toward the muddy pile of crumpled Cam. Her knees burned with the pain of gravel cutting into her skin as she slid across the dirt.

Trying to suffocate the disappointment painted clearly on Cam's sweaty, mud speckled face, Fab enveloped her in her arms. She scooped her up, wishing she could hold her closer. That she could tuck her inside her chest instead of just pressing her against it.

"I'm sorry." Cam's words were a broken whisper. A gray sky right before the rain. A hairline crack before the break. "I tried—"

The sound of Cam crying was a poison spear through Fab's gut. It spread an intolerable ache through her body.

"Stop." Fab held her tighter. "You were right behind him. There was no way you could have—"

Janette's whistle was a banshee's wail.

"It's okay, Cam. You did so good. We are *not* out, okay? I can go again." Fab tucked Cam's head underneath her chin. She wanted to say more, but the wave of emotion was already pushing at the roof of her mouth. Pressing on the back of her eyes and threatening her iron grip.

"Competitors." Janette moved toward them, cameras trailing behind her as she angled herself toward the crew behind Fab. "Six seconds separate Cameron and Rowan."

On trembling legs, Fab dragged herself up and took Cam with her. On Fab's signal, a member of the crew brought Cam a cold bottle of water. Her fair skin had turned pale with concerning red splotches. There was no doubt that Cam had given her absolute all in trying to win.

Fab rubbed her back as if that might help Cam catch her breath. As she did, she glared at the guy who was still splayed on the ground. When a PA handed him a bottle, he cracked it open and poured it on his face.

Rage churned and bubbled and pulled at Fab. It was fuel filling her empty

gas tank. She couldn't wait to destroy him.

But doubt chipped away at her bravado when he leapt to his feet, seemingly recharged. Cam was such a strong swimmer, if she couldn't get an insurmountable lead, the dude might be part shark.

Fab shook off her worry. She was going to beat him. She had to. Reminding herself that she was playing for more than money, Fab focused on Janette and readied herself to run again.

"Fabiola and Cameron, you have played so well together. It's been remarkable to watch you show up week after week and absolutely dominate." Janette paused, searching for some positive spin in the face of their slim odds. "You may no longer count as rivals." Her lip twitched like a fat house cat watching a bird land on her windowsill.

Narrowing her gaze, Fab's suspicions returned. Was that Janette's way of saying they were playing too well? That they weren't meant to win this way.

She gritted her teeth. *Sabotage.*

Janette's white veneers gleamed in the sunlight when she grinned. "And it looks like you'll get at least one more opportunity to do it again."

In her arms, Cam's trembling body sagged. "What?"

Fab waited for Janette to explain.

Janette turned to the man already cursing and shouting accusingly that everything was bullshit. "Rowan, you were given very clear instructions."

Cam reached over to the hand Fab was resting on her shoulder. She squeezed it hard, her eyes wide as they ping-ponged between Rowan and Janette.

"Did he cheat?" Fab whispered.

Shaking her head, Cam looked unsure. "I was ahead of him until the mud pit." She was still breathing hard. "He's like six inches taller than me so he didn't sink in as deep as me. He moved through it so fast, but I wasn't watching him."

"All participants were specifically told that they could not drop the

buckets until they emerged from the mud pit,” Janette explained.

Fab flashed back in time. She’d balanced the rod carrying a bucket of water on each side on her neck when she climbed the steps out of the mud pit. It had been slow and agonizing.

“Rowen, you dropped your buckets before you ran out of the pit.”

Rowen, apparently forgetting that everything they did was captured on video, demanded proof. As if production had been expecting it, a PA emerged from one of the tents. A white parasol in one hand and a tablet in the other.

CHAPTER 37



FRESH FROM THE long shower needed to get rid of all the mud, Fab was sprawled out on Cam's bed. Face down and wearing Cam's shorts and tank top, her cute farmer's tan from that day's challenge was visible.

Cam tried not to smile as she approached her with an ice pack. "I can't believe you sprained your ass."

Fab groaned before turning her head toward her. "Hilarious."

Sitting on the edge of the bed, Cam placed the cold pack gently over her tailbone. "Are you sure you don't want the medics to come look at it? It's really hot to the touch."

"Stop looking for excuses to touch my butt."

Cam laughed. "I didn't know I needed an excuse." She slid her hand over Fab's smooth hamstring and up the back of her thigh, stopping at the edge of the running shorts.

Fab moaned her approval as Cam massaged the muscles she was sure were as sore as hers. As she worked out the tension, Fab relaxed. A rare occurrence.

Moments like this were numbered. Even if Cam didn't want to think about it, she couldn't ignore the truth. There was just one challenge left. And then the finale. Winning wasn't going to keep them together much longer.

"What are you going to do without me in Atlanta?"

Cam intended her tone to sound flirty, but there was a halting waver in it. The unspoken question of *what-happens-next* was lingering beneath the surface.

The ice pack tumbled onto the bed as Fab turned to lay on her side. She reached out for Cam, pulling her in.

“I don’t want to think about the future,” Cam confessed, nuzzling into the crook of Fab’s arm. “I don’t want to deal with all the crap that comes next.”

“Me neither,” she admitted quietly.

Cam inhaled the scent of Fab’s damp skin, the fragrance of her shampoo. They’d been together for nearly two months, but in so many ways it was like they’d just started getting to know each other. It was too soon to think about parting.

“I know we talked about it once before.” Cam hated the cold rush of shame that followed the memory of that conversation. In hushed whispers in a dark closet, they’d planned on Cam moving to Atlanta. A plan that Cam crumpled up, threw in a garbage can, and set on fire before flattening it with a bulldozer. A fiery pancake of regret.

Every second Fab didn’t respond robbed another year off of Cameron’s life. They hadn’t even had sex yet, something Cam was sure Fab was intentionally waiting to do. They’d played around with the idea of waiting to make sex a reward for winning, but if she knew Fab at all, it was a final barrier. Maybe talking about something as real as the post-show-world was too much too soon.

Doubt and anxiety forced Cam to grip the conversation with both hands and use her entire body to pull it back. “If it’s too soon to talk about—”

“No.” Fab ran her fingers through Cam’s hair, her blunt nails scraping her scalp. “We should talk about it.”

Cam closed her eyes, relishing the sensation of Fab holding her close. Of her not running from the difficult topic.

“I know I still have a lot to prove to you,” Cam whispered against the

column of Fab's neck. "I'm not trying to diminish that or rush anything—"

"I don't think you are." Fab's voice was steady and sure.

Relief eased some of the restlessness creeping up Cam's legs and coiling around her stomach. "I can still come to Atlanta. I mean . . . if you want me to. I can get my own place — I'm not trying to move in—"

"What about your t-shirt business?"

Cam's head snapped back so she could look Fab in the eye. Adjusting herself on the pillow, she held Fab's gaze.

"I'm sure I can find a storage unit and FedEx in the greater Atlanta area." Her stomach fluttered at the prospect of being in Fab's city with her.

The smile that crept over Fab's full lips was slow but sure. As if she'd tried to stop it but it broke free from her defenses. "Is that what you want? To come to Atlanta?"

Cam reached out, running her thumb along Fab's bottom lip. "Only if you want me there."

Fab closed her eyes, obviously indulging in the small contact. Reveling in it. Maybe she was wishing she could package up every moment together and take it with her too.

"Of course, I want you there," Fab confessed, her voice somewhere between a breath and a whisper.

The soft words were a syringe of adrenaline jammed straight into Cam's heart. "So we do this? We date?"

Fab chuckled, her face brightening. "Can you imagine?"

Imagination was something Cam had plenty of stocked away. For years Cameron had fantasized about what life might have been like if she hadn't made such a colossal mistake. She pictured them binging Cam's favorite mysteries in exchange for Cam sitting through Fab's romcoms. Imagined what it would be like to do laundry together, argue over what to eat for dinner, make deals over whose turn it was to clean the litter box.

Cam ran her fingers through Fab's long, dark hair. Simultaneously

wishing for the moment to never end and eager to see what was waiting for them outside their bubble. “Does this mean you trust me again?”

Some of the light in Fab’s bright, brown eyes dimmed. She didn’t like being reminded that they still had a foundation to repair. “I’m trying.”

The truth was a clenched fist around Cam’s heart. “I know.”

Fab’s arms were as steady around her body as they had been earlier that afternoon. “We just need time.”

“There’s nothing I want more than time with you.” Cam closed the gap, taking Fab’s bottom lip between hers.

The urgency between them had transformed to a savoring. A slow, methodical appreciation. Neither of them could pretend that a single moment could be taken for granted.

With the reverence reserved for classical paintings, for ancient works of precious art, Cameron kissed her. Focused on the warmth of Fab’s mouth, she parted Fab’s lips with the tip of her tongue.

Fab responded with a rumbling moan as she deepened their kiss. The cameras didn’t stop her from claiming her lips, but she did throw the sheet over them. This time, Fab only covered their bodies.

CHAPTER 38



A MORNING RAINSTORM moved quickly over their island paradise, but it left a thin, cold drizzle behind. The kind that continued even after the sun reappeared.

When Fabiola decided to lay out on the deck in her bathing suit, Cameron followed, her scattered tattoos on display thanks to her revealing lime green bikini. She'd intended to sneak away while Cam was in the shower that morning. To steal a few minutes to talk to the crew and ask for a little favor. They probably already knew that Cam was turning thirty, but she was sure Cam expected everyone to forget. Fab included.

"Do you remember who's left?" Cam asked from where she was resting her head on Fab's abdomen. They didn't have enough room on the small wrap-around deck to make a t-shape with their bodies, so Cam had kicked her feet up on the side of the bungalow, resting her heels near the window frame.

Fab continued playing with the tips of Cam's hair. The ones splayed on her chest and spilling over the side. The final vestiges of pink. "There's that Brian guy," she responded with little effort. "And that team of dudes who look like bodybuilding twins." She searched her memory banks. "Is that it?"

"I think that's it," Cam agreed. "Should we come up with a strategy?"

Cam's head bobbed when Fab chuckled. "Yeah. Win."

"Fantastic plan," Cam said when she turned her head to look up at her. In

the sunlight her eyes were incandescent. “You think anybody else has thought of that?”

Fab smirked. “With the exception of Brian’s partner, those are some real beasts we have left.” She pictured the behemoths in their path.

“Aisha,” Cam responded with Brian’s partner’s name. “She’s sweet, and she must be pretty good if they’re still in the game. I doubt they’ve been facing many challenges where one person can carry their partner’s weight.”

Fab nodded. Cam was probably right. Based on what they’d experienced before they were banished, the main challenges relied just as much on teamwork as the elimination obstacles. Each team was only as strong as their weakest link. No one was getting carried to the end.

“What do you think the final is going to be like?” Cam ran her fingertips over the long scab on Fab’s hand. The one she’d acquired during the most recent relay obstacle course. She hadn’t felt whatever gouged her skin, but she guessed it was a branch from the many trees in her way while she ran.

“If it’s anything like these last seven weeks. . . grueling,” Fab admitted, feeling the accumulation of aches and pains in her body. “I don’t know if I’d rather see Brian in the finale or in the last elimination challenge.” Her pulse jumped at the memory of his obnoxious face. “He’ll be over-confident that he’s competing against a female team,” she decided. “We can play into that in a finale, let him think he has an advantage, let him put in bare mins, and then strike. We’ll have won before he even knows what happened.”

Cam rolled over to her side, her face brightened by her smile. “God, you’re so hot when you’re all Machiavellian and intense.”

Fab was going to take issue with the comparison, but Cam whirled around and kissed her before she opened her mouth.

With the cold, thin rain landing like needles around them, Fab wrapped her arms around Cam’s waist and pulled her on top of her. She wondered how serious she was about going to Atlanta. If she would really be willing to rent an apartment there just to date her.

As Fab lost herself in Cam's lips, she doubted she would really let her get a separate place. After the years they'd lost, she wasn't sure she could let her go . . . even if it was the wisest thing to do.

"I thought we were going to be strategizing," Fab whispered before kissing a line down the column of Cam's throat. She paused briefly over the deep bruise starting to heal on her neck. She didn't add to the mark, but she pressed on it with her tongue.

Cam shuddered, a strangled sound somewhere between a cry and a moan breaking free.

"We're working," Cam replied in a moan, her hips slipping between Fab's parted thighs.

Fab hooked her legs around Cam, pulling her in as she ran her palms over her bare, dripping back. "What are we working on exactly?" She scraped her teeth along Cam's throat before remembering the cameras and rolling Cam onto her side.

"Why'd you stop?" Cam complained, her face flushed despite the cool rain and soft breeze. It was the closest thing to being in air conditioning they'd had since being banished. "They're not going to use—"

"They can still see us," Fab reminded her a second after she'd reminded herself. It was easy to forget they were being watched outside where the cameras were better concealed.

Cam sighed before dropping her head dramatically against Fab's chest. "Maybe we should lose so we can get out of here already." She fiddled with the seam on the strap of Fab's bathing suit.

Fab laughed at the absurd suggestion. "After all this hard work? After being buried alive, and jumping out of helicopters, and surviving hypothermia?"

Cam ran her fingertips along the curve of Fab's jaw, gently turning her face down to her. "I would give it up for a normal night with you."

Before Fab called bullshit on the extreme sentiment, she locked onto

Cam's eyes. The sincerity waiting for her there was startling.

"All I want is you," Cam repeated softly, her hand cradling Fab's cheek as if she meant to keep her eyes on her. As if she needed a witness for what she was saying. "I'd be happy to give you my half of the winnings to prove it. You're all that matters."

The confession felt so true. Fab's racing heart reacted before the rest of her.

"I don't need you to prove it to me. Not like that." Fab covered Cam's hand with her own. "It's never been about the money. Not the first time and not now."

Cam's eyes never stopped moving. Never stopped searching Fab's face. "Then how can I prove it to you? How can I show you what you mean to me, Fabiola?"

Fab leaned in again, kissing her with a renewed sense of purpose. Of urgency.

She used her lips, her tongue, her teeth to show Cam that all she needed was her. Their connection, one that she could trust blindly, could count on to be there and support her unconditionally, was all she'd ever wanted.

Cam's body, wet and cool, pressed harder against her side.

"I want you," Cam groaned before taking Fab's bottom lip between her teeth and pulling hard.

The pain sent a throbbing rush through Fab's body. It simultaneously cut off her connection to her brain and ignited the desire she was having a hard time containing.

"Bathroom?" Fab whispered.

"Fuck yes."

CHAPTER 39



HALF of the bottles and jars and tubes Cam kept scattered around the bathroom sink fell to the floor with a glorious crash when Fab picked her up and slid her onto the counter. Tossing her head back, Cam hit the mirror while Fab kicked the door closed behind her.

The mess scattered all over the bathroom floor didn't slow Fab down. Her ferocity turned the thumping desire thrashing in Cam's body into an all-out rave. Cam loved when Fabiola was like this. So starved. So focused on her that she didn't even see the world around them.

Despite the faucet digging into her spine, Cam leaned back again, playing keep-away with her lips.

Fab followed, trying to kiss her, but Cam held herself just out of reach. Dark eyes blazed like an uncontrolled wildfire, desperately seeking oxygen and more material to devour. It singed Cam's resolve. She was never good at playing hard to get. Her game vanished into smoke.

Strong hands gripped Cam's thighs hard before Fab pulled her forward in a single, decisive move. The display of strength and control was dizzying.

Cam moaned and wrapped her legs around Fab's hips, submitting to her kiss. In a flurry of hands, Fab started unfastening the knot on Cam's bathing suit top.

"Just rip it off," she begged, her hands in Fab's wet hair, making fists and

pulling her hard against her neck.

Without hesitating. Without asking if Cam was sure. Fab clawed at the front of Cam's bikini top. The hard yank made the material dig into Cam's back, leaving a hot line burned into her skin.

Biting down on her bottom lip, Cam stifled a moan.

The material snapped under Fab's force, but only enough to tear a little. It was all Fab needed to pull the top over Cam's head and throw it on the floor.

With an equally decisive tug, Cam pulled down the straps on Fab's bathing suit. Wiggling out of it, Fab let the dark material pool at her feet.

Cam stopped to take in the sight of her. Her skin criss-crossed with the evidence of various tans. T-shirts, tank tops, bathing suits, shorts of varying lengths, they'd all left a different pattern on Fab's smooth, olive skin.

"You're so beautiful," Cam whispered, greedily taking in Fab's muscular, nude form.

For a moment, Fab allowed herself to be admired, as if Cam might appreciate the hard work that went in to such a body. She pretended to need a second to throw her hair up in her trademark high-pony, but Cam knew better. She wanted her to look.

Cam slid off the counter. She pressed herself to Fab until her back was against the closed door. Holding Fab's ravenous gaze, she wrapped her arms around her waist and held her flush to her.

The sensation of Fab's naked body against hers was overwhelming. She kissed her again, drunk from the salty-sweet lips that knew exactly what she liked. Knew that she didn't want to be kissed as much as she needed to be consumed.

Fab was more than willing to give her what she needed. Her tongue, hot and hard, invaded her mouth, leaving Cam powerless to do anything but be ravaged.

Before she let Fab have what she wanted, Cam kept her pressed to the bathroom door. Pulling away from their kiss, she looked at her, eyes wide

and innocent. “Me first.” She paused, taking great pains to drag her teeth across her bottom lip very slowly. “Please.”

Fab’s dark gaze rolled over her, considering the request. Her attention snagged on Cam’s mouth, on the bottom lip she was very intentionally still biting.

When Fab silently acquiesced, Cam pounced. Diving forward, she went directly for the place at the base of Fab’s neck that always brought her to her knees. She sunk her teeth into the tender flesh, earning a soft, breathy moan in response.

Her body sagged beneath Cam’s expert mouth, using the door to support her weight more than she’d probably like to admit. Cam didn’t give her any quarter. She cupped one of Fab’s breasts, taking the hard point between her fingers and squeezing.

Increasingly louder moans were Cam’s reward as she ran her lips over Fab’s boney clavicle, teasing her with a light touch.

Sliding her open palms over Fab’s chest, Cam began her slow descent down Fab’s body. When she dropped to her knees, she closed her eyes so she might fully engage in the act of tasting her.

The sudden and sharp pain of Fab’s fist tangled in her hair stopped Cam before she slid her tongue over the smooth flesh glistening with arousal.

Cam’s eyes flew open as she glanced up at Fabiola, her bicep flexed and her forearm tensed as she held her back. The sight alone was enough to devastate. Cam’s arousal pounded so hard, she was sure Fab would barely need to touch her.

“What’s wrong?” Cam’s voice was husky and thick with desire.

Fab didn’t respond. Instead, she turned to the side, leaning against the towel rack. Deliberately, she raised her leg and propped her foot on the empty hamper behind Cam. Before letting Cam look at her, she turned Cam’s head toward the mirror now at her side.

The sight was a hot rush pulsating through Cam’s system and sending her

arousal into painful new heights. She wished she could capture the image of her on her knees about to worship Fab's body.

Cam cursed, her head spinning.

Fab's top lip twitched into a momentary smirk before she turned Cam's head away from the mirror again. She started pulling her hand out of her hair, but Cam stopped her. Looking up at her, she covered Fab's hand with hers, making it clear she very much wanted it there.

Pulling the hair at the base of Cam's neck, Fab made a fist again. The electric pull set Cam's skin on fire.

With another curse, Cam pulled Fab's foot off the hamper and tossed her thigh onto her shoulder. Fab didn't miss a beat. She hooked her leg into Cam's back as if it had been her idea to put it there.

Cam didn't care about the details. She dove into Fab, moaning at the taste of her on her tongue.

Fab cursed at the suddenness of Cam's attentions. Cam had intended to take her time. To savor Fab slowly the way she imagined she would. The way she'd fantasized about all those nights she'd missed her. But as Cam filled her mouth with the taste of her, any hope of self-control vanished.

She lost herself in the heady effect of Fab's arousal, coating her lips, her tongue, her chin. She dove deeper, needing more of her.

Moaning her approval, Fab's body shivered with every targeted attack by Cam's tongue. To keep her still, Cam hooked her arms around Fab's hips, locking her in place.

Balancing on one leg proved impossible. As Fab trembled and cursed, Cam twisted her around, letting her lean against the counter. With something holding her up other than one quivering leg, Fab started grinding harder against Cam's tongue.

The effect was immediate and devastating. Cam had to resist the urge to ease the painful desire pulling between her own thighs as Fab's panting became more frantic. As her body tensed and then she stopped breathing after

a sharp and decisive inhale.

Knowing she was close, Cam didn't let up. Instead, she worked faster, moaning against Fab as she felt her come apart.

Fab's orgasm was almost enough to take Cam down too, but she stayed focused. She maintained her rhythm until Fab put her hand on her forehead. The international sign for please-stop-or-I-will-definitely-die.

Cam sat back on her heels and stared up at her. Fab was a flushed, sweaty mess, and she loved every moment of it. Slowly, she slid her mouth over her inner thigh, leaving a row of soft kisses.

Breathless, Fab extended her hand, pulling Cam to stand on wobbly legs. In a fluid motion, she traded places with Cam, pressing her against the bathroom counter again.

"I taste so good on you," Fab whispered before running her tongue up Cam's throat and over her lips as if erasing trace evidence.

Cam moaned, tossing her head back to give Fab better access to everything she wanted. "I want you so fucking bad."

Fab's lips brushed her neck when she smiled. Cam knew the expression she wore. An arrogant little grin that drove her insane in moments like this.

"What do you want?" Fab pressed on Cam's bruise with her tongue.

"I want you to touch me. . . please." Cam's heart was beating so hard, her mind focused on the throbbing desire she needed satisfied.

Unhurried, Fab ran her fingertips down Cam's throat and over her chest. The light sensation over her hard nipple sent another rush of heat to what was already an inferno.

"Touch you where?" Fab moved her fingers, bringing them up to Cam's mouth. Sucking at them greedily, Cam didn't need verbal commands.

The sensation of Fab's wet fingers over her nipple made Cam whimper. "Touch me everywhere," Cam whined, simultaneously wishing Fab would just give her what she needed and wanting to draw things out. There would only be one first moment like this. A first time together after such a long

absence. They'd never get this fire, this longing, again.

Fab dropped her hand, running her open palm down Cam's side before kissing her hard and releasing her lips. "Tell me what you want," her voice was dark, insistent.

"I want you," Cam replied, intentionally coy. She knew what Fab wanted her to say, but she was trying to make her work for it, too.

Fab ran her fingers along the top of her bikini, lightly touching the sensitive skin along the edge. "You want me to what?"

Cam's hand slid over Fab's bicep and down her arm. "Please," she groaned. "You know what I need." She curled her fingers over Fab's hand and squeezed.

Kissing her again, Fab was rough, growing impatient. All Cam wanted her to do was tear off her remaining clothes and claim her.

"Tell me," she growled against her lips, pressing her forehead against Cam's.

Cam bit down on her bottom lip, she couldn't play anymore. She was only hurting herself. "I need you to make me come. Please," she whispered, her tone hot and hoarse.

Fab's body stiffened. She liked that.

"Please," Cam repeated more urgently, her hips bucking as if she could force Fab's hand just a little lower.

Unable to resist, Fab tugged at the lime green bow on Cam's bikini. With one side unfastened, Fab ran her fingers lightly along Cam's newly exposed flesh and moaned.

"I'm so fucking wet," Cam groaned, throwing her arms around Fab's neck and pulling her close. "Didn't I tell you how bad I wanted you?"

Even Fab's light touch was almost enough to send Cam flying over the edge. She was so close. So ready.

"Please," Cam cried again.

Fab wouldn't touch her any harder. She wanted to watch her writhe and

beg, a kink Cam was usually more than happy to indulge, but now she needed release more than she wanted to play. Tipping her hips up again, she tried to rock against Fab's fingers, the ones running the length of her. The ones teasing her entrance just enough to make her want to cry.

"Tell me it's mine," Fab whispered against the shell of her ear.

Cam dug her nails into Fab's back, dizzy from the blast of arousal caused by her hot breath and hotter request.

"It's yours," Cam managed through a strangled whisper as Fab's fingers pushed just a millimeter into her. "Fuck, Fab. It's yours."

As a reward, Fab finally slid her fingers over her aching clit, sending a rush of heat pounding between her thighs. Cam couldn't help grinding against her fingers. If she had a few seconds of Fab's fingers there, she'd finally find relief.

Fab slid down again, teasing her opening. The anticipation was too much, Cam was either going to have an orgasm or she was going to die. Maybe both.

"Tell me you're mine," Fab demanded.

"Fuck." Cam's eyes rolled into the back of her head. She wasn't sure she could have an orgasm without being touched, but it was starting to feel very possible.

"Tell me," Fab repeated, her fingertips dipping into her.

"I'm yours," Cam cried.

Fab plunged deep into her, turning Cam's vision to black as she snapped her eyes closed. Fab dropped to the floor, kneeling in front of Cam and using her mouth while her fingers slammed into Cam in a hard, measured tempo.

The moment Fab's soft lips circled her, Cam clamped down, grinding hard against Fab's eager tongue. She wanted to last more than three seconds, but there was no room in the stuffy bathroom for pride.

"I'm yours," Cam repeated as her entire body shook, and the pent up energy of a supernova erupted from her core. "I'm yours."

CHAPTER 40



CAM EYED FAB with dread and suspicion. Since their escapade in the bathroom that morning, she'd been weird. Not just her usual broody, stoic self, but kind of standoffish and distracted.

She'd wanted to make a joke about turning thirty with a bang, but Fab wouldn't sit down long enough for a conversation.

After an hour of her continuously going in and out of the bungalow, it was obvious that Fab regretted what they did and couldn't stand to be around her. Upon making that discovery, Cam decided not to mention her birthday. The last thing she wanted was Fab thinking she was trying to score sympathy points so she would pay attention to her. Cam did want her attention, but not her pity.

When there was a knock at the door, Cam looked up from her game of solitaire with homemade cards. She didn't have a chance to consider answering it before Fab bolted out of her bed where she'd been sitting like she was waiting for her mom to pick her up from camp.

Fab was back to her jeans and knit sweater despite the heat. As if she would rather be hot than continue to wear Cam's clothes. As she zoomed past her to get to the door, Fab's hair, loose and glossy, trailed behind her.

Whispering at the door was Cam's next clue that something was amiss. Usually, production came in and dropped something off. They also never

waited for someone to answer the door, they just always barged in.

Cam's empty stomach tensed. Had Fab regretted what they'd done so badly that she'd quit? Was she coordinating a trip back home?

Glancing around the room, Cam confirmed that Fab's bed was made and her bags neatly packed and arranged at the foot of her bed near the sliding glass door.

She always keeps it like that. Cam tried to reason with herself. She'd tell you if she was leaving. Doubt gnawed at her. But would she?

Nausea rocked Cam's system like the time she rode Thunder Mountain six times in a row because Disney World had stayed open during a hurricane watch and most people had the good sense not to go to a theme park.

Cam closed her eyes, wishing she could leave her body and avoid Fab dumping her and quitting the show. She'd pushed Fab too fast. They shouldn't have had sex. Fab wasn't ready and now she was freaking out. Cam should've known better. Should have seen that Fab wasn't going to be ready until they'd had more time together. More time to repair—

The door slammed shut like Fab had closed it with her foot. When she opened her eyes, Cam expected Fab to be gone.

Instead, she was walking toward her with a tiny white cake, a tiny sparkler sticking out of it and sending silvery sparks in every direction. Under one arm was a bottle of champagne. Tucked under the other was a pair of glass flutes.

The light from the sparkler danced in Fab's eyes as she grinned, broad and wide and beaming.

"Happy birthday," Fab said, carefully sliding the cake onto the table so she wouldn't drop the things wedged under her arms. "I'm sorry I couldn't get a fruit tart—"

Cam cut off the unnecessary apology with her lips on hers. Relief that Fab hadn't been avoiding her due to cold feet overwhelmed her. As it faded, she made room for gratitude that she'd not only remembered her birthday, but

planned something special.

Fab kissed her back while she was setting the bottle and glasses down. When her hands were free, she wrapped them around Cam and lifted her.

Reflexively, Cam hooked her long legs around Fab's waist, attempting to kiss her while smiling.

"It's going to burn out before you make a wish," Fab said between messy kisses.

Cam slid off of her. "Don't make me say it."

Fab cocked her head to the side.

"You're setting me up, Fabiola. I'm not one of the characters in your rom coms." She crossed her arms over her chest.

The picture of innocence, Fab refused to acknowledge that she understood.

Cam shook her head. "I'm *not* going to say that I don't need your makeshift candle because I already got my wish."

Fab's face was brighter than the fizzling sparkler. She yanked Cam toward her, folding her arms around her. "You said it."

Unable to stop smiling, Cam nuzzled against her neck, indulging in her scent. "I most definitely did not."

Fab's throat rumbled with her contained chuckle.

After they'd eaten half of the small, round cake, Cam convinced Fab that she didn't have to combat heatstroke on account of her turning thirty. Dressed in similar jogging shorts and t-shirts, they sat huddled together on the steps leading into the water. Their feet in the cool, clear sea. On the horizon, the setting sun had painted the sky in romantic pinks and oranges just for her. Another gift to commemorate the milestone.

"I'm going to miss this," Cam admitted before passing Fab the half empty bottle of champagne.

Instead of complaining about empty calories and dehydration and electrolytes, Fab took the bottle. Just like she'd taken the huge piece of cake

Cam served her.

“The lack of AC?” Fab smirked before taking a conservative sip of the dry bubbly.

“Shut up.” Cam bumped into her with her shoulder. “This really has been so much more than I could ever have dreamed.” She took a deep, cleansing breath as if she might be able to carry the place home in her lungs. “When I was preparing for the trip, nine weeks seemed like a lifetime. But now that it’s almost over—”

“It feels like a blink.”

Cam nodded. “I don’t know where all the time went.”

Fab took another swig and passed the warming bottle back. “We sure did waste a lot of it fighting.” She moved her foot, sending ripples over the calm water. “I wasted it.”

Cam set the bottle down on the deck behind them. “Don’t do that. If it wasn’t for me, we never would’ve been in this situation.”

Fab’s dark eyes bore into hers, she was always holding back so much. Cam would give anything to know what she was thinking. “I’m sorry I was so angry.”

“You had every right to be.” She slid her hand into Fab’s and rested her head on her shoulder. Cam didn’t want to think about the past anymore, but she would never say so.

They sat quietly, watching the sun burn away as it sunk into the ocean beyond, listening to the water lapping against the wooden steps and gently sloping, rocky shoreline.

Cam closed her eyes and allowed herself to be lulled by the perfectly peaceful moment. It was harder to resist the urge to tell Fab that she loved her this way, but she let herself be fully present anyway.

“I’m going to miss this, too,” Fab said softly. “Being here with you.” She ran her fingertips over Cam’s forearm, touching her so faintly that Cam’s skin had no business feeling the touch so deeply. “This is the happiest I’ve

ever been.” Fab turned her head to look at her, her burnt honey eyes pinning her in place. “We’re trapped.” Her lips curved into a gentle smile. “But I’ve never felt so free.”

A deep and penetrating warmth dripped into Cam’s chest before flooding her organs and tissue and skin. Fab’s confession mirrored hers.

Running her fingers through Fab’s loose hair, Cam locked her in her gaze. “You’re everything.”

Fab’s eyes slipped closed as Cam cupped her face. She floated forward, letting Cam pull her in.

Gently, they kissed, stress and worry and fear falling away like the early evening heat. There was no doubt that Cam was going to follow Fab to Atlanta. She would follow her anywhere.

“Thank you,” Cam whispered against Fab’s lips. “For this whole birthday thing.” She leaned back. “I was kind of freaked out about turning thirty.”

Fab’s dark, arching brows shot up her forehead. “Why?”

Cam winced. “I don’t know.” She dropped her gaze to the water covering her feet. “It feels like I should have a lot more figured out by now, you know? Like I should be a serious adult.”

Fab stood and held out her hand. “Maybe serious is overrated.”

A nervous chuckle bubbled up from Cam’s chest as she cautiously accepted Fab’s extended hand.

In a quick, confident motion, Fab pulled her to her feet and unceremoniously tossed her into the water. Shock turned Cam’s brain sluggish as she caught up with her sudden floundering in chest-deep water.

Landing with a splash next to her, Fab dunked herself under the water, tossing her head back and smoothing her hair as she emerged. Dark eyeliner smudged under her eyes as Fab cleared the water from her face. She smiled a bright, devastating smile before pulling Cam close and claiming her with a kiss.

CHAPTER 41



UNDER THE STADIUM lights trained on the clearing, Fab used her forearm to wipe the sweat beading on her face. They hadn't even started yet and the three thousand percent humidity was already sapping her energy.

"What do you think?" Cam asked, her hair in the same double fishtail braids she'd put in Fab's hair.

Fab scanned the obstacles. There were two identical twelve-foot high structures. They looked like doorways for giants.

"I think we have to do pull-ups all the way up. Climb to the top by moving a bar up to those pegs." Fab pointed to the rungs dotting the side of the frame.

"That's impossible." Cam's eyes widened.

"It'll be about rhythm," Fab assured her. "We will have to do it in tandem, no doubt."

"What? Do I have to be strapped to your back or something?"

Fab eyed the obstacle again. If it worked the way she expected, they would have to move a bar up the rungs. If they got a good rhythm, it would be as easy as doing ten pull-ups. Ten pull-ups and they were in the final.

"There's no way one person can carry two bodies up this thing. It's about form, not raw strength. We have to work together. My guess? We have to move a single bar at the same time."

Cam used the bottom of her t-shirt to dry her flushed face. “You think that’s even possible? We’d have to move in perfect unison or we won’t move at all.”

Fab agreed.

“And we’ll either be going up against two musclebound beasts or—”

Fab put her hand on Cam’s shoulder to stop her. “Don’t get ahead of yourself. We’ve gotten here moving one step at a time. This is just another task.”

“Yeah,” Cam scoffed. “Another task we have to win or we go home with nothing. After all this—”

Fab pulled her in by her waistband. “Nothing?”

Cam smirked, throwing her arms around Fab’s neck. “I suppose you’re right. I’ve got my prize. Anything else is icing on the cake.” The exaggerated wistfulness in her tone and the tossing back of her head made it clear she was being sappy just for her.

Fab indulged in a kiss before a member of the production crew called for them to take their places.

“We got this, okay?” She reached over, giving Cam’s hand a squeeze while standing on their marks.

One way or another, it was going to be the last time they stood there. At the center of the clearing, watching a production van’s lights illuminate the half-tunnel of pruned trees and thick, tropical vegetation.

Cam was right, it did feel like she’d already won, but she wanted the life changing money too.

“They probably thought they won,” Cam muttered when the van lights appeared in the distance.

Fab waited for her to explain.

“The remaining team,” Cam added. “They’re probably celebrating tonight. Getting all dehydrated.” She glanced over at Fab, a smirk on her lips.

“Don’t get cocky,” she warned. “Think about the team we have to face

first. The team that made it all the way to the end. They've gotten a second chance when it counts. They will have a ton of momentum."

Cam's smirk disappeared. With her hands clasped like a soldier behind her back, she nodded. "They'll be tired though."

Fab mimicked her posture, her eyes trained on the tunnel. "Assume they're going to catch a second wind."

As soon as the figures emerged from the van, Fab gritted her teeth. Judging by the size differential of the dark forms, it could only be Brian and his partner. Fab wanted to see him in the final. To mop the floor with his arrogant face just before she beat him.

Oh, well. Beating him now was just going to have to do.

FAB HAD BEEN RIGHT on in her assessment. After Janette did her usual introduction, explaining the twist to Brian and Aisha while reminding the viewers at home, they'd been snapped into harnesses. Just as Fab predicted, she and Cam had been attached to each other by an extra clip fixed to their chests.

They were placed under the doorway with the pegs running up the frame. The metal bar they'd been given fit into the slanted rungs.

"I'll work backward," Fab whispered to the crew member placing them on their marks. She glanced to the side where Brian was barking orders at an exhausted looking Aisha.

Quickly, Fab spun them around so she was now standing on the side with the rungs tilted toward her. Their opponents didn't notice the switch. They probably hadn't run through the obstacle like Fab had and realized one position was harder than the other and should be occupied by the person with the best upper body strength.

Cam couldn't stop watching Brian. He was bigger than she remembered

and Aisha was smaller. “Are you sure he can’t just muscle her all the way up?”

Fab’s usually stoic face flashed with worry. She wasn’t admitting it, but she was having the same fear.

“Look at me,” Fab whispered. “He might be able to drag her up the first few, but there is no way he can make it all the way up. He’s not Superman.”

Cam nodded, letting Fab’s confidence calm her.

“But we do have to go fast,” Fab admitted, her dark eyes heavy under the weight of her confession. “We won’t survive a mistake unless he makes a bigger one. Our best hope is perfect form and speed.”

Cam shoved her anxiety deep within herself. “We can do this.” She shook out her arms and rolled her neck.

Fab responded with a sharp, decisive nod. “Keep your elbows bent at ninety degrees and your core tight. Apply equal pressure with both hands so we don’t wobble. We lift on two.”

Wiggling her brows, Cam smirked. “Oh, I keep it tight.”

Fab’s blush was hidden by her already heat-streaked skin. “Focus.”

Cam laughed. She’d said it to be intentionally cheesy, but as she stood there, gripping a metal bar propped under her chin, she realized Fab really was the prize. She’d gone there seeking forgiveness and left with so much more than she ever hoped. Cam’s driving motivation wasn’t about some big check, it was about giving Fab the chance to do what she wanted with the money. About fulfilling her dreams.

“Contestants, are we ready to go?” Janette appeared at the edge of the clearing.

Cam took a deep breath as she gripped the bar hard. Moving the thing was going to hurt like hell. There was no way their hands wouldn’t be shredded by the end of the night.

Fab’s expression turned to laser focus. Her eyes were fixed on Cam, but it was obvious that she was looking through her. She was in game mode.

Singularly concentrating on getting the bar up the contraption one pull up at a time.

Ten, Cam reminded herself. Just ten pull-ups. She did more than that on a daily basis. Her hands trembled as she gripped the bar harder, preparing to explode off the ground. She felt a little like a rocket waiting for blast off. Although she doubted rockets had sweaty palms to contend with.

“The first team to the top qualifies for the chance to win half a million dollars tomorrow,” Janette reminded them.

Tomorrow. Cam held her breath. They were so close.

Janette’s gold whistle trilled loudly into the hot, humid night.

“One,” Fab hissed.

Without missing a beat, they lifted the metal bar to the first rung they could reach. Being limited by the shortest person on the team meant that Cam’s knees scraped the dirt when she got into pull-up position.

“Two!” Fab struggled to breathe and talk, their bodies swinging awkwardly into each other as they worked at opposing ends of the bar.

The pull-up was easy. Moving the bar vertically into the next cradle an inch above the last was a nightmare.

Every second they hung there trying to coordinate the movement was draining. Sweat poured in sheets down Cam’s body as she tried again to match Fab’s exact movements. Nerves were clouding her vision, making it hard not to be a moment too soon or a second too late. She didn’t dare to look to her side to see whether their opponents had figured it out.

“You got this, babe,” Fab strained, a previously unseen vein in her forehead pulsing as her olive skin turned a deep, troubling shade of red.

“Let me count,” Cam managed, trying to access the meditative state she achieved during some of her more challenging yoga practices.

Fab replied with a curt nod, her nostrils flaring while she tried to keep her breathing even.

They tried again and again, but the bar wouldn’t do more than jump up

before landing hard in the starting rung they couldn't escape. It couldn't be right. Their method had to be flawed.

"One at a time," Cam choked out, gesturing toward her right hand with her eyes.

Fab looked dubious, but she nodded, signaling for Cam to take the lead.

"One," Cam gripped the bar tight. "Two."

They lifted one side, easily sliding it over the peg above.

Cam's heart pounded in her ears. Her muscles ignited with the electric surge of possibility.

They'd figured out the trick, now all they had to do was finish first.

CHAPTER 42



THE CORK FLEW OUT of the champagne bottle, hitting the window frame with a dramatic *tack* before landing somewhere behind Fab's bed. An effervescent stream erupted from the matte black bottle and spilled on the tiled bungalow floor.

"We're going to the mother freaking final!" Cam lifted the bottle above her head before taking a decisive swig.

Fab couldn't help but laugh when the gifted bubbly ran down the sides of her mouth in two rivers. Everything in her back and upper body ached. Her hands and forearms burned like she was bleeding internally. She didn't know how Cam could even stand to lift the bottle. It had to be the adrenaline of winning. Of knowing they'd made it out of the grueling elimination contest with just one hurdle left to face.

When Cam handed her the bottle, she couldn't help but accept it. "Just a little," she warned. "You heard Janette. Tomorrow—"

"I promise to rehydrate like a champ, Fabiola!" Cam tipped the bottom of the bottle toward her, urging her to drink. "Let's celebrate for five minutes, yeah?"

Fab smirked and took a modest sip.

"I can't believe we won." Cam dropped onto her bed like a discarded bag of laundry, the mattress springs creaking underneath her.

Fab dried her mouth with her forearm and set the bottle on the table. “We won because of you.” She plopped down next to her on the bed. “It was your quick thinking.”

Proud, Cam’s sweaty, champagne smeared face turned a brilliant shade of red. “That was close though.”

“Don’t think about that.” Fab didn’t want to think about how close they’d been to losing. Brute strength had counted for a lot more than she expected. It made her nervous to face a pair of Brians in the morning. There was no sense in worrying. Their time would be better spent recuperating.

“So you think those guys think they won already?” Cam changed the subject, but only slightly.

Fab didn’t want to think about their opponents. “Production wouldn’t reveal this battle-your-way-out-of-exile twist without a show down moment. I don’t think they’re going to tell them before tomorrow.”

Cam nodded. “We should come out of the gate hot instead of conserving energy. Take advantage of them being off kilter if they already think they won.”

Fab tilted her head, waiting for Cam to continue.

“Let’s be real. They’re going to look at two *girls* who lost two months ago and think they’re going to have a cakewalk to the money.”

Fab hated to agree.

“They’re not going to have a lot of time to stop and think about how many teams we beat to get here,” Cam continued, her voice getting higher and faster. “They’re not gonna know what kind of obstacles we’ve had to overcome to stay in the game. They’ll make assumptions.”

“If they think it will be easy, they won’t be prepared to put in maximum effort.”

Cam nodded. “We have to create an advantage. If we’re really lucky, they’ll start with a puzzle. From what little we saw of them, they’re both terrible at them. It’ll be the perfect stressor. They’ll start fighting when we

pass them. Throw them off their game.”

Fab smirked. “Who’s Machiavelli now?”

“You want me to really blow your mind?” Cam stood and held out her hand. “Let’s get cleaned up and get to bed early. We can even have a couple of those revolting plant-based recovery shakes.”

Lifting her arm to take Cam’s hand hurt, but she laughed. “We should do some of your stretching, too. Get ahead of that soreness.”

Cam tossed her head back as she laughed, the sound was invigorating. “Look at us. Soon we’ll be agreeing about China patterns and what kindergarten to enroll our twins in.”

Fab’s eyes widened, unable to tell how much of that was a joke.

As they started for the bathroom, Cam glanced back at her over her shoulder. “Relax.” She grinned. “I’m just kidding.” She winked. “They might not be twins, but multiples do run in my family.”

The possibility of a life with Cam. A family. Suddenly felt very possible.

A previously unimaginable future flashed in her mind. Cam would be the fun parent, of course. She’d let their imaginary children stay up past their bedtime, let them dye their hair wild colors, let them eat dessert before dinner. It would be up to Fab to make sure that homework was done, that teeth were brushed, that chores were completed.

Warmth, unrelated to the lack of air conditioning in the room, spread across her chest, invading her unprotected heart. It was stupid to believe it was possible. Ridiculous to fall for her promises again given what happened before, but Fab couldn’t stop herself. She wanted that life with Cameron.

Following her into the small bathroom, Fab closed the door behind them.

“Do you really want children?” Fab asked before pulling her shirt over her head and dropping it into the hamper.

“Yeah.” Cam tossed her shirt in behind Fab’s. “Don’t you? Did you change your mind about them?” She started struggling with the sweat-soaked sports bra that refused to be removed. “I thought Mancha was dying to be a

big brother.”

Fab helped her wrestle the sports bra off.

“And don’t you think you’re going to speak Portuguese with them behind my back. As soon as I get my phone back, I’m downloading one of those language-learning apps.”

Fab accepted Cam’s help in getting her own fused sports bra off. When it was in a pile in the hamper, she held Cam’s gaze. “I know we can joke—”

“I’m not playing, Fab.” She wrapped her arms around her waist. “I know it’s too soon, and I don’t want to freak you out or scare you away or pressure you or any of that, but I told you. . . I want everything with you.” Her blue eyes widened as if wishing she could persuade her. “I do want little Brazilian babies. I . . .”

Fab’s heart rocketed out of her chest. She knew the words Cam had stopped herself from saying. “You what?” She was more breathless than when they’d been clawing their way up the ladder a couple of hours earlier.

Cam pressed her chest to hers, holding her close. “I don’t want to say it yet. Not until we’re out of this place, and you know, without a doubt, that I mean it.” Her eyes were vast pools of pristine blue water. “I *need* you to know that I mean it.”

Fab rushed forward, kissing her deeply, conveying the message with her lips. I love you, too.

With a rumbling moan, Cam clawed at her back, pulling her in, even though they couldn’t really get any closer. Tearing off their remaining clothes, they fumbled into the shower, tripping over Cam’s shoes as they went.

“What about conserving our energy?” Cam teased halfheartedly, her back against the shower wall as Fab kissed her neck.

Fab smirked, her open palm running over Cam’s hips, sore muscles forgotten. “I guess we’ll have to be quick then.” She slid her hand between Cam’s thighs, eliciting a breathy groan.

“This could be good for morale.” Cam bucked against Fab’s moving fingers.

“Mm hmm.” Fab dipped her fingers into Cam’s dripping arousal, loving the tiny gasp that came along with it.

With a curse, Cam threw her head back, her body starting to tremble as she rolled her hips. “Kiss me,” she begged.

Fab obliged. She kissed her until Cam unraveled on her fingers. Until she cried her name and begged for mercy. She wanted to keep kissing her until her lips were chapped or bruised or broken. She wanted, very much, to never stop kissing her.

CHAPTER 43



THEIR OPPONENTS DID NOT TAKE the news well. Cam had been right. The remaining team had assumed they'd won after eliminating the last set of challengers. Production had probably aided them in forming the assumption. They'd probably gotten a bottle of bubbly, much like Cam and Fab had found on their table. Except when Cam opened theirs, she knew not to overindulge.

Even if Fab liked to think otherwise, she wouldn't have risked being hungover on a day like this. She'd watched the show long enough to know that anything could cost players a win. A cramp. Dehydration. Heatstroke. Elevation sickness. The elements and environment had taken out seemingly unbeatable challengers before. Cam refused to go out like that. If she lost, she'd rather it be because a better person crossed the finish line first, not because she crapped out.

"How are you feeling?" Fab's dark eyes were on her, inspecting her while Cam's attention was on their opponents. It was obvious that they'd learned how to get along as well as them. Well . . . probably not *as* well.

She knew why Fab was worried. Standing in the small airplane hangar behind the resort, there was no doubt that the final challenge was going to start in the air. Because they'd already jumped out of a helicopter, they were probably going to do something else. Something more terrifying. Cutthroat Island was all about upping the stakes.

“I’m fine,” she promised. “They’re not going to let me die. Lawyers, remember?”

Cam’s encouraging smile did nothing to alter the concern on Fab’s face. She was more uncomfortable with Cam’s phobias than her own.

It took another hour to learn that they were skydiving. It wasn’t even timed. Just something they had to do to start. A pass/fail test that seemed designed to test Cam’s nerve, or maybe to sabotage her by throwing her off.

“You got this.” Fab slipped her hand in hers when they were instructed to get fitted for safety gear.

Cam didn’t want to think about jumping out of a plane. “After all that work to give us matching braids, we’re going to cover it up with ugly helmets.”

Fab didn’t laugh at her joke. She was a dog with a scent.

“Worrying about me isn’t going to help either of us,” Cam said in a low voice so their opponents wouldn’t hear them. “Get your head in the game. That’s what I’m going to do.”

The muscle in Fab’s jaw danced her wordless disapproval. Cam reached out, soothing it with her thumb as she cupped Fab’s face. “What’s the alternative?”

Fab’s dark eyes narrowed, painting a hilarious image in Cam’s mind. Fab, a knee-high toddler, pouting because another kid wouldn’t share the swing.

Unable to resist the adorable, albeit imaginary, scene, Cam snaked her arm around Fab’s waist. It had been her idea not to drop the L-shaped bomb, but as she lost herself in Fab’s eyes, she hoped she felt it. “There is no one I would rather be here with,” she confessed, unconcerned with the people watching them or the cameras turned on them. “I don’t even care that we’re jumping out of a plane. There is nothing I wouldn’t do for you.”

Fab’s carved marble face eased into a smile. Flinging her arms around Cam’s neck, she pulled her down into a kiss.

Around them, hoots and whistles echoed in the cavernous hangar. One of

the men on the other team whispered something that sounded like *oh, shit*.

Cam grinned before picking Fab up and spinning her around once. Adrenaline was pounding hard in her chest. In her ears. “Let’s go jump out of a freaking plane.”

By the time they’d watched an instructional video and been hooked up to their instructors for a tandem skydive, Cam was ready to get it over with. She’d psyched herself up so much, she was mentally exhausted. A terrible place to be considering they had at least one long day ahead of them. Most of the time, Cutthroat Island extended final runs over at least two days, and on a few occasions, three days. Cam couldn’t afford to be tired. Not yet.

Their opponents crab walked onto the empty cargo plane first. There was nothing to sit on. Only random loops suspended from twin rails down the center of the ceiling to hold onto.

“This is going to be freaking awesome!” One guy bashed his forearm into his partner like he just couldn’t wait to jump. His partner slammed into him in similar excitement, undeterred by the entire human on his back.

Fab, who was waiting her turn to get on the plane in front of her, looked back. “They’re just trying to get in our heads,” she whispered.

Cam nodded.

“Don’t let them,” she added.

With a deep, calming breath, Cam nodded again. She wasn’t going to let this mess with her. After being buried alive, jumping out of a plane really didn’t seem so bad. It was just plummeting fourteen thousand feet to the ground that sucked. Her stomach lurched like she’d hit the brakes too hard. Her body stopped, but her organs kept moving.

At least I’m going first, she decided, hoping that getting it over with would be better than sitting in a terrified ball while waiting for her turn. Anticipation was always the worst part.

Cam folded herself between the legs of the man attached to her back and gripped her knees. The unforgiving floor of the cargo plane pressed painfully

into her tailbone. The thin material of her compression pants did nothing to cushion her behind.

The climb to jumping altitude took three lifetimes. Cam used the loud but oddly calming hum of the engine and turbines to create a quiet, meditative space inside herself. She left the terrifying prospect of skydiving. Left the Caribbean all together. She imagined life after they crossed the finish line. Win or lose, she was leaving with Fabiola.

It wouldn't take long to pack up her life in Miami. All she had to do was break her lease and lure Tangerine into her backpack carrier. Say goodbye to her parents, endure a little guilt, and then drive her old Mini Cooper ten hours north to Atlanta.

Her heart soared at the image of Fab opening the door to her home and welcoming her in. Mancha, the big white and gray Pit Bull, forgetting his manners and barreling into her. Tangerine yowling her displeasure from her bag.

Cam smiled, her skin tingling with the thrill of possibility. She decided to spend the flight from Belize to Miami banking content. She'd scheduled her social media posts for nine weeks so she wouldn't have a drop in engagement. There was no reason she couldn't schedule another few weeks and focus entirely on Fab.

Her body tingled like her nerve endings had all been turned on at the same time. She finally understood why people paid good money to go on retreats and force themselves to complete digital detoxes. There was a freedom in detachment. In being completely present.

Behind her, the instructor walked her through the jump again. Reminded her about what would happen and what she was expected to do. When he was finished, he paused. His gruff voice was close to her ear as if anyone could hear anything in the loud space.

“Make sure you keep your eyes open.”

Cam was going to make a joke and tell him the only way she was going

to survive this ordeal was with her eyes closed, but something about his halting tone made her hesitate. Was he giving her a clue?

Production said this wasn't really an obstacle. Production also played with the contours of truth.

Cam reached over to Fab who was sitting next to her. She squeezed her hand.

Fab, who looked like she'd been startled out of her own deep meditation, glanced at her.

"Pay attention to everything," Cam mouthed silently.

Fab furrowed her brow just before understanding flickered in her eyes. Without needing more explanation, she understood Cam's meaning. She straightened, looking around the plane.

Cam knew what she was doing, and it was a good idea. It would be impossible to know what they might be quizzed about later when they were exhausted and sleep starved. She counted the hand loops before memorizing what everyone was wearing. Logos might be important, so she committed those to memory.

When a guy in a red jumpsuit finally pulled open the jump door, Cam was focused and ready to go. She reached over to Fab again, giving her hand a squeeze, packing a hundred emotions in her touch. Fab squeezed back, returning them.

Ready to notice everything and anything around her, she pulled on the clear goggles meant to protect her eyes from the wind.

Cold, thin air rushed over Cam's skin as she scooted toward the door, instantly drying the light sheen of perspiration that had formed during the flight. As she neared the edge, the sky looked like an endless ocean she was diving into rather than a whole lot of nothing she was going to free-fall through. The change in perspective was calming.

The guy in the red jumpsuit clung to the bar going across the open jump door. He gave them a thumbs up.

Cam scurried toward the door, afraid to lose her nerve. With a final glance at Fab, she smiled and tipped over the side.

Instead of the horrific stomach drop and endless feeling of falling she was expecting, Cam opened her arms. A stream of air carried her through the sky like an unseen hand keeping her safe as she glided. She wasn't plummeting. She was flying.

Despite the crushing wind tugging at her skin making it hard to breathe, Cam let out a shattering shriek of full-body laughter.

The free fall was too short. Before she was ready, the instructor pulled the cord, dropping her from Super Woman flight to adult BabyBjörn.

As soon as her blood stopped pounding in her ears like a marching band on pixie sticks, Cam focused on the sprawling scene below.

They'd traveled to a new, much smaller island, and Cam was intent on memorizing every part of the rocky, and apparently uninhabited, terrain.

CHAPTER 44



SWEAT MIXED with sea water and rain as it poured down Fab's back. Kayaking was usually fun, but not when a quickly moving thunderstorm had churned up the sea like an enormous blender.

With a guttural roar, she dug her paddle into the cresting wave, keeping her core tight as the tandem kayak was tossed around like a little paper boat.

In the seat behind her, Cam shouted, "There it is!"

Fab should've let Cam sit in the front. She had the superior eyesight. But Fab had been thinking about getting across the water as quickly as possible. She hadn't counted on how hard it would be to see a tiny orange flag in the blinding rain.

"I can't see it!"

Instead of getting frustrated after a long grueling morning, Cam put her hand on Fab's shoulder.

"We're still ahead," she reminded, sounding as comforting as she could while she shouted over the noise of the storm. "The flag is between those two super tall pines! Find the tallest pine and aim for that!"

She spotted the two tall pines along the gray, rocky coast and turned herself into a human propeller. She still couldn't see the flag marking the next checkpoint, but she trusted Cam blindly. Literally.

Fab allowed herself to be comforted by Cam's reassurance. They were

ahead. Not by a lot, but they didn't need to win by a landslide when a tumbling pebble would do.

Guilt burned Fab's throat like acid reflux. She wanted to win because they were the best, not because one of their opponents landed wrong after the skydive. Despite being cleared to play, it was obvious that his injured knee had slowed him down.

It meant that she and Cam overtook them during the three-mile run from the landing strip to the coast. Even when the rain had started at the tail end.

They'd maintained their lead through the trivia checkpoint where they were asked about what they'd observed while parachuting out of the plane. But now that they'd been given an upper body focused task that didn't require use of a knee, the guys had made up a tremendous amount of ground. There was no room to slack. If they made a mistake, they'd lose.

Fab engaged her entire body in the act of paddling, digging into the water like she could force it to obey her. Gritting her teeth, she paddled as hard as she could, and then a little harder.

As soon as she finally spotted the orange flag and turned them toward it, their momentum came to a fiery halt. No matter how hard they paddled, it was like an invisible giant had his finger hooked into the back of their kayak. Fab sneered, enraged at the cruel figure amused by their exhausted distress.

"Are we doing this wrong?" Cam shouted behind her, obviously frustrated by having stalled so majestically.

"This current is insane!" Salt water sprayed in Fab's eyes, burning them and adding fuel to her rage. She was ready to dive off the side and swim to shore while dragging the stupid kayak behind her.

Every inch they advanced was erased by the rhythmic swells carrying them backward at regular intervals. They were on a treadmill, expending incredible amounts of energy just to remain in one spot.

As they wrestled the waves, and made heartbreakingly small amounts of progress, their opponents' shouts echoed behind them.

Fab glanced over her shoulder. Through the thinning rain, the second kayak was clearly visible. They were still moving parallel to the shoreline. It was easier to slice through the water that way.

She flared her nostrils. Just wait until you have to hit these waves head-on.

“Fab, we’re losing ground!”

The high pitch of Cam’s tone snapped Fab back to the task at hand. She gripped the aluminum pole, bracing herself as they rode the wave. Leaning forward, Fab closed her eyes and braced herself for the drop as they smacked against the surface.

Exhaustion forced Fab to accept that all they could do was ride the waves, doing their best to stay upright, and then paddle hard during the lulls. Otherwise, they were only expending precious energy and getting nowhere.

While they inched toward the checkpoint, their opponents smashed through the waves like they’d concealed an engine in their kayak.

“How are they doing that?” Cam cried in frustration.

Fab shook her head, adjusting the helmet slipping down over her forehead. Despite their best efforts, they’d lost the lead.

When they finally reached the shore, Fab no longer had any feeling in her body. The rain had slowed to a drizzle as they dragged themselves to the orange flag. Everything hurt, even her chest felt like she’d cracked a few ribs.

“Puzzle,” Cam whispered as she slipped under Fab’s arm, helping her to where their opponents were already working on something on a drafting table.

A second wind filled Fab with heady hope. Sloshing through slippery mud, they sprinted toward the second drafting table set up across the small, flooded clearing.

Steam floated up from the ground as the noonday sun appeared just in time to set everything on fire. In performance leggings and compression shirts most of their skin was covered, but the braid exposed Fab’s neck,

making it a prime spot for a sunburn.

“What the hell is this?” Cam gasped, breathless when they stumbled to the drafting table.

Fab had to wait for the spots in her vision to clear to understand the task. “A math problem.” She scanned the sea of numbers floating around the board. Willing herself to focus, she divined the purpose of the game. There were ten rows and ten columns of numbers. “We have to solve it to get this code.” Fab tapped her finger on an empty eleventh column.

“Math?” Cam shrieked. “Are you freaking kidding me right now? Freaking math?”

Judging from the expression on their opponents’ faces, they felt the same way Cam did.

“We just have to calm down and think clearly.” Fab pulled off her shirt, hanging it over the side of the table to let it dry. She cracked open a bottle of water and forced herself to sip it, even though she was desperate to chug. The point was rehydration. She had to go slow.

Cam followed her lead and pulled off her shirt. While Fab evaluated the math problem, Cam procured a tube of sunblock from production and slathered them both.

“How are we going to solve a math problem when we don’t know whether we have to add or subtract—”

“Because I was wrong,” she whispered so the other team couldn’t hear her. “It’s not math. It’s a pattern. We have to guess the next number in the sequence. I can almost see it.”

If they hadn’t already been put through hell, Fab could see the pattern clearly. But her head was throbbing, her body ached, and it was nearly impossible not to continuously look up to see whether their opponents had figured it out.

“Are the lines related to each other or self-contained?”

Fab shook her head. She didn’t know yet.

Cam took her hand. “Sixty seconds.”

“What?”

“Stop for one minute.” Cam took her other hand, making her face her instead of the table.

“Cameron, we don’t—”

“If we don’t recenter, we’re not going to figure out shit.”

Begrudgingly, Fab agreed.

In the middle of a high-stakes game, Fab willingly stopped playing and looked at Cam. Trusting her, she closed her eyes and allowed herself to be guided through a brief meditation.

When Fab opened her eyes, her heart had stopped racing uncontrollably. The spots in her vision had cleared and the general full-body throb had slowed. She took a long drink of cold water and released a hard cleansing breath.

“Better?” Cam smirked.

Fab nodded and turned back to the puzzle. Together, they worked out the answers. The responses turned out to be a ten digit password.

Judging by the rage exploding from their opponents, they weren’t even close to working out the problem.

A producer explained that they had to memorize the code and use it at the end of another 5k run through a hot, humid, bug-infested thicket with no trail. All they had to go by were randomly placed orange arrows pointing toward the next checkpoint.

The only way to know whether they’d done the puzzle correctly was to use the code. If they were wrong, they’d have to run back and try again.

Running at full tilt was impossible when they were always worried they were going in the wrong direction. The orange markers weren’t only sparsely placed, they were often hard to spot.

As they ran, they only spoke to warn each other about fallen tree trunks, exposed roots, and low-hanging branches. Cam ran ahead, setting the pace.

Fab knew Cam could run faster without her. All she could do was work hard and slow her down as little as possible.

When they emerged from the woods covered in mosquito bites, Cam pointed at the orange flag planted in the sand on a desolate beach.

The production tents set up off to the side of the checkpoint signaled that they'd reached the end. Or, at least, the end was close.

Soft, wet soil turned to compact rocky sand beneath their feet as they sprinted toward the flag. Instead of some huge safe or somewhere equally dramatic to key in the code, they were met with two huge Xs spray painted into the sand. One green and one black.

"They're wearing green shirts," Cam said before gulping down water and pouring the rest of her bottle over her head. "This one has to be ours." She gestured to the black X before cracking open another bottle of water.

The sun was absolutely brutal, punishing Fab as she tried to think. "More digging?"

Cam nodded.

Janette appeared from the production tent in a white linen dress and broad smile. The amusement in her eyes made it clear she had an un-winnable wager to make or a time-share in Orlando to sell.

"Great work, ladies. You've come quite a long way," she said in the grand, comfortable style of someone who'd been sitting in front of a portable air conditioner instead of sweating out of every single pore in her body. "I'm sure you're eager to put that password you've got locked in there," she pointed at their heads, "to good use. The last thing you need to do today is retrieve an item locked in a safe that can only be opened with that ten-digit key."

Fab looked at the black X in the sand.

"The safe is waiting three feet under your mark. All you have to do is dig it up," Janette responded to Fab's unspoken question. "You can use your hands or a shovel."

Fab stiffened. The all-you-have-to-do line rang very false. If using a shovel was an option, they would've found it speared into the sand waiting for them. She waited for the catch to materialize.

"How do we get the shovel?" Cam's sharp tone matched Fab's suspicions.

Janette's smirk said I'm-so-glad-you-asked. She raised an eyebrow toward a crew member waiting for her signal. The young woman jogged off toward the production tent.

"Whatever it is, we need that shovel," Cam muttered.

Fab agreed that they needed the tool to move three-feet worth of wet, compact sand.

The crew member sprinted out of the tent with a box in one hand and a shovel in the other.

"It's a small box. That might be a good sign," Cam whispered.

Fab didn't think the final twist at the end of a race for half-a-million dollars could ever be *good*, but she didn't say so. Optimism could go a long way in a last gasp like this, and she wasn't going to dampen that for Cameron.

Janette gestured toward the woman standing next to her. "One of you can use the shovel, as long as the other one eats what's in the box."

"What's in the box?" Fab asked, refusing to agree before knowing what they were getting into.

Janette tilted her head to the side as if debating whether to answer the question. After a moment's hesitation, she signaled for the woman to lift the lid.

"Oh, get right out of here," Fab looked away, her stomach churning in disgust. "We will dig with our hands."

"Fab, wait—"

"We're not eating insects, Cameron!"

"We don't have to," Cam contested, her face pale despite the heat and

humidity. “Just one of us.”

“Cam—”

Before Fab could talk her out of it, Cam swiped the box and pulled out an enormous black scorpion on a stick.

The sound of their opponents emerging from the bug-infested thicket pulled Fab’s attention over her shoulder. She looked away, missing Cam doing the unthinkable, but hearing the shocking crunch.

“Go!” Cam screamed, her mouth full and unshed tears welling up in her eyes.

Without wasting any more time, Fab grabbed the shovel and threw herself into the act of digging. The heavy, soaked sand was leadened concrete at the end of her shovel. She ignored the painful pull on her lower back, engaging her arms and legs and core to move more earth.

A few feet away, their opponents were being presented with the same choice. Fab couldn’t hear everything through the deafening pulse in her ears, but she clearly heard the objections being shouted along with a string of curses.

“You better get digging, my dude. There’s no way I’m eating that!”

If Fab wasn’t confident that every second counted, she would take the time to point out that them throwing out gendered insults like *pussy* and *bitch* and *little girl*, didn’t quite work when a woman was standing across from them completing a task they wouldn’t even attempt.

Instead, Fab used her anger as fuel, letting out a guttural cry to access a more primitive layer of strength locked deep within her.

“Gimme the stupid box!” One of them shouted.

Next to her, sand started flying through the air like a landmine had been detonated.

Shit.

“You can only dig as long as your partner is eating,” Janette reminded, forcing her neighbor to pause and chastise his partner.

The pause lasted only a moment.

Fab closed her eyes to keep the sweat and sand from getting in, though she was sure that even a scratched cornea wouldn't stop her now. Every muscle in her body strained to the point of snapping as she worked.

With an animalistic yell, she jumped into the hole she created, hoping the walls wouldn't collapse around her as she tunneled to the prize.

"I got it," Fab shouted when the tip of her shovel clanged hard against something metallic. "Stop eating!" She threw the shovel over her head, hoping she didn't hit anybody as she used her fingers to pry the case free.

She didn't need the five numbers Cam had committed to memory. Crouched in the hole, she plugged in the ten digits burned into her mind.

Above her, Cam's face appeared.

Fab tore open the box with trembling fingers and revealed an odd plastic key at the end of a coiled lanyard and wrist strap.

Without hesitation, Fab tossed it up to Cam. She caught it, pulling it around her wrist before reaching into the freshly dug hole and offering Fab her hand to help her climb out.

"Done! We're done!" Fab shouted as she climbed out, sand filling her shoes.

Janette blew her whistle, ending the game.

Fab collapsed on the ground, hysterical laughter pouring out of her body in waves. Cam landed on top of her, seized by the same uncontrolled giddiness. They'd won. After all the impossible odds. All the pain and sacrifice and effort. All the risk and vulnerability. It had actually paid off. Relief was a cloud carrying Fab off to an air-conditioned paradise.

As they rolled in the sand, Fab squeezed Cam tight enough to cut her airflow. She was so proud of her, she was sure she would explode into a mass of confetti.

Their opponents cursed and screamed, but, ultimately, allowed themselves to be led off to the side. Production would want to capture their

heartbreak while it was fresh.

“You’re amazing,” Fab said, Cam hovering above her. “I can’t believe you ate—”

“Let’s pretend that didn’t happen, okay?”

Fab laughed, her soul absolutely weightless.

“Congratulations, ladies. You’ve put on an incredible performance and won today’s challenge.” Janette’s smile was blinding when she appeared above them. “That was epic.”

Cam got to her feet first and then helped Fab up. “Today’s challenge?” she snapped, catching the peculiar phrasing before Fab did. “You said we were in the final.”

Janette was the Cheshire Cat leading them into the depths of hell. “You are,” she paused, her lip curling into something more sinister than a smile. It sent a spike of ice-cold panic down Fab’s spine. “But it’s not over.”

Fab looked over at Cam. She was flushed and sunburnt and caked in sand with several scorpions digesting in her stomach. There couldn’t be more.

Janette turned toward the camera. “The last leg of this final will not be played as partners.”

She paused, letting the final twist sink into Fab’s back like a knife plunged between her shoulder blades. While Fab processed the words, her legs trembled, dropping her unceremoniously to her knees.

Cam stood closer to Fab, hand on her shoulder. They were bracing themselves for the details.

“Tomorrow, you go against each other and finish your *unfinished* business. The half-a-million dollar prize is for one winner only.”

Cam staggered back as if the news was a physical thing that slammed into her. Like it was one of the waves that had nearly pounded them into dust a few hours earlier.

“But hey we’re not cruel.” Janette smirked. “You get to sleep tonight.” She tilted her head toward the PA waiting in the wings. He jogged through

the sand and dropped a rolled-up tent at their mud-covered feet. “Hopefully, you won’t mind sharing one. The key you uncovered will take you to a jet ski.” She pointed toward the small vessel floating just off shore behind her. “You can take it to a campsite on the other end of the island.”

Shock dissipated and quickly morphed into unhinged rage. “You did this on purpose!” She roared.

Janette stepped back, but not even Cam’s hand on her wrist could stop Fab’s advance. She jammed a trembling finger in Janette’s startled face. “Do you get a kick out of this, huh? Just messing with us however you want?”

“Fab,” Cam tugged on her arm.

There was no stopping her. Not until she said everything she wanted to say. “When did you people come up with this twist, huh?” She whirled toward the production tent where a dozen set of eyes were peering at her. “As soon as you saw us kiss?”

Anger was a seething, fire-breathing monster clawing its way out of its cave. Black claws digging into the earth, leaving smoking gashes in their wake. Static obscured her vision, disconnecting her brain from her body. There was nothing but palpable rage.

“Was it just too tempting to pass up? Were you just salivating over how you were going to package this? Drooling over the ratings gold no matter what it cost? Who cares right? It’s not you on the line. How fun to tear people apart for your viewing pleasure.”

“Fabiola.” A producer appeared in her peripheral vision. “This was always planned.” His eyes were big and pleading and almost believable. “If you just calm—”

“If you tell me to calm down, Titus, I will quit this show right now.” It wasn’t a threat; she was too ready to burn it all down. Let Cam have the money and refuse to give them the satisfaction of torturing them.

“Sorry.” He wiped the sweat from his brow. “Listen, we didn’t know about you—”

“Don’t lie to me,” Fab growled, her final warning. She was done being a pawn. Done being pushed around for anyone’s amusement. Done being manipulated and used.

“I’m not,” he begged. “Come to the tent. I’ll show you. This has always been the concept of the season. We had no way of knowing you two would be left standing.” His face flushed with color. “And how could we possibly guess you would’ve gotten . . . close.”

Fab focused every bit of her ire on Titus. The poor sap who’d been tasked with facing her. “I don’t believe you,” she growled, her jaw tight.

“Fab,” Cam’s voice was gentle against her ear.

She didn’t want to break her eye contact with Titus. Didn’t want to soften.

“Come on.” Cam’s arm was around her shoulder. “We’ve come too far to give up now.”

Fab unclenched her fists, letting the blood rush back into her hands as she flexed them.

Around her, Fab heard murmurings.

“We need to get back to ones.” A young woman’s voice wavered, clearly unsure how to tell Fab that they needed to reshoot thanks to her ruining the take by interacting with production. “At least a pick-up shot from when Janette—”

“Leave it. We can’t recapture that,” Titus whispered, effectively releasing them.

Openly wearing her disgust, Fab allowed Cam to turn her away from Titus, but not before she pulled off her mic pack and threw it in the sand.

When no one objected, she asked Cam for hers. With bitter delight, she tossed the pack at Titus’ feet.

A pointed glare made the message clear, the crew were not to follow them. Not a one did. Not while they crossed the sand and waded into the water, and not while they climbed onto the single jet ski, hugging the coast

until they reached the dock marked with an orange flag.

Fab didn't forget about the drones filming above them, but at least she didn't have to see any of the producers' faces. She needed the small victory after such a devastating kick to the teeth.

CHAPTER 45



“YOU’RE QUIET.” Cam tucked her legs underneath herself. Sunset had brought a curtain of biting and flying insects, forcing them into their small tent perched at the edge of the small cliff overlooking the rocky shore. “And saying you’re quiet is like . . . Saying something.”

Fab didn’t look over from where she was laying on her back, staring straight up, unblinkingly at the blue nylon interior of their tent. Every now and again a breeze filtered in through the mesh panel above the zippered door and moved the stray hairs that had snuck out of Fab’s braid and were forming a halo around her head. That was the only thing of Fab’s that had moved in the hour since they’d been there.

Cam looked up at the small camera and microphone rigged to the top of the tent. She couldn’t wait to get away from the constant surveillance. When she got back to her phone, she might go completely silent for a while instead of posting in advance. For once in her life, she was sick of being watched. Tired of the attention.

Thanks to Fab’s probably-not-empty threat to quit, they’d bought themselves a solid hour away from the cameras. Cam would’ve like to spend it talking and strategizing. Discussing the news and figuring out a solution together, but Fab had shut down on her.

After they left the jet ski tied to the dock, they followed the marked path

to a slow-moving river where they undressed and rinsed off their bodies and clothes. Where Cam washed her mouth out enough to erase the vile sour, fishy taste. Where Fab didn't speak a single word. Not even while they stood naked near the river, waiting for their clothes to dry in the baking sun. It hadn't taken long given the moisture-wicking fabric.

From the river, they walked barefoot through the soft grass and up to what was jokingly called a campground. It was an orange X spray painted in the sparse grass. In the shade trees around the spot, cameras and sound equipment took the place of birds. There was no bathroom, no food, nothing but a pile of warm water bottles, a lantern, and a place for their tent.

Cam knew why the crew hadn't followed them. It wasn't some magnanimous gesture, or some apology for their shitty twist. They knew whoever made it here would have a bigger blow up if they forgot about the cameras. And that it was easier to do when they were perched in the trees.

She doubted that they had anticipated this. A sulking pair of dead silent competitors. Cam watched Fab. Her hands folded over her chest. Her steady breathing. Her generally comatose countenance. It was too much.

"I won't compete," Cam decided aloud. "They can't make me participate tomorrow."

Fab turned her head, looking up at her with tired brown eyes. "What?"

"I'll just quit." She shrugged, confident that this was the best solution. Not only would it save them from the conflict, but she could finally set right what she got wrong all those years ago. "What are they going to do? They'll have no choice but to—"

Fab shot up like a slice of burnt toast popping out of a malfunctioning toaster. "Absolutely not."

"There's no reason we have to—"

"Cameron—"

"*Fabiola.*" Cam exaggerated her imitation of Fab's sober tone. "I told you, I don't care about the money. Being on the show will net me a ton of

new fans, that's plenty. This way you get to keep the money and we don't have to compete against each other. All things considered, the right thing for me to do is bow out. I don't—"

"Don't you dare." Fab's tone was indignant. Offended.

"It's the best—"

"If you want me to start trusting you again, you play this the right way. Don't you dare let me win, or I will never forgive you, and I swear you'll be dead to me. I'll never speak to you again—"

"Jesus, Fab. Okay." Cam reached out, hooking her pinky in Fab's. "I just think we should spend tonight celebrating."

Fab turned her head to the side, the breeze catching her hair again.

"Haven't you realized that we won?" She smiled, pulling Fab a little closer. "No matter what happens tomorrow, we win."

Fab's expression changed into something unreadable. The memory of a similar conversation was a boot to the stomach, but Cam confronted her shame head-on.

"This time will be different. If you want me to prove it to you, let me quit."

With a swift, decisive pull, Fab yanked Cam forward. They tumbled carelessly to the side, Fab's arms securely around her.

"I told you . . . If you quit—"

Cam laughed, her adrenaline surging at the proximity. "I know, I know. Thunderbolts and lightning. Zeus on the warpath."

Fab's upper lip twitched. "Worse. Hera with a grudge."

Settling against Fab's chest, Cam took a long, deep breath. Oxygen flooded her spent muscles, relaxing them. "I can't believe there's more."

"I know."

"Do you really think they added this at the end?"

Fab sighed, her chest bowing beneath Cam's cheek. "No. I don't think production schedules are that flexible. I can still be angry, though."

“It really sucks ass.”

“So eloquent.” Fab chuckled, the sound a forklift carrying Cam’s spirits out of the gutter.

“What’s the first thing you’re going to do when you get out of here?” Cam mused.

“Take a long, scorching shower.” Fab answered so quickly she had obviously given it some thought. “You?”

Cam hooked her leg around Fab’s thigh. “Miss you.”

Cam felt Fab’s smile even though she couldn’t see it.

She popped her head up, resting her chin over Fab’s heart as she gazed at her. “I’m serious, you know. After all this. . . I have no idea how I’m going to get through a day without you. Are you serious about me coming to Atlanta?”

Fab searched her face, her dark eyes dull in the dim lantern light. “Are you having second thoughts? You don’t have to—”

A surge of energy pulled Cam up. She straddled Fab’s hips, staring down at her with arms crossed over her chest. “I ate a damn zoo exhibit today, and you think I’m having second thoughts about you?”

Fab winced, her face brightening. “Nothing says I love—”

She stopped short right along with Cam’s heart. After a moment’s hesitation, she was going to tell Fab it wasn’t a big deal. That she understood it was a figure of speech, not a proclamation, when Fab pulled her down.

Flush against her chest, Cam felt Fab’s heart hammering. Her eyes were wide, but not panicked.

“I love you,” Fab confessed softly. “Whether I say it today or tomorrow or a week from now or next year . . . It doesn’t matter. If you’re doing all this to play me. . .” Fab shrugged. “It would still be true. Unfortunate. . . but true. I love you and my fear can’t change that.”

Cam’s heart was slam dancing in her body like it wanted to bust out of the mosh pit, tear a hole in the tent, and race through the woods screaming. Emotion pricked the back of her eyes, rolling down her cheeks without

permission.

“I love you, Fab. I’ve loved you for so long.” The confession lifted the exhaustion from Cam’s sore muscles, excised the regret from her soul. “I’m never going to let you forget it. Every single day, I’m going to make you feel so completely seen and appreciated and loved.”

Fab craned her neck, closing the small gap and kissing her.

CHAPTER 46



CURLED TOGETHER on the tent floor, Fab didn't care that her arm was asleep because Cam had used it like a pillow all night. In the weak morning light, with a cool ocean breeze filtering into the tent, Fab could almost forget that they had another day of competing to go.

Combing back a wild strand of blonde hair from Cam's lightly perspiring forehead, Fab allowed her heart to feel full. She expected to regret her confession. To kick herself for telling Cam she loved her, but she didn't. There was no way to know for sure that Cam wouldn't play her again. No guarantee that she wouldn't get hurt, but she'd done it anyway. As she watched Cam sleep, she was overwhelmed with a sense of calm. With certainty.

The sky visible through the mesh opening above the door had turned from pink to yellow when Cam stirred in her arms. Instead of rolling away, she nestled her face against Fab's chest.

"Just five more minutes," she grumbled.

Fab ran her hand over Cam's damp back. "I'm surprised they haven't come to get us already. They really let us sleep."

"Maybe they're busy making us breakfast." Cam's words were muffled.

"Yeah, right." Fab put her hand to her painfully grumbling belly. Part of the final challenge involved contending with hunger and exhaustion.

“God, I still have that weird, fishy scorpion taste in my mouth. Come to think of it, I might not be able to eat for a week,” Cam complained. “I don’t know why we can’t get a little toothpaste.”

“To break us,” Fab decided. “It’s the little things that add up.”

“What do you think Mancha is going to do when he sees you?”

The image of her dog stumbling down her mom’s porch steps and barreling toward her, warmed her fatigued heart. “He’ll probably run me over to get in the car. And then he’ll try to sit in my lap the whole way home. As soon as we get back to the city, he’ll start whining because he misses Tilo and my mom and Ted.”

Cam chuckled, her voice still hoarse from sleep. “I know how that feels. Always missing somebody no matter where you are.”

Fab held her closer, knowing she was thinking of her grandmother. Of the incredible void she’d left behind.

“Do you think he’ll like Tangerine?” Cam ran her fingertips along the edge of Fab’s waistband.

“There isn’t a single thing, alive or inanimate, that Mancha doesn’t like.”

“So, the opposite of you,” she joked.

“We all can’t just like people indiscriminately,” she replied very seriously. “Being liked by people like you and Mancha is meaningless when you’ll strike up a conversation with just anybody. Tangerine and I, however, when we accept you, you know you’re worthy.”

Cam cackled. “Worthy, huh? That’s how you see it?”

“Nope,” she replied casually. “That’s how it is.”

In a sudden rush of movement, Cam leapt on top of her. “You’re the worst.” Her eyes were so bright, Fab heard them screaming *I love you*, despite what her mouth was saying.

When production stopped outside their tent and signaled that it was time to go, Cameron groaned and dropped her head into the crook of Fab’s neck.

“You know, we can pull some Katniss and Peeta shenanigans and refuse

to finish if they don't play fair," Cam said before rolling off of her and getting to her knees.

"Absolutely not." Fab got up, sitting on her heels since they couldn't stand in the tent. "All I've thought about for the last six years is whether or not I could've beaten you." She glanced up at the camera above them and left out the if-we-hadn't-agreed-to-cheat part. "This is my chance."

Cam looked like she was going to make another joke but thought better of it. "I'm scared of what this will do to us, Fab. I'm so afraid of losing you again. This all feels so . . . fragile. This stupid game is not worth it to me. I'd rather have you over anything."

Fab waddled on her knees to close the gap between them. She pressed her forehead to Cam's. "I know it doesn't feel like we can survive this. I don't know what's going to happen." She made herself be vulnerable, laying it all out. "But I do know that we can't run away from this. We have to finish what we started."

Cam circled her arms around Fab's waist, holding her close. "What if I win and you hate me?"

Fab smirked, pulling away to look at Cam directly when she said, "there is no way you can beat me."

"Are you serious right now?"

Fab tipped her head to the side. "You did teach me all of your swimming secrets."

Cam couldn't conceal her smile despite her best attempts. "Oh, you think I taught you all of my tricks, huh?"

Fab smirked. "Enough to make me very dangerous." She tried to sound like an evil genius, even as her nerves had awakened in her empty stomach.

Cam dropped her shoulders, a hard sigh rattling out of her body. "So, we just do this? We compete against each other and wait to see what happens?" She shook her head. "It just feels so wrong. After everything."

With her fingers, she combed Cam's hair where it had gone flat

overnight. “I know, but we’re almost done. And no matter what, we know we’ve won, right?”

Cam nodded before leaning in to kiss her.

Fab closed her eyes, wishing she could take the warmth of Cam’s lips with her the rest of the day. It was going to be a grueling trial.

“We both give it our best, promise?”

Cam hesitated, her lips still hovering over Fab’s mouth.

“I’m trusting you, Cam.”

She nodded, peering into her with a steely, blue gaze. “I swear. I’m going to do my very best to kick your ass.”

Fab’s lip twitched. “Just try not to cry when you lose, okay?”

When they stepped out of the tent, they emerged as competitors. Ready to play one last game.

CHAPTER 47



THE SUN BEAT down on Cam's back like molten lava was being poured over her skin. Using her elbows and knees, she hauled herself across the mud that was trying desperately to suck her in like cartoon quicksand. Above her, an insanely long and narrow cage ensured that she couldn't pick up her hips. The only way she could get across was by dragging her body.

Ahead of her, Fab was hustling across the same obstacle. Moving in a quick, controlled maneuver. She made it look so easy. Like she was gliding across a recently oiled bowling lane while Cam was struggle-bussing through Sleeping Beauty's thorn forest.

Cam watched Fab long enough to copy her. Then, she tucked in her chin and mimicked the tight, quick jabs. She tried as hard as she could to catch up.

When Janette explained the final obstacle course to them, Cam was sure that she'd win. Spread across twenty-six miles, the length of a marathon, with four checkpoints scattered along the course looping around the island, it played into Cam's strengths. With more than one ironman under her belt, she knew how to keep herself from falling apart.

But now, they were halfway through the course, and she'd been a step behind Fab the entire way. Whatever ground she gained on the six and a half mile run along the coast, Fab erased it at the following checkpoint. With two checkpoints left to go, Cam needed to make the running count for more.

Fab slid out from her enclosure and galloped away from the check point like she was being chased by zombies. Cam shook her head. There was no way Fab was going to be able to maintain that breakneck pace. She was pushing too hard, punishing her body when they still had so far to go.

With a grunt, Cam pulled herself out of the mud. She reached for one of the water bottles waiting for them at the orange flag. The bottles that Fab ignored. She used one to wash the mud from her face and hands. The other she took long pulls from before tearing off in a measured jog.

In the distance, she spotted the back of Fab's body as she raced through the woods. Production had taken great pains to make their trails as difficult as possible. The first one had been up a rocky hill. Steep enough to tear up their shins and sap their energy. On empty stomachs, it had been easy to leave them depleted.

Cam tossed the empty water bottle on the side of the trail knowing the camera crew in the off-roading vehicle behind her would pick it up. In the brutal afternoon heat, she was happy for the shade of the trees, even if it meant keeping her eyes on the ground for exposed roots.

Ahead of her, Fab's outline grew bigger and clearer. She was catching up to her faster and faster each time. Despite her wishes to the contrary, Fab wasn't superhuman.

"You need to drink water," Cam said when she pulled up alongside her, long sweat streaks visible on her mud-covered arms and legs.

Fab kept her attention set straight ahead.

Cam knew her well enough to know that she wasn't just being her usual stoic self, she didn't have the breath control to talk and run. She was tired. Probably dehydrated.

"Look, I'll stop with you. I'm not trying to trick you here, but you need to rehydrate." The crew always had a ton of extra water for them. It was the only thing they didn't limit. "God, I sound like you. Next thing you know I'll be making you drink seaweed."

Fab didn't so much as smile.

"I know you're in the zone and everything, but you and I both know you're going to cramp up and collapse any minute now. You can't treat your body—"

"We're not a team," Fab snapped without looking away from the horizon.

"Oh, drop it. Of course, we're a team. Just because we're competing against each other doesn't change anything. I'm happy to kick your ass, I just want it to be fair and square. I don't want to spend the rest of our lives hearing you complain that I only won because you got heatstroke. Our future grandchildren don't deserve that kind of torment."

Fab's lip twitched. She obviously liked when Cam mentioned their imaginary future family.

It was her moment to pounce, she turned around and sprinted toward the crew in the cart. With two huge, cold bottles pressed to her muddy chest, she ran back to Fab.

"Look," she jammed the bottle in her face and swished it around.

Fab didn't go for it.

"Ugh, you're such a freaking ox, you know that?" Cam stopped running. "I'll stop first," she shouted at the back of Fab's head.

Fab slowed but didn't stop.

A pair of sound and camera operators jumped off the vehicle before it continued down the trail behind Fab. Judging by their expressions, it was clear they didn't know whether Fab was going to stop. Neither did Cam.

Cam stood in the middle of the dusty footpath, holding two massive bottles of water, hoping Fab trusted her. In the distance, the vehicle stopped.

She couldn't see Fab, but she guessed she must have paused. Cam bolted up the trail, the crew struggling to keep up with her.

The sight of Fab looking at her, her hands on her hips as she caught her breath was more romantic than Ryan Gosling kissing Rachel McAdams in the rain.

“I can’t waste time.” Fab accepted the bottle before squeezing water on her head and the back of her neck.

Cam handed her the second bottle to drink. “So, let’s just walk a little.”

Fab shook her head. “This is your strong suit. You can’t give up that advantage. It would be as bad as handing me the win.”

“Okaaaay, so we can just walk together for a mile and then I’ll happily leave you in the dust.”

“Absolutely not. You have until I finish this.” She shook the half-empty bottle at Cam and began walking.

“Fine. Half a mile.”

Fab rejected the offer before taking another drink from the bottle.

“You’re terrible at negotiating.”

“Am I?” She continued drinking.

Cam wished she’d drink slower. Not only because Fab would hydrate better that way, but because Cam wished she saw that they didn’t need to wear themselves out. They didn’t have to do any of it.

Fab handed the empty bottle to the crew member behind her. She looked better. Her face was fuller and her eyes brighter.

“Ready?” Fab asked.

“No.”

“Too bad.” Fab took off in a trot.

If Fab hadn’t made such a big deal about trusting Cam to play fair, she wouldn’t have continued. She would have waited for Fab to come to her senses and walk with her. But she didn’t want doubt to creep into Fab’s tired, overheated brain.

With a sigh, she started jogging. It wasn’t long before she overtook Fab and hit the third checkpoint well before her.

The next task was a complex puzzle. It was almost impossible to complete after running nearly twenty miles, in the heat, after sleeping on the floor, on an empty stomach. Her brain was fried. Her body was near its

breaking point.

Fab appeared at the third checkpoint. The parts of her face that weren't splattered with mud were bloodless and pale.

Cam's hammering heart lurched at the sight of her. Fab looked like she was moments from collapse.

They're trying to kill us. There was no other reason for the grueling test.

Despite every fiber in her being burning to run to Fab, to check on her, Cam turned toward the mountain of wooden shapes she was supposed to turn into something. Fab wanted to play this like competitors, and she was going to try her best to give her that.

Every part of Cam's body was throbbing. Even her eyeballs felt like buzzing, pulsating orbs of staticky neon light. Focusing on the strange wood figure she was supposed to assemble was impossible. All she really wanted was a break from the heat. To let Fab have the win that meant so much to her.

Cam was only starting to build her structure with shaky hands when Fab raised her hand and called for a check. A whistle blew and she was off with a glance over her shoulder at Cam.

You might as well walk, Cam wanted to shout after her. It's not like I'm going to get out of here any time soon.

Laying flat on her back in the dirt, Cam slid under the table holding the puzzle. In the shade, she drank water and waited for the whistle. Eventually she'd time out of the checkpoint. There was no reason to wear herself out on a puzzle she couldn't complete.

She'd started to doze off, a combination of stress and fatigue had depleted her adrenaline, leaving her empty and tired.

A paramedic dropping to her knees next to her knocked her out of her daydream. She wasn't floating in crystal blue waters; she was still in hell.

"I'm going to take your vitals," she said in a soft accent.

Cam nodded, knowing she was just thirsty and hungry and tired. She let her check her pupils and temperature. Allowed her to take her blood pressure

and ask her a few questions.

Once Cam was clear, she crawled out from under the table and made her legs move. Six and a half miles and one checkpoint. That was all that was standing in the way between her and Fab. Once she overcame that, they could break out of their cocoon. She could prove to Fab that she meant everything she said about moving to Atlanta, about being with her, about loving her.

Digging into the very bottom of her energy reserves, Cam moved into a quick stride, pumping her arms while she walked.

Blood circulated in her body, easing the exhaustion and soreness and cramps. She downed another bottle of water and then poured one over herself, the cold water was invigorating.

After a few deep breaths, Cam eased from a walk to a jog. A challenging but manageable pace. From running so many marathons, Cam had a good sense of place. She knew she was somewhere near the two-mile-mark when she saw Fab walking in the distance.

Cam held herself back. She didn't want to pass Fab. They were so close to the end. She just wanted Fab to cross the finish line. Just wanted this to be over with.

Cam set her jaw and forced herself to keep her promise. She started jogging again. Catching up to Fab took seconds. She was moving so slowly, she was almost standing still.

"How are you feeling?" Cam couldn't just pass her up like she wasn't there. Like Fab was some other opponent.

"Fine." The blotches on her face made a liar of Fab. "Don't walk with me."

Cam winced but didn't argue. "I love you. Don't give up. We're almost there," she whispered, and then took off down the trail.

At the end of the twenty-six mile run, Cam arrived at the fourth and final checkpoint ahead of Fab.

Shit.

Slowly, Cameron started down the rocky embankment and toward the ring made of rope in the sand. At the center, there was a pole spiked into the ground. Two metal loops on either side.

Janette was a vision. A mirage at the end of the day-long wandering. Dressed in white linen, the crashing surf and sun setting behind her, Janette looked like a saint.

Cam was suddenly aware of herself. Of the sweat and mud and scrapes. Of the bone-deep exhaustion. She must be a terrifying sight.

“Congratulations.” Janette smiled.

She knew better than to relax. It wasn't the end. The wide ring at Janette's feet was gnawing at the pit in Cam's stomach.

“For reaching the final checkpoint first, you won an advantage that might just give you an edge in snatching that prize money.”

Cam bristled. She didn't like the idea of *snatching* anything. It sounded too much like stealing.

When Fab appeared on the short ridge perched above the checkpoint, Cam's heart lurched. She wished they didn't have to do this. She knew what the ring meant and as soon as Fab's unfocused eyes landed on it, Cam was sure she recognized it too.

On unsteady legs, Fab ambled down to the beach. She was hiding a limp. Had she fallen?

Cam reached out, touching Fab's sweaty wrist. “You okay?”

Fab nodded, her gaze flittering between Cam and the ring. The exhaustion on her face was devastating.

“The task is simple.” Janette produced a black bungee cord. “You will be attached to each other with this. It'll be clipped to the back of your harnesses. Each of you will face the opposite side of the ring. The goal is to step out of the ring first. Your opponent will be pulling in the opposite direction. It's best two out of three.” Janette's eyes floated over Cam. “Cameron, I told you that you have an advantage for arriving at the checkpoint first. You start with one

win. All you have to do is beat Fabiola once and the prize is yours.”

Cam closed her eyes.

Double shit.

CHAPTER 48



FAB'S QUADS burned under the strain, her muscles tearing like cheap fabric. She dug her raw fingers into the sand and heaved, desperate for any leverage she could exploit, engaging her entire body in the act of moving forward but getting nowhere.

They'd been stuck there for what felt like hours. The sun had set, bringing down a curtain of flying bugs that had nothing better to do than buzz around Fab's sweaty face. As if they knew she couldn't swat at them, gnats landed on her mouth, trying to break her resolve. She had no choice but to try and ignore the obnoxious opportunists.

Crawling the remaining six inches out of the ring was much harder than she anticipated. After a while, she started wondering whether they'd replaced Cam with a boulder or an anchor or the freaking Statue of Liberty.

The initial sprint toward the edge of the ring had been fast, but before she could leap over the rope, she'd snapped backward, slamming into the pole at the center of the circle before scrambling to her feet.

Behind her, Cameron hadn't let up for a second. Tension on the bungee cord connecting them was so tight, Fab wouldn't be surprised if it snapped. Neither of them had given an inch in hours. They were trapped in their freeze-frame struggle.

Sweat dripped into Fab's eyes, which apparently was a siren song for the

damn gnats. She tightened her jaw, engaged her core, and dug deeper.

Nothing.

Fab dropped her body a little further, her chest hovering inches from the ground. Her calves roared as she pushed against the holes she'd created in the beach.

No progress. Cam wouldn't be moved and Fab was running out of energy. It had been thirty-six hours since she'd last eaten anything and the lack of fuel was starting to wear her down. All she wanted was a cold shower, clean clothes, and a cheeseburger the size of her head. And a chocolate milkshake with full fat milk. And that really unhealthy trail mix Ted always offered her because he didn't understand the concept of hidden calories.

Fab let out a guttural cry, desperate to gain a centimeter. Anything that would alter the stalemate they were in. She just wanted to be done.

"Ladies, that is three hours gone," Janette said from somewhere above, her voice distorted through the deafening throbbing in Fab's ears. "Who is going to break first?"

Baring her teeth, Fab gathered what was left of her strength and lunged. Cam refused to let her move. There was no doubt left in Fab's mind that she'd taken her vow to play hard seriously. She'd had her doubts while they were on the trail. She could sense how badly Cam wanted to stay with her. How badly it seemed to hurt when she left her behind on the marathon runs between checkpoints.

Fab's muscles twitched and shuddered, sending her sinking deeper into the cool sand. A warning that her body wouldn't last like this forever.

She could quit. Let Cam win. They could be done with this. Be on their way to finding out what their relationship might be like in the real world.

Fab locked her elbows, holding them flush against her sides, shifting the burden to another part of her body to give her legs something of a rest.

Her body was so ungrateful. For years, she nourished it, trained it, did everything possible to achieve optimal performance from her muscles. Her

muscles that were so ungrateful they'd started to weaken the moment she lost access to the gym and kitchen.

Reality set in like the pain shooting up Fab's hamstrings. She and Cam were too evenly matched now, they could be out there for hours longer. And even if Fab won the battle, she'd have to do it again to win the war.

The more fatigue set into her body, the less sense continuing to fight made. Fab wanted to completely trust Cam. To know, without a specter of a doubt, that Cam wasn't lying to her again.

Fab's pounding heart tripped over her doubt. What kind of sucker fell for the same con twice?

Shaking her head, Fab refused to let her fear win. Cameron had shown her who she was over the last nine weeks. Had made herself vulnerable. Had shared truths that were shameful and hard.

Behind her, Cam was grunting. A bull trapped behind a gate, desperate to break through and send splintering wood flying through the air as she charged. Only Fab was halting her advance, fencing her in.

She was holding them both back. The longer she held on, the longer the game would last. Fab was tired of playing. Tired of being consumed by fear and worry and doubt.

There was only one way to know whether what she and Cam had was real. One definitive test. She had to let go. She had to take the leap.

Letting go proved much harder than Fab expected. Her muscles and joints had locked up from the day's punishment. Dehydration wasn't making things easier.

Of course, it would be harder to quit than it was to play. The universe couldn't help but torment her.

With a deep, shaky breath, Fab opened her eyes. With her eyes on the beach, the dark water shimmering under the moonlight, she thought about Cam. About all the time they'd spent in their little corner of the sea.

The salt water had cleansed so much of their past. Of Fab's old

resentments.

Thinking of Cam's lips on hers, she grinned. She never expected to feel them again. To be so wonderfully devastated by the kiss stolen under the deck. To be moved by Cam's confessions. Her heart. Her love.

If it was real. . . If Cam meant everything she said, Fab really had already won.

Another deep breath and Fab gathered herself. As she stood on violently quivering legs, she felt the tension on her back ease a fraction. Cam could've taken advantage of the momentary slack and darted over the ring, but she didn't. She was hesitating. Waiting for Fab's cue.

Glancing over her shoulder, Fab looked at her. Still on the ground like a wild creature on her hands and knees, Cam looked as depleted as Fab felt.

With a tired smile, Fab suddenly relaxed her body. Cam tumbled forward, her chin landing in the sand on the other side of the rope.

Janette's whistle trilled.

Game over.

AFTER THE CHAOS of the win died down, Cam broke free of the filming crew and ran toward Fab. She didn't care that she was interrupting her sideline interview. The one where Fab would be asked how it felt to lose to Cam. Again.

They couldn't know that Fab had let her win. Again. That Cam was going to split the money with her. That it didn't matter who crossed the line first.

"Can we get a few minutes, please?" Cam pulled Fab away from the camera before the producer asking questions had a chance to respond.

Covered in sweat and dirt and mud that had dried white, Fab was still the most beautiful being she'd ever seen. Throwing her arms around Fab's neck, she held her close.

“How are you feeling?” she whispered against the shell of Fab’s mud painted ear.

Fab’s arms wrapped around her waist. “Hungry.”

Unburdened, Cam laughed. “I’ll make sure to bring food with me when I show up at your door.”

Fab stepped back, her hands still on Cam’s hips and her gaze fixed on hers. Doubt crept over her face like a shadow. A doubt that hadn’t been there when she let Cam win.

“I’m coming,” Cam said with absolute conviction. “Okay? I’ll be there before you know it.” She hesitated, watching Fab’s face. “Unless you changed your mind? If you don’t want—”

“I want.” Fab’s voice dropped to a whisper, her warm forehead pressed against hers.

The contact, gentle and vulnerable filled Cam’s depleted body with an overwhelming sense of calm. “I’ll meet you in Atlanta, okay?”

Fab nodded, but Cam knew she wasn’t confident that it would happen. She could sense the doubt creeping into her, clouding her mind and probably marring her memories.

“I promise,” Cam kissed her with the desperation of a woman who needed to be believed. “I promise I’m coming back to you.”

“Fabiola, Cameron.” A producer appeared, looking like he’d drawn the short straw. “We have a lot of filming left to complete. We need to get you cleaned up and into your interview clothes.”

Reaching for Fab’s hand, Cam didn’t want to let her go. It would be a whirlwind now. No time to rest together. To shower Fab in reassurance. Promise her that this was only the beginning for them.

Their time together was over here. Now there was only time to get cleaned up, dragged into hair and make-up, and film hours and hours of interviews. To help them make the appropriate commentary, they’d be forced to watch segments back. Cam wasn’t excited to start the mortifying process

of watching herself on film.

The producer looked at his watch. "We have to go."

Cam pulled Fab into her arms again, kissing her again and again. Quick bursts of desperate affection. "I love you," she whispered, needing Fab to believe her.

Fab's smile was weak against Cam's lips. "I love you, too."

"Wait for me, okay? I'm coming."

"Yeah," Fab replied without conviction or confidence.

CHAPTER 49



NUMB WAS all Fabiola could feel as she drove home from the airport alone. Atlanta's summer heat had cooled while she was away, or maybe she'd gotten so used to being in the wet Caribbean heat that her SUV's air conditioning suddenly felt excessive. Indulgent. Obscene.

She lowered her windows, allowing the late afternoon breeze to circulate in her dusty car as she pulled off the highway and headed for her mother's house.

If anyone had told her that she would be here again. Coming home a loser again. Second place to Cameron again. Alone again. She wouldn't have believed it. She wouldn't have guessed there was any way she could be so stupid. So naive.

But here she was, willfully repeating history. A sour pang of discomfort ignited in her gut. Had she really fallen for the same trick twice?

Fab gripped the steering wheel, maintaining control of the car as it transitioned from asphalt to a compact, well-maintained dirt road.

She sat up straighter, the seat belt digging into her sunburnt neck.

No. It wasn't the same scenario. Cam hadn't slinked away and disappeared into the shadows this time. She'd waited for her outside the resort's conference room where production shot the talking-head interviews. Interviews they would cut up and use in whatever way they wanted in order

to fit their narrative.

Of course, producers had asked about their relationship. Forced Fab to look at grainy video of them trying to conceal themselves beneath the deck. Of them floating in the ocean, nothing audible but whispers. Of them kissing on the dock on the way to the bungalow. Kissing at the end of the challenge. Cuddling in one very small bed together. To Fab's relief, they hadn't shown her anything untoward, but she hadn't missed the smirks on the crew's faces. The knowing, less-than-subtle glances.

They'd already edited together the season's performances, highlighting how Fab had gone from refusing to look at Cam to nearly having a coronary trying to dig her out of the coffin. She'd refused to watch the clip. As it was, Cam's expression, terrified and sweat-drenched, was already burned in her mind. She didn't need to see it again. Didn't need to watch her own terror.

Despite the producer's insistence, Fab initially refused to talk about her relationship with Cam. She couldn't bring herself to acknowledge it. Not without knowing for sure whether it was real or not. Whether she was making a fool of herself.

It was obvious production was going to make their romance a storyline. At least the tone appeared to be sweet. Something swoon-worthy rather than tawdry. Time would tell how prominently the plot would feature on the show.

After constant prodding, and hours under the hot lights while crammed into the uncomfortable production chair, Fab's resistance crumbled. The leap of faith she took in confirming the seriousness of her feelings for Cameron was terrifying, but she'd done it anyway. She'd opened her eyes, measured the distance, and jumped.

When Fab was finally released from filming and relieved of her mic pack for the last time, she only had enough time to walk from the resort to the jet where her bags were already packed and waiting for her. After everything, it was just . . . over.

She hadn't expected Cam to be waiting for her, sitting on the hotel floor,

her head resting against the wall. Her mouth agape and snoring. If Fab had her phone with her, she would've snapped a picture. There was something intensely endearing about Cam passed out in a hallway.

Goodbye had been difficult. Every fiber of Fab's being resisted leaving her. She wanted to believe their separation would only be temporary, but there would be only one way to find out. She had to leave and see whether Cam followed.

Her strange, gray mood lifted as soon as she drove through her parents' open gate. On the porch, expending every ounce of self-control in his thick body, Mancha was waiting. Around his neck, he wore a huge blue and green polka-dot tie. It matched the perfectly ridiculous party hat on his head. Next to him, Tilo, his tiny chihuahua body trembling like he was sitting on a vibrating bed, was wearing the same outfit.

Overwhelmed by a tangle of emotions curling around her heart, Fab threw her SUV in park before the end of the driveway. In a sprint, she tore off for the dogs.

As soon as Mancha saw her, he leapt off the porch, much to Ted's chagrin. They'd obviously practiced this trick, but there was only so much discipline a mortal could show. The flimsy string holding the paper hat to his head snapped as he ran.

A shriek made its way out of Fab, half-cry, half-giddy hoot as she crouched. Mancha, a freight train with no breaks, barreled into her at full speed. Sixty pounds of muscle and happiness hit her square in the chest, knocking her backward onto the gravel driveway.

"Who's my good boy?" Fab squeezed the wiggling, licking mass flailing on top of her. "I've missed you so much, buddy."

To signal that the feelings of love and excitement were mutual, Mancha rolled over on Fab's torso and placed his big white paws on her shoulders. With precise, gentle pressure, he used his front teeth to nibble on her like she was a delicious corn on the cob.

Rubbing his one ear, Fab laughed.

Tilo ran over her face, his tiny feet narrowly missing her eyes as he barked while running in circles around them.

“I should go away more often.” With one hand, she scooped Tilo mid-lap and kissed the chihuahua while he licked her forehead.

In Portuguese, Fab’s mother yelled at her to get off the ground. Fab laid there a moment longer, absorbing the unfiltered affection and returning it ten-fold.

Dusting herself off, Fab jogged the rest of the way to the house. The dogs, still wearing their matching bowties, ran in circles around her as she went.

“Nice hats.” Fab hugged her mother first and then Ted. They were in the matching blue and green party hats the dogs left littered on the driveway.

“Don’t worry. Ted has one for you too,” her mother joked, her dark gaze floating up to a proud looking Ted.

Before Fab could protest, Ted slipped the hat over her face, string snapping on her jaw. “Great.” Her smile wasn’t as hard to fake as she expected. After a long, strange nine weeks, she was happy to be home.

“I know you sign all those NDAs and everything, but you were gone a long time.” Ted rocked on his heels. His eyes bright and wide and inquiring.

Fab winced. She didn’t want to tell them that she’d landed in second place. First loser. Again.

She followed her parents into the house where a feast awaited. “Don’t get your hopes up,” she muttered.

Her mother rubbed her back and rattled off all the dishes waiting for them. All of Fab’s favorite foods.

In a flurry of movement, Fab’s mother was pulling dishes from the cabinet and Ted was grabbing a glass pitcher of caipirinha from the fridge. Fab took a deep breath.

“I have to tell you guys something.”

Her mother turned, her round face creased in concern. “What happened?”

“Nothing.” Fab hesitated. “Everything.”

Sitting around the table, Fabiola prepared her mother and Ted for what they were going to see on TV. Without mentioning the astronomical risk of disaster, she sat down and confessed how very stupidly she fell in love.

CHAPTER 50



MANCHA SPRAWLED out on the polished cement floor facing the exposed red-brick wall as soon as they got home. For the entire ride from Grandma's house, he'd crashed on his bed in the back of the SUV and snored over the radio. It was well past sunset when they headed back to the city, and he'd had his fill of running.

While Fab showered and unpacked, Mancha migrated to his favorite spot on the leather sectional at the center of the industrial-style loft. It was Fab's favorite spot too. The former cotton mill retained its rustic charm despite being converted into modern lofts.

When she first moved in, she imagined walking into the massive brick structure in a faded blue jumpsuit and carrying a black metal lunchbox. She never stopped feeling like she was strolling into a time machine. After long training days, she loved sitting with Mancha and looking at the distant Atlanta skyline through enormous, black-framed windows.

Sometimes she allowed herself to imagine a third body on the couch. A missing piece. A very specific shape that fit perfectly with them.

Fab emerged from the bathroom, her freshly washed hair in a towel and wearing joggers and a sweatshirt. Even with the air conditioner turned off, she couldn't get the chill out of her bones.

She had every intention of plopping next to Mancha on the couch. After

checking her phone, she'd gotten messages from everyone except the only person she wanted.

Hours had felt like years in Cam's absence. The distance had formed cracks and fissures, letting doubt sprout like noxious weeds.

Why wouldn't she have at least called? Texted? DM'ed? The only message between them was when they exchanged contact information in the resort lobby. Since then, neither one of them had said a word. The familiar silence was a sickening pit in Fab's stomach.

Before she dropped her exhausted body next to the snoring Mancha, a banging at her heavy metal door made her jump.

Mancha opened one eye. Fab only ever invited her mother into her cave, and she never showed up unannounced.

"It's probably four-fifteen's food delivery again," she said to Mancha as if to settle him.

She crossed the minimally decorated living space attached to the huge kitchen and on to the front door. Rising up on the balls of her feet, she peered through the peephole.

The sight of her stopped Fab's heart and jolted it back to life. She closed her eyes, pressing her forehead to the cold metal.

Dressed in black leggings and a pale, gauzy tank top, Cam hadn't changed her clothes since the last time Fab saw her. Even her baggage was the same. The only addition was the black straps of a backpack.

Pulling off the towel, Fab flipped her hair, drying it as best as she could before tossing the wet towel into the powder room by the entrance. In the mirror, she adjusted her damp hair falling in soft, long waves over one shoulder.

If she'd known Cam was coming, she'd have done more. She'd have dried her hair and maybe thrown some eyeliner on. At the very least she'd have worn something a little less . . . comfortable.

Awash with electric excitement, she bit the inside of her cheek to keep

from grinning as she pulled open the door.

Cam's eyes were bright. A beacon of light in the dark hallway. "Your elevator is really freaking slow, you know?"

Fab resisted the urge to laugh. "Well, the building *is* over a hundred years old. You could've taken the stairs."

"Oh, yeah. Tangerine would've loved being lugged up four stories. As it is, I'm pretty sure she's going to cough up hairballs in my shoes for a week."

On cue, the cat let out an irate meow from the pack on Cam's back.

"Maybe I should have dropped her off at the Airbnb."

Fab grabbed Cam by the wrist and pulled her over the threshold. She kissed her. Filling her with the spine-crushing weight of her relief. With the expansive peace consuming her very core.

Cam puddled in her arms, her muscles going slack in response.

"I know it's so late, and I debated going to the Airbnb first, but I've missed you," Cam whispered against her lips. "As soon as I got home, I went to my mom's house, scarfed down some black beans and rice, picked up Tangerine, and started driving north. I know you weren't expecting me like this—"

Fab kissed her again, drowning out the worry that had crept into her tone. "You better be joking about staying somewhere else." She held her tight, refusing to let her go again.

Cam smiled against her parted lips.

Mancha, finally noticing the activity at the door, peeled himself off the couch and trotted toward them. With his butt wiggling, he happily greeted Cam. She bent down, allowing him to attack her face with aggressive kisses.

"Aren't you a good guard dog?" Cam patted his side, enduring his aggressive friendliness.

Tangerine yowled her displeasure. Unconcerned, Mancha threw himself on his back, giving Cam his white and gray belly to rub.

"I didn't bring a litter box," Cam admitted as she continued to indulge

Mancha.

“Come on.” Fab held out her hand to get Cam away from the ham on the ground. “We can let her out in the master bath for now.” Once Cam was on her feet, Fab carefully peeled the cat carrier off her back. The cat was so black, all Fab saw were yellow eyes glaring at her. “I’ll run out and get her some stuff while you shower and get comfortable. I have clean clothes you can borrow if—”

Cam threw her arms around Fab’s neck, pressing herself to Fab’s side to avoid squishing the cat. “You don’t have to do all that.”

Chest inflating like she’d been hooked up to a helium tank, Fab wrapped one arm around Cam’s waist holding her close. “I’ll be back before you’re finished showering.”

“Don’t you want to get in with me?” Cam wiggled her brows.

“Aren’t you tired of sharing the shower?”

“I’ll never get sick of being with you.” Cam laughed. “Is that corny?”

“Yes,” she replied without a hint of amusement. “But I love it.”

Fab gave her a quick tour of the large, open space before leading her to the master bathroom attached to the only bedroom.

“Have you eaten since your mom’s house?”

Cam shook her head, pulling off her sneakers and setting them next to the bathroom door.

“I’ll bring you something,” she said instead of asking, then grabbed Cam a new towel.

While Cam showered, Fab gave the displeased Tangerine a bowl of clean water and a can of tuna. To keep her from continuously hissing at the curious Mancha under the door, she left the overstimulated dog in his crate while she was gone.

On her way out, Fab threw Cam’s clothes into the washing machine. On her bed, she’d left something clean and comfortable for her to wear.

As she jogged to her car, Fab placed an order for a couple of club

sandwiches from one of the only diners open around the clock. She'd pick up Tangerine's things from the 24-hour Walmart. Fab didn't care that it was the middle of the night, or that she hadn't slept, or that under her rushing adrenaline she was tired. Despite all odds, Cam had shown up. That was enough to keep her going for days.

She'd only just gotten into her car when her phone dinged. A message from Cam.

Cam: Sorry, I didn't have time to do it while I was driving. Didn't want you to think I forgot. Found your account with your phone number.

Confused, Fab waited for more.

A moment later, the phone dinged again. A money transfer request. When Fab finally understood what she was looking at, her eyes bulged.

Without prompting, Cam had sent her half of the prize money.

Shock at such an unbelievable amount of money being wired into her account was staggering. It was life changing. The key to all her earthly desires. And yet, Cam's presence in her life felt even bigger than the pending cash infusion.

A surge of something colorful and free and pure flashed through her veins, electrifying her skin. This was what people felt before they did insane things like getting married in Vegas on a second date, or getting questionable tattoos around their ring fingers, branding themselves with another's name.

The wave carried her forward and onto the quiet Atlanta street. Without the usual traffic, she'd be able to get everything she needed in under an hour. Hoping Cam wouldn't mind that she'd exaggerated how quickly she'd be back, she pulled onto the highway, already eager to get home.

CHAPTER 51



UNSURE OF WHAT TO do with herself while Fab was out, Cam curled up on the couch. It felt odd to be dressed in her soft, comfortable clothes. To occupy a space that was so uniquely Fab's without her being there too.

Fab's loft was exactly like the woman herself. Nothing superfluous. Nothing in the sprawling loft was there just for decoration. She didn't have anything that wasn't functional or necessary. No plants. No art. No decorative soaps. Not even a single photo in a frame or a magnet on the fridge.

As she absentmindedly rubbed Mancha's head in her lap, she relaxed against the leather, loving the feel of Fab's soft t-shirt against her skin. She closed her eyes, letting the surreal moment wash over her.

Despite her biggest mistake, her greatest regret, she was sitting in Fab's house where she was always meant to be. She was on the cusp of a real future with her. She was overwhelmed with gratitude, with excitement, with love.

An idea formed as she imagined integrating herself into Fabiola's life. Therapy. If there were any lingering trust issues, she wanted to do what she could to resolve them. Maybe someone could help them build a solid foundation.

Cam let her mind drift. Let herself imagine a life with Fab. A normal one, without the pressure of competition and cameras.

By the time Fab clamored into the house with two armfuls loaded with plastic shopping bags, Cam had been dozing in perfect contentment with a heavy dog snoring on her chest.

“So, I wasn’t sure what all you needed.” Fab heaved the dozen bags onto the poured cement kitchen island. A sudden mess of textures and colors on the cool, clean surface. “I got you a new toothbrush and that natural deodorant you like.”

Cam floated to the kitchen while Fab rattled off her haul.

“That’s dinner. Eat that.” Fab gestured toward a large paper bag with a nod. “I didn’t go to the grocery store earlier, so there isn’t much here, but I got stuff to tide us over until tomorrow.” She put away the coffee, milk, water, and a package of cereal. “I also wasn’t sure what Tangerine liked, so I got her a few different brands of food. Wet and dry. A new bed. The litter box of course.”

Fab moved like she’d chugged a pack of energy drinks while running around town. In a flash, she disappeared into the master bath where Cam could hear her talking to a loudly complaining Tangerine.

While Cam finished putting the groceries away, she couldn’t stop chuckling to herself. Fab was explaining to Tangerine what she was doing as she went, like she was a doctor and the cat was her patient.

Cam had finished putting things away when Fab emerged from the bathroom, using a small towel to dry her hands as she returned to the kitchen.

“I gave Tangerine a little bit of each food to see which one she likes—”

Cam lunged toward her, capturing Fab in a kiss before she could finish her list. She’d never met someone so eager to provide and protect and care. It was overwhelming in the best possible way.

“Thank you,” Cam muttered before kissing her again, her lips hurried and hungry. Her body had grown cold in Fab’s absence, like she’d been in suspended animation and had just awoken with a start.

After a moment of startled hesitation, Fab returned the kiss. Wrapped

around Cam, she was an all-consuming shroud of warmth and muscle and skin and touch.

In the fluid way that they'd practiced into an art, Fab picked Cam up without breaking the rhythm of their kiss. With a groan, Cam hooked her legs around Fab's waist and tangled her fingers in Fab's silky hair.

Desperate, Cam kissed and clawed like there was a way she could get closer, deeper, more connected. Landing on Fab's big, white bed with a bounce, she pulled Fab's sweatshirt over her head and tossed it to the ground.

They were free. For the first time, unfettered, uncensored, unleashed. Clothes landed on the floor one after another until there was nothing between them but skin and need and heat.

Cam flipped Fab onto her back before climbing on top of her. She straddled Fab's hips before tossing her long blonde hair back. As she threw it into a messy bun, Fab's fingertips rolled up her sides and over her chest.

With her hair out of her face, she looked down at Fab. Her dark eyes were so full of lust. Of yearning. Of the kind of desire Cam hoped would never dim. As she rocked her hips gently, gliding over Fab's lower abdomen, she hoped that they'd never stop wanting each other like this. That they would always remember this insatiable desire.

Fab pulled her down, bringing her lips to her mouth, as if it was the only thing that could quench her.

"You feel so good," Fab moaned into their increasingly unsteady kiss, her hand sliding over Cam's bare back.

Fab squeezed Cam's hips, quietly exerting her control as she changed the rhythm of Cam's grinding. Slowed her down, made her sway more purposeful.

With her head thrown back, Cam focused on the sensation of Fab's hard pelvic bone pressing against her.

Understanding what she wanted, what she needed, Fab made her own lower body rigid. With increased urgency, she moved Cam in quick, short

bursts.

The heat that rose from Cam's core seeped through her skin, creating a thin sheen of perspiration. Fab's gaze bore into her, her eyes inky black as she bit down on her bottom lip.

Fab took her hands from Cam's hips, gliding up her torso to grip her breasts. Taking her aching nipples between her fingers, Fab squeezed.

"Fuck," Cam gasped, her thighs starting to shake.

She tried to give Fab what she wanted. To let her watch. Let her tease. She made a silent vow to make up for the weakness of her flesh.

"Please," Cam begged.

Fab rolled her sensitive nipples between her fingers, creating currents of hot, pulsing desire that needed to be eased. The ache pulled so hard, she couldn't stand it.

"Please, what?" Fab's voice was so low, so husky.

Cam was sure of what she'd find if she reached back to touch her. The knowledge alone pushed her to the limit.

"I need you," Cam half-cried, half-moaned.

A smirk flashed on Fab's face before it disappeared. Patiently, Fab waited for Cam to elaborate. She should've known Fab wouldn't make things so easy.

Fighting fire with fire, Cam leaned back. Stretching, she rested her weight on one palm. Her free hand slid between Fab's thighs.

She watched Fab's face like she was observing a celestial event before teasing her with the very tip of her finger. Dripping. Fab was nearly dripping with arousal.

"Fuck," Cam cursed again, her eyes slamming shut as every particle of her being focused on the wetness suddenly coating her fingertips.

Reflexively, Fab's hips jerked up. Despite her enviable self-control, Fab's body was as desperate as Cam was.

"You're so wet," Cam groaned, like she was experiencing a revelation.

Fab cursed in Portuguese before dropping her hands to Cam's hips. With a rough, hard jerk, Fab pulled Cam off of her hips.

In a movement so quick Cam couldn't process it, she landed on the bed again. Her knees sinking into the pillow. Fab's face securely positioned between her thighs.

Fab's breath was hot and heavy against Cam's aching core. Gripping the headboard, Cam braced herself for the dizzying sensation of Fab's lips softly closing around her hard clit.

"No fair," Cam cried half-heartedly, wishing she had the kind of self-control that would let her pull away. That would force Fab to wait until she wanted it so bad she was begging.

But Cam was weak, and her own desire was so strong it obliterated any appetite for games. She moaned in the darkness of Fab's room, her husky voice bouncing against the insanely high ceilings.

Pleading, Cam reached down. She made a fist in the top of Fab's hair, gripping her hard before grinding against her flicking tongue.

Cam cursed, her back muscles tensing, her thighs tightening. Fab created a symphony with the tip of her tongue until she suddenly pressed the flat part of her tongue flush against her.

Fab curled her arms around Cam's thighs, holding her still before launching a targeted attack.

With her back arched, it took all of Cam's physical strength to remain mostly upright as heat rushed out of her, consuming them both.

Panting, Cam slid off of Fab and landed in a sweaty mess at her side. She curled in her legs to fit against the headboard.

With a satisfied chuckle, Fab smacked her butt, sending a ripple over Cam's tingling skin. "I remember you used to last longer."

Lost in her satisfied haze, Cam rolled onto her back and propped her feet on the headboard. "Maybe you've gotten better since we've been apart" She wiggled her eyebrows. "Or, you know what they say . . . distance makes the

orgasms grow stronger.”

Fab’s dark brown eyes were incandescent as she laughed. The sound heightened her already peaking euphoria to stratospheric heights.

Reenergized, Cam turned herself around. She stretched, capturing Fab’s lips in hers, moaning as she tasted herself in their kiss.

Capitalizing on Fab’s surprise at Cam suddenly climbing on top of her, Cam flipped her over, scraping her teeth over her shoulder blade as she slid her slick chest over Fab’s back.

Fab’s gasp was addictive. Wanting more of that soft, lusty sound, Cam bit down hard.

Beneath her, Fab writhed, pushing backward into her. Cam gave her part of what she wanted. From behind, she slipped her leg between Fab’s thighs.

As if she’d been waiting for that contact all of her life, Fab bucked her hips, lifting them off the bed before pushing back against Cam’s thigh.

Fab’s searing wet heat gliding against her skin made Cam’s head spin. She gripped Fab’s hips as she kneeled behind her.

Biting her bottom lip to keep herself from rushing past the moment, she watched Fab’s back muscles ripple as she moved back and forth against her in a purposeful rhythm.

On her hands and knees, Fab exerted the same kind of easy control she did when she was physically on top of her. The performance was for Cam’s sake, she knew that, but Cam didn’t care. She reveled in the sight.

Snaking her hand between their bodies, Cam slid one finger gently inside of Fab and then another. The rush was immediate and unstoppable.

Cam cursed and groaned at the feeling of Fab tightening around her fingers. After a moment, Fab dropped, unable to hold herself up with one arm. Her chest landed flush against the mattress.

Despite having already had an orgasm, Cam’s body pitched with desire as Fab’s free hand disappeared between her own thighs.

As soon as Fab touched herself, she clenched hard around Cam’s fingers,

her hips losing their rhythm.

“Harder,” Fab’s plea was a breathy moan Cam wasn’t sure she heard, but her body reacted without hesitation.

Dropping back to sit on her heels, Cam watched Fab, her mouth agape before unleashing a string of curses. She indulged in the sight of Fab’s quickly moving fingers before slamming hard into her.

It wasn’t hard enough.

Fab groaned but shoved her body back into Cam’s fingers. More. She asked for more.

Clenching her jaw and engaging all her upper body strength, Cam obliged. Planting one foot on the bed to steady herself, she indulged Fab’s wishes. She slid into her with hard, deliberate thrusts. As she did, Fab’s body stiffened.

Relinquishing a small amount of control, Fab let Cam give her what she needed. Let Cam bury herself knuckles-deep inside of her.

With a strangled cry, Fab’s body shook. Despite being muffled by the bedspread, her guttural, primal sounds were a jolt of adrenaline spurring Cam to keep up the frantic pace despite the awkward angle and the cramp in her hand.

When Fab’s body went slack, Cam crumpled forward. Laying sideways across the bed, she rolled into Fab’s space, laying her head on Fab’s sweaty chest. The wild hammering of Fab’s heart betrayed her outwardly calm demeanor.

“I didn’t know sex on a bed could be so good,” Cam joked, hooking her leg around Fab’s thigh.

Fab’s arm curled around her back, pressing her closer still. “Imagine what we can do after a little sleep.” She made lazy shapes with her fingertips on Cam’s back.

After a beat, Cam popped her head up. Even in the low light, Fab’s eyes were brilliant, keen, expectant. “Who said I was going to let you sleep?”

CHAPTER 52



TAKING the stairs down from the rooftop deck, Fab whistled. She hated whistling and hated the people who whistled in public even more. The fact was true, and yet it didn't matter.

She'd only been able to stop doing it while she trained her client in her building's rooftop gym. When she agreed to meet her oldest and most loyal client that morning, she didn't know she'd have to tear herself away from Cam's warm, soft body curled against her.

Certain that she'd never tire of it, she'd touched and kissed every inch of Cam's body. She traced the elegant and intricate tattoos scattered over her arms, her back, her thigh. Committed them to memory. Captured the scent of her skin to carry with her. Etched the image of her in her mind.

In his own way, Mancha had been enamored, too. After being relegated to the living room for most of the night, he'd eagerly jumped into bed and nestled next to Cam.

After an hour of sleep, Fab's alarm rang. Cam and Mancha complained at the intrusion. Fab wasn't thrilled at the shrill buzzing either, but she wouldn't cancel her appointment. She kissed the snoring pair before slipping into the bathroom.

Tangerine didn't move from one of the double sinks she'd claimed as a bed. She'd watched Fab shower with mild curiosity and purred like an out of

tune engine when Fab scratched her chin. Fab didn't see what was so bad about the old girl and she told her so.

That's when the whistling had started. Fab had been possessed by some upbeat ghost or fallen victim to a futuristic plague where the first symptom was pathological peppiness.

Despite the lack of sleep, Fab whistled while she made two pre-workout shakes. One for her, and the other for the client. Continued doing it as she met her client in the lobby and they jogged up five flights to the roof just in time to watch the sunrise.

Her client immediately called her out on her mood, guessing that it meant she'd beat Cutthroat Island. Fab responded with a sheepish grin.

When she asked about Mancha, Fab explained that he'd been unable to resist the temptation of staying in bed. She knew him well enough to know that was impossible. It only took her a second to make the connection.

Fab admitted that there was someone in her bed, but she didn't divulge who. Soon the world would see for themselves what they'd won on that island. Even if she hadn't signed an NDA, she would still guard that secret. Protect it as long as she could.

Training along with her client had left Fab invigorated and electric. When she silently slipped into her loft, she expected to find it quiet and everyone still sleeping.

The first one who greeted her was Tangerine. Her sleek, black body curled at the center of Mancha's huge, plush bed near the cold fireplace.

On the hard floor next to her, Mancha was sleeping on his side.

"Aren't you such a good host," Fab said when Mancha trotted over to her. She took her time scratching him from ear to tail. "I've missed you so much, buddy. We're going to go on a nice long jog, yeah?"

When Fab continued into the kitchen, her brow furrowed. Something smelled good. Following her nose, she opened one of the double ovens. Cam had prepared some kind of egg and vegetable casserole and it smelled

delicious.

On the counter, the blender she'd used that morning had been washed and filled with her recovery shake stuff. With a marker, Cam had scribbled the words *drink me* surrounded by a heart on the back of a receipt.

She smiled, the warm pressure in her chest stretching her ribs and making it hard to breathe in the best possible way. She closed her eyes, letting the sensation rush over her skin.

With her shake in hand, she followed Mancha to the bedroom where she found Cam in a complicated yoga pose. She drank her shake, waiting for Cam to ease out of her pose.

When she was finished, Cam got to her feet, a smile on her face. "Good morning," she said, rolling up the thick, black mat.

"I expected to find you all in bed where I left you."

Dressed in leggings and a thin tank, Cam padded toward her barefoot. "We have so much to do. I don't want to waste time sleeping."

"So much to do?"

Cam's lips tasted like toothpaste. Fab indulged in the kiss, loving how it never ceased to make her heart race.

"Yup." Cam agreed, disappearing into the bathroom. "I was thinking we could take Mancha for a walk, and you could show me your city." She reappeared, her hair free from its ponytail and falling in blonde waves around her shoulder. All the pink had faded away.

Fab smiled. She couldn't think of a single thing she wanted to do more.

FAB'S NEIGHBORHOOD SKIRTED A COOL, former industrial area. The buildings were mostly sprawling, red brick structures that had been taken over by restaurants and shops. Most buildings had been tattooed with colorful murals or modern appendages.

Cam imagined the current occupants as hermit crabs, moving into the old, abandoned shells and making them their own.

As they walked, the relatively cool morning promising an autumn she wouldn't have experienced in Miami, Cam slipped her hand into Fab's. Ahead of them, Mancha led the way, greeting anyone who made eye contact with him.

"Where are we going?" Cam asked when they reached the bottom of a sloping hill.

There was nothing on the dead-end road but an empty building that looked like it may have been a factory in a former life. Fab didn't respond, but her lip twitched in a momentary smile.

Chain link surrounded the huge, abandoned property, but Fab walked through a massive gash in the fence. When Fab bent over to unclip Mancha's leash, it became apparent that Mancha had run in the empty field behind the building before.

"Isn't it a little early in the day for trespassing?" Cam joked, following Fab onto the property and passing a *For Sale* sign covered in pink graffiti.

"It wouldn't be trespassing if we owned it." Barely contained excitement flashed in Fab's eyes.

"What the hell are we going to do with a decrepit old building?"

Fab continued toward one of the two-story high black windows. One of the only ones not covered in plywood and graffiti.

"It used to be a small printing press," Fab replied as if that explained anything. "Structurally, it's completely sound."

Cam peered inside, cupping her hands around her eyes to block out the glare. Apart from some dirt and debris, it was a vast, open space with a long loft looking over the main floor.

"I didn't know you had printing press aspirations," Cam joked.

Fab crossed her arms over her chest. "I'm serious."

Cam raised a brow. "About?"

Mancha sprinted toward them, his mouth open and tongue waving in the wind. After two tight circles around them, he took off again.

“You want to open a store and I want to open a boutique gym,” Fab explained like it should be obvious. “Ten thousand square feet is too big for either one of those.” Her lips twitched into a momentary grin. “But it’s perfect for both. Lots of leftover space for storage, too.”

Cam’s racing heart reacted before her brain could process the proposal. “You really want to buy it?”

“I’ve been looking at it for a long time, but I know it’s a huge decision —”

“How much is it? How much work is it going to take to fit it to our purposes?”

“The owner has been trying to unload it for a while. Last year I talked to the agent about a lease-to-own deal. He was very interested. Add another year of losing money paying taxes.” She shrugged.

“And he’s probably even more motivated now,” Cam finished her thought.

Fab nodded. “I just wanted to show it to you. Give you something to think about—”

“Can we go inside? Get a feel for the energy in the space?”

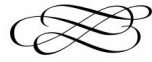
Fab’s smile grew and spread over her face. “Yeah? You want to? I can call the agent.”

Cam threw her arms around Fab’s neck. “There’s nothing I would rather do than explore the possibility with you.” She kissed her long and deep and slow. “It’s a big commitment.” She leaned back to look Fab in the eyes. “Are you sure you’re ready for it? That’s a lot of trust we have to have in each other. A lot of trust you have to place in me.”

Fab furrowed her dark brows. “I trust you with my heart. What else is there to give?” she replied simply. As if the words didn’t mean absolutely everything. “Are you having doubts?”

Cam kissed her again. “Not a single one.”

EPILOGUE



THREE YEARS Later

“LET’S GO! Let’s go! Let’s go!” Fab clapped as she paced in front of the three treadmills going at full speed.

“I know you can do better than that, Tommy. Come on! Push through the pain,” she shouted over the high-intensity music.

In response, the three clients she had reaching for a new goal upped their speed. Across from them, she checked on the two clients in the middle of a painfully long row. The water in the rowing machines sloshing in rhythm was one of her favorite sounds.

“That’s awesome, Tasha.” She peered over the screen on her rowing machine. “You’re crushing it. Just another three hundred meters to go. You got this. Gimme some good, strong pulls.”

A beautiful blonde on the stationary bike stood, pumping her legs harder. A vein appeared on her forehead that seemed to pulse to the beat of the music.

“Is that all you got, Cameron?” Fab stood next to the bike, crossing her arms over her chest while she evaluated the numbers on the screen.

Drenched in sweat, Cam shot her the kind of look that said you're-going-to-pay-for-this-later.

“Hey, if that’s all you can do.” Fab threw her hands up, imitating the shrug emoji.

Unable to resist the bait, Cam unleashed a burst of power. Under the strain, the machine sounded like it might break free from the bolts holding it down to the cement floor. Or maybe the expensive equipment would snap in half.

“Good,” Fab said with a sharp nod. Pride swelled hard and fast in her chest, but she didn’t show it. Not in front of her clients. There would be plenty of time to encourage Cam when they were home alone later.

Fab looked at the stopwatch she kept hanging around her neck. “Ten seconds folks. Give me everything you have, and you’ll earn all those delicious Sunday brunch cocktails.”

Grunts and guttural screams bounced off the brick walls of the former printing press. The one that she and Cam had owned for the last three years and successfully built into a thriving business.

“Three, two, one! Very good!”

While Cam showered in the locker room, Fab locked the door behind the last client to limp out of the building. Her Sunday morning crew was the most dedicated and hard-working group, but even she was impressed with how far they pushed themselves.

The sound of Mancha’s nails clicking against the cement floor forced Fab to turn from the entrance. She followed him to the door connecting her gym to Cam’s store. As he did a thousand times a day, Mancha waddled through the doggie door where his name and Tangerine’s had been intentionally graffitied to match the cool vibe of Cam’s shop. On Cam’s side, the door was painted in black with clean, white letters.

Tangerine rarely used the door. The only time she ventured out of Cam’s office, nestled inside the quiet forest of boxes in the storage space they

created, was when Fab was alone in the gym and the music was off.

As soon as Fab entered Cam's t-shirt shop, which had only taken a year to start turning a profit, she spotted Cam behind the counter. The store wouldn't be open for hours, so she'd left her hair in a towel after her shower.

Wearing one of her own organic cotton t-shirts, Cam was sitting on a stool behind the register. The live wood counter had been created from salvaged materials, like nearly everything else in Cam's place. Nothing matched, and yet, it all worked so beautifully together.

With her phone to her ear, Cam's expression was serious, but Fab couldn't read whether the call was bad or just business related.

Running through the possibilities in her mind, she considered whether it was her parents. Cam's birthday was a month away and they'd planned to take a big trip to Alaska. Cam's mom and Ted had taken over planning duties, but they all got along well. No reason for consternation.

"Yeah," Cam said into the phone.

Fab leaned over the counter across from her, hoping to pick up on what was going on.

Cam's bright blue gaze drifted to Fab. "I'm going to have to talk to Fabiola about it."

Cocking her head to the side, Fab wished she could divine what the hell Cam was talking about. She'd settle for who was on the other end of the line.

When Cam finally hung up, she tossed her cell phone on the counter. "Well. . . that was interesting."

Fab waited.

"That was Mike," Cam said without explaining.

"What Mike?"

She rested her elbow on the counter and propped her chin in her hand. "Remember that cute little PA? He used to think you were the coolest thing?"

Fab nodded. She hadn't thought about Mike, the kid who picked her up from the airport so many years ago, in forever. She'd severed the memories

of the show all together. The ones that didn't involve being with Cam, anyway.

“Apparently, he’s an executive producer now.”

“Good for him,” Fab decided. “But I don’t want to film again.”

Every so often production called them to contribute to current seasons, usually by commenting on some storyline or challenge. Something short and sweet they could stitch into the new seasons.

Despite the boost in sales to Cam’s store that usually accompanied the appearances, they’d turned down the last couple of offers. Cam no longer needed new followers on social media since she was focused on the store’s presence rather than her own, and reminding people about their existence usually tacked on another minute to the fifteen of fame they’d already enjoyed. A little money wasn’t worth the wake rocking their otherwise serene life.

“The offer was different,” Cam said, her expression starting to show signs of devious mischief.

Fab sighed and braced herself.

“They invited us to compete again.”

Before Fab could say no, Cam continued talking.

“It’s all family members competing in teams. Parents, siblings, spouses. He said we’d be only one of two teams where both teammates had competed on Cutthroat Island before instead of just the one ex-competitor bringing an immediate relative with them.”

Fab knew her wife well enough to know that she was already sold on the idea.

“We can’t leave—”

“It’s an abbreviated filming schedule,” Cam interrupted, knowing that Fab was going to say they couldn’t leave the businesses unattended. “Only six weeks at the most.”

Fab opened her mouth to lodge another objection, but Cam was already

talking.

“We’ll get paid thirty grand a week *each*, in addition to the prize money if we win. Plus, we get a nice bonus if we make it to the final.”

Fab’s eyes widened in disbelief. Even after taxes, that was an enticing amount of money. It would go a long way to paying off the business and real estate loans they’d taken out.

“Filming is in February, and he promised it will not be in a tropical location,” Cam continued.

“Can we really leave that long?”

Cam tilted her head. “You’ve been training Yael to cover for you while we’re in Alaska —”

“Yeah, but that’s just a week.”

“You’ve said she’s a really good trainer.”

Fab nodded. “But six weeks means covering more than classes. It’s cutting checks and paying vendors and—”

“And Ted is so bored during his retirement that he would pay you to let him do that stuff while we’re gone.”

“You’ve already made up your mind?”

Cam reached across the counter and took her hand. “He said he would put in writing that we would not have to compete against each other. And he revealed the prize amount.”

Fab waited for Cam to have her fill of dramatic silence.

“One million freaking dollars, Fab!” Cam hesitated. “Unless you don’t think you have what it takes to win?”

Fab glared at her. “You’re not going to bait me, Cameron.”

“I get it,” she said with a sigh. “Turning thirty this year really messed with you. You know, after thirty my body hasn’t been quite the same either.”

Fab pulled away, crossing her arms over her chest. Nope. She wasn’t going to be baited or goaded or provoked. They had a nice life. She didn’t need to be subjected to all the production bullshit. She didn’t care how many

promises they made, there would always be some twist. It was like that monkey paw fable, no matter how carefully a person worded their wish, it always bit them in the ass.

“I’ll call him back and tell him we don’t have what it takes anymore. That we don’t think we can win—”

“It has nothing to do with winning,” Fab snapped.

“Of course it does,” Cam replied brightly, like she was telling her that the ice cream truck was outside and handing out free scoops. “You’d never back down from a challenge, not unless you knew it was futile.”

“You’re not going to do this to me, Cam.”

Cam slid off the stool. “It’s okay, babe. There’s no reason to be ashamed. You know what? You’re probably right. We’re not as young as we used to be. We can’t—”

A surge of hot, unbridled pride forced Fab’s jaws open. “Fine! If you want to suffer sleeping in a strange bed, dealing with cameras in our face all the time, who am I to stop you?”

Cam’s towel fell off her head when she pulled Fab into a hug. “I love you.”

She relaxed into the embrace, knowing that there was no way either of them could pass up a challenge.

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Having spent their lives as rivals, Lauren and Sylvie are now in their early thirties and primed to take over their respective family bakeries. That means working long, hot, seasons of outdoor food festivals where they are forced to endure each other - albeit with a lot of bantering and barb-trading. After all, no one knows how to get under Sylvie's skin like Lauren.

Sick of dealing with Lauren and her thieving family, Sylvie sets out to unmask the Machados for the traitors they are.

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CHAPTER 1

Fifteen Years Ago

Our Lady of Solitude High School

“You’re such a brat,” Lauren muttered under her breath, her swollen lip throbbing as she glared at Sylvie.

Sitting across the hallway from her, Sylvie, an irritating girl dressed in a plaid uniform skirt and disheveled white Oxford shirt, narrowed her eyes. “You started it,” Sylvie replied through gritted teeth.

“Girls,” Sister Catherine snapped, her sandy hair peeking out from under her white veil. “That’s enough. Don’t add to the trouble you’re already in. Sister Gloria has no patience for unladylike behavior.”

Lauren looked down at her shirt where the pocket had ripped. Where Sylvie had practically torn it off her chest. Where she still felt the pressure and weight of Sylvie’s fingertips.

Anger flashed hot and renewed in Lauren’s stomach. They wouldn’t be in

this situation if Sylvie wasn't such a nightmare.

"Sister," a woman from the front office poked her head into the hallway where they waited for the assistant principle to hand out their punishment. "The phone call you were waiting for—"

"Oh, yes. I will be right there. Thank you." Sister Catherine's gaze bounced between Lauren and Sylvie as if weighing her options. "Can I trust you two not to inflict any violence upon each other for a minute?"

"I'm not the one who—" Lauren started, but Sister Catherine didn't let her finish.

"Ms. Machado," she interrupted. "This is not the time to plead your case. Can I trust you or not?"

Lauren pushed her long, dark brown hair over her shoulder and straightened. "You can count on me Sister." She turned her attention to Sylvie, her gaze and silence sharpened to a lethal point. "I'm not the heathen."

Sylvie, her light brown hair no longer neatly confined to her usual high ponytail, seethed. "*Heathen?* That's hilarious coming from a—"

"Enough! If I so much as hear a peep out of either one of you I'll make sure Sister Gloria doubles your punishment. That is no threat, so don't test me."

Lauren chewed the inside of her cheek to keep silent as she glowered at Sylvie. It was her fault they were sitting outside the assistant principal's office instead of in their environmental science class.

Sister Catherine pursed her lips as she crossed her arms over her chest. She expected an answer.

Always the consummate brown-noser, Sylvie chirped like a mangy parrot. "I don't have a problem following rules." Smugness festered in her honey-colored eyes as she turned her attention from Sister Catherine to Lauren. Her pointy chin aimed at Lauren in silent accusation.

"Thank you, Ms. Campos," the nun replied with a sigh.

Sneering, Lauren stared right back at her nemesis until Sister Catherine cleared her throat.

“I won’t start anything,” Lauren replied stiffly. She didn’t add that she would be happy to finish whatever Sylvie kicked off.

After some trepidation, Sister Catherine left them alone. As a parting gift, she warned them again that they were already in plenty of trouble. Lauren knew she was right, but wished the nun understood how maddening Sylvie was and how irritating. She was salt in a wound, dirt in the eye, sand in a bathing suit. She couldn’t be blamed for trying to yank her hair out.

Sitting across from each other in blue molded plastic chairs, Lauren and Sylvie played the most hostile game of whoever-blinks-first-loses. The longer Lauren stared, the more her muscles tensed.

Lauren tried to keep her mouth shut, but the images kept replaying over and over in her mind. Sylvie and Patty on a date. The Patty that Lauren had a crush on since junior year. A crush Sylvie overheard Lauren talking about in the locker room after softball practice. It was no coincidence that Sylvie asked Patty out the next day.

“Coldplay,” Lauren murmured, disgust forcing her attention away from Sylvie.

“What was that, Loser Lou?” Sylvie taunted her with the name no one had used since elementary school. No one but Sylvie. “If you have something to say, say it. Don’t mumble,” she challenged.

“Coldplay,” she repeated, enunciating every consonant. “You got a date with the one and only Patricia Guerra and you took her to whack-ass Coldplay.”

“What’s wrong with Coldplay? You’re just jealous that she would never go out with you,” Sylvie replied, her upper lip trembling while she tried to keep her cool.

Sylvie was too easy to rile. Lauren could get her to explode in seconds. If she got her to lunge again, she might get her expelled. What a blessing it

would be to never see her stuck-up face again.

“*What’s wrong with Coldplay?*” Lauren repeated, sitting back and crossing one bare leg over the other. “Nothing is *wrong*, I guess.” She shrugged. “If you like lame lyrics and pained wailing.” She laughed.

Sylvie tried to laugh, but her bad temper was so poorly contained it was palpable beneath the fake cackle. Offending her took such little effort.

“What the hell do you know?” Sylvie’s pulse throbbed visibly in her neck, as if a tiny rage monster might break through her flesh *Alien* style.

“I don’t think a degree in music is required to notice they’re just a Radiohead rip off.” Lauren smirked. “A bad one.”

Sylvie’s lips disappeared into a fine, thin line. “Whatever.”

Lauren was going to continue taunting her, but the door at the end of the hall flew open. Clamoring voices and shoes clacking against wood floors destroyed the relative silence.

Watching four adults try to wedge through the same opening at once would’ve been comical if Lauren didn’t know what was coming. Sylvie’s mom muscled her way in first, followed by Lauren’s mom, leaving the two dads to wrestle for last place.

“*Mami!* I didn’t start it!” Sylvie cried as her mother, a tall bottle-blond in a sundress, darted toward her like she was rescuing a duckling from oncoming traffic.

“I know, *mi niña*.” Ms. Campos threw her arms around Sylvie. As she hugged her daughter, Ms. Campos’ head swiveled to Lauren. She offered the same icy glare her daughter always wore. “It’s not your fault some people haven’t been raised right.”

Lauren’s mother, her dark hair framing her full face, stood between Lauren and Ms. Campos. The expensive outfit she wore to spin class showed off more curves than was appropriate for a trip to a catholic school, but that didn’t inhibit her mother. “Don’t talk to my daughter, Barbara.”

Lauren’s father appeared at his wife’s side. “What can you expect from

these people? They're classless."

"*Classless?*" Mr. Campos bumped his round chest against Lauren's father's sternum. Lauren's dad, lean and tall, towered over Sylvie's dad, but that didn't stop him. "That's hysterical coming from you."

"We're not the family of thieves," Lauren's mom barked.

Sylvie's mom replied with a cold, sarcastic laugh. "Now you're just projecting, you two-faced—"

"*Two-faced?*" Lauren's mother matched the maniacal fake laughter. "Says the woman who has paid a small fortune in plastic surgery to literally have a second face!"

"She started it! This is her fault!" Sylvie pointed at Lauren as their parents argued.

Lauren's anger flared in response to the false accusation. Mostly false. "You're such a liar!"

Before Lauren could process her movements, Sylvie leapt toward her. "You provoked me!" Sylvie screamed. "You always provoke me!"

Like a hawk swooping in talons first, Sylvie flew at her face with her hands outstretched. Sylvie's dad, despite being built like a chubby Hobbit, moved fast enough to catch her. He tucked his petite daughter under his arm. Lauren struggled against her father's hold to defend herself from the not entirely untrue accusation.

Chaos crescendoed to deafening levels as the six of them squabbled. In the confusing mess of blame and cross-accusations, the assistant principal's door swung open.

Sister Gloria, a severe woman in her eighties dressed in a pristine white habit, appeared in the doorway. Her presence alone froze them in place. For generations, the all-female student body at Our Lady of Solitude had questioned whether the tall and imposing woman played professional football in her youth.

"What is going on here?"

Sylvie's dad put her down as her mother straightened her uniform and pushed her hair out of her flushed face.

"Sister, good morning—"

"Does it look like a good morning to you, Ms. Machado?"

In an instant, Lauren's mom traveled back in time. Rubbing her hands down her pant legs, she was a teenager gathering the nerve to face an authority figure.

Not to be outdone, Sylvie's mother rushed forward and stood a few inches in front of Lauren's mom. As if competing to see who could be more contrite.

"We have little tolerance for this kind of behavior," Sister Gloria announced, her tone as sharp as a razor blade. She fixed the older women physically shielding their daughters in her gaze. "I shouldn't have to tell either of you that."

The great Campos-Machado rivalry spanned countries and generations. How many times had they been hauled to this very office staring down the business end of this very nun?

Sylvie's mother, her store-bought features sharp and narrow, cast her eyes to the floor. Instead of capitalizing on the moment of weakness, Lauren's mother let shame soften her stance.

"This is the second incident this year," Sister Gloria started, her irritation growing. "Clearly, my leniency the first time was a mistake. Perhaps suspension will make the message clear."

Every ounce of heat fled from Lauren's body. They were only months from graduation. Months from her escaping to California.

"Dad," Lauren whispered to her father who was standing next to her with his arm around her shoulders. "UCLA," she mouthed, her eyes wide as terror rushed over her.

Understanding dawned on all of them at once. Even Sylvie went from looking angry to petrified as she clutched her mother's hand.

“We take this very seriously as well,” Sylvie’s father started as he walked around his wife and daughter and neared the irate nun standing in her doorway. “I can assure you that Sylvia will be thoroughly punished for her role in this spat.” He glanced back expectantly at Lauren and her parents still huddled together.

Lauren’s mother reacted first, stepping forward and standing tall at Mr. Campos’ side. “Yes. I think we are all agreed that no matter who started it, the girls should not be engaging in petty squabbles. Lauren will suffer the consequences of her actions, starting with losing her car until graduation.”

Wincing, Lauren didn’t have to exaggerate the pain of such a loss. There was no way her mother was going to lie to a nun. If she said it, that meant the convertible BMW she loved so much was not seeing the outside of the garage for a while.

Sylvie stifled her laugh, but Lauren heard the amusement in her breathing. Snapping her attention to the side, Lauren glared at her.

“Sylvia will also lose her driving privileges,” Sylvie’s father echoed, earning an inaudible gasp from his suddenly unamused daughter.

“And that’s just the beginning,” Lauren’s mother promised. “I can guarantee that we will make them learn this lesson, but there is no reason to ruin either girl’s future with something like this on their record, is there? It might give their colleges the wrong impression.”

Sylvie’s dad nodded aggressively. “Yes, let’s not take official action. The girls are both very sorry for their momentary lapse in judgment.” He glanced over his shoulder as if giving them a cue. “Aren’t you, girls?”

“Of course they are,” Lauren’s father nudged her. “They’re ready to apologize for their inappropriate behavior,” he added when she didn’t move.

“Why don’t you show Sister Gloria that you’re sorry,” Sylvie’s mother prodded her daughter.

Forced to face each other, the best Lauren could do was suppress her snarl.

She wasn't sorry. Not even a little.

Given that Sylvie couldn't look at her without glaring, she probably regretted elbowing her in the face as much as Lauren regretted tearing out a fistful of her hair. Not one bit.

"Lou," her father bent down to whisper in her ear. "*Pídele perdón,*" he instructed, ordering her to apologize.

Lauren wanted her mouth to move. It was bad enough that she'd probably be grounded with no car, no phone, no TV, and no friends for months. She really didn't want Sylvie to ruin college for her too.

When Sylvie's mom whispered something in her ear, her shoulders dropped but her lips remained sealed. She couldn't bring herself to apologize either.

As soon as Sister Gloria started to speak, Lauren blurted the magic words under threat of force. "I'm sorry Sylvie."

I'm sorry you're such an insufferable mutant, she thought before plastering a smile on her face.

"Me too," Sylvie replied so fast it was nearly unintelligible. When her mother pushed her with her elbow, she sighed and gritted her teeth. "I'm sorry, Lauren."

"Now hug it out, girls," Sylvie's dad added as he opened his eyes wide, indicating they better play along. "You want Sister Gloria to see you're sincere, don't you? Assure her that this is *not* going to happen again."

There were easily a thousand things Lauren would rather do than hug Sylvie, but she also sensed Sister Gloria wasn't buying their cardboard apologies. Like ripping off a bandage, Lauren closed the gap as Sylvie took two pained steps forward.

Awkwardly, Lauren leaned in to the coldest hug ever recorded as she barely touched her rival. Sylvie unexpectedly pulled her in tight, crushing her as she pressed her lips to her ear.

"Patty is a really good kisser," Sylvie whispered as she squeezed her

tight.

Instead of body-slamming her to the ground like she wanted, Lauren held her so tight she could've given her the Heimlich maneuver. "So is your mom."

"Okay, why don't you girls go back to class," Lauren's dad said as he pried her out of their hostile embrace.

"Here, put your sweater on," Lauren's mother chimed in as she yanked off the dark blue cotton sweatshirt wrapped around Lauren's waist. "It'll cover your shirt."

Eager to erase the signs of their fight, both mothers set to making them look composed again.

"While I'm here, Sister Gloria," Sylvie's dad started as if they could distract the nun long enough to free them. "I've been meaning to make a donation to the school. You know for the orphanage," he added, reaching back to his wife who had started rifling through her purse.

"Yes, us too." Lauren's mother already had her checkbook in hand. "Is now a good time?"

Sister Gloria looked beyond the parents desperately tap-dancing for her attention in hopes of sparing their daughters from punishment. Lauren did her best to look genuinely sorry and hoped Sylvie could try to look more like *Anne of Green Gables* and less like *The Terminator*.

Shaking her head, Sister Gloria relented. "If either one of you so much as raises your voice you'll be suspended. There will be no discussion. Action will be swift and severe. Am I clear?"

Unable to speak under the intensity of Sister Gloria's gaze, Lauren nodded emphatically. Next to her, Sylvie managed a squeak that sounded something like *yes, ma'am*.

"You may go, but report back here after the final bell. You will be staying an hour after school each day to help in the administrative office. You will be prompt and assist with enthusiasm."

Lauren almost asked how long they were expected to stay after school before thinking better of it and turning on her heels. She reached for the backpack next to where she'd been sitting.

"Lou," her father called before she could get more than two steps away. "Your keys." He held out his hand expectantly.

Cursing under her breath, Lauren unzipped the small front pocket of her bag and handed over her freedom.

"Your grandmother will pick you up later," he explained, his tone uncharacteristically stern.

The only comfort in her loss was watching Sylvie hand over an identical set of keys to her mother. As they walked toward the door at the end of the hall, Lauren resisted the desire to poke at her.

"Good thing Patty has a car," Sylvie muttered triumphantly the moment they were out of Sister Gloria's earshot.

Unable to swim past the bait, Lauren forced a smile. "I always knew Patty was a sweetheart. It's great that she also believes in doing acts of charity," she said before they turned down the corridor that led to a stairwell.

Sylvie's fists balled up at her sides. "You're so pathetic."

"I'm not the one going out with somebody just to spite someone else. You're obsessed with me. It would be kind of funny if it weren't so sad." Lauren took the steps two at a time once they reached them.

A few inches shorter than her, Sylvie had to work harder to keep up as Lauren glided up the stairs.

"Obsessed with you?" Sylvie laughed dryly when they reached the top. "Please, you're delusional." She elbowed her to get ahead. "I hate you."

Lauren glared at her as she darted out to reach the door of their science class first, pushing Sylvie out of the way with her hips. "Not more than I hate you."

CHAPTER 2

Now

Lauren pulled on her sunglasses to shield her eyes from the midday sun. Even in April, the Miami afternoon was unbearable. She'd never understand why they held Pride on the beach rather than somewhere indoors.

Better yet, they should move it to January. They'd all be just as gay when the weather was cool.

Barely an hour into the weekend-long festival, Lauren was in desperate need of caffeine. She picked up her long, wavy hair and tossed it into a messy bun as she checked that her espresso machine was set up correctly. Fitting a Cuban bakery under a tent with nothing but three tables and a power strip was a feat.

"Lou, where do you want this?" Domingo asked over the thumping dance music emanating from the stage on the other side of the park. His muscular arms flexed as he carried the metal trays toward the Pastry King booth.

"Thanks, Dom. Right here is great." She pointed to the chafing dishes already hot and ready to go. "Stay a minute and I'll make you a *café con leche*."

“Girl, hot milk is *not* it right now,” he joked as he wiped the sweat beading on his bald head. Even in nothing but tiny, rainbow-striped spandex shorts, Dom looked as hot as she felt.

Lauren laughed, leaving the milk in the enormous cooler under one of the tables. “Well, I have to thank you for lugging the rest of that from the van for me. A shot of espresso for the road?”

Dom painted a smile on his bearded face. “Who can turn that down?” he replied with a wink as he leaned over the table where Lauren had laid out the sweet treats capable of resisting the heat.

While Lauren started on his drink, he chuckled behind her. She glanced over her shoulder at what had amused him before her mood soured.

“Is she seriously setting up across from you?” he asked, shaking his head in disbelief.

“Apparently,” Lauren’s reply seeped through her clenched jaws.

Ten feet away, Sylvie Campos was overseeing two men as they hung a banner across her white tent. *King of Pastries Bakery. The Original Since 1970.*

“What a joke,” Lauren muttered, rolling her eyes at the false claim.

Unfortunately for her, she was going to see the sign many more times before the season was over. Pride was just the first stop. From now until the end of May, they’d both be at a myriad of events until it was too hot and they took a break until the winter.

“There are like a million other food vendor spots,” he said as he surveyed the sprawling sea of white tents.

Lauren poured a double shot of steaming hot espresso into a tiny insulated cup. “Yup, but I always end up within spitting distance of *her*. It’s a generational curse,” she explained as she handed over the coffee and started arranging the empanadas Dom brought for her. “She’s been copying me since first grade. Do you know she even came out right when I did?”

“Is nothing sacred?” Dom joked as he blew on the hot espresso before

sipping it.

With a drag performance of *Bad Romance* as a soundtrack, Lauren watched Sylvie as she worked. She was still as petite as she was in high school, but a few years ago she'd started lightening her shoulder-length brown hair by adding blonde highlights. In a few years, she'd probably end up as fake as her Cuban Barbie mother.

Turning away from the stall across the aisle, Lauren tried to focus on her work instead of letting Sylvie get to her. "She's seriously obsessed. Our senior year she even changed her car just to have a slightly higher trim level than me. Like who the hell does that?"

"You are not bitching about Campos, are you?" Melissa, her auburn hair in two braids she'd tied off with rainbow ribbons, appeared with a case of water. "High school ended fifteen freaking years ago!"

Resisting the urge to get defensive, Lauren tried to relax the tension coiled in her body. "She's the one who's stalking me. I was just telling Dom the extent of her insanity since he wasn't there to witness it like you were."

Melissa squatted to jam the plastic bottles in the ice chest. "I'm just saying, Lou. You need to work on letting that shit go. If she wants to compete, let her do it by herself. Don't let her leech your energy. Don't let her get under your skin like she always does."

Lauren clenched her teeth. "I don't let her rile me up."

Dom laughed. "Girl, I may not have gone to Our Lady of Perpetual Torment with you all, but I was there at the 2011 white party." He gulped down the rest of the potent coffee. "I saw you dump red wine on her in a glorious moment of telenovela realness. If that's not *getting under your skin*, I'd hate to see what is."

Crossing her arms over her chest, Lauren shook her head. She never expected to be thirty-two-years-old and still defending herself against false accusations. Mostly false. "That was an accident."

"So it was just a coincidence that not minutes before she'd been dancing

with Christy Sala?” Melissa pressed as she closed the cooler but kept a water bottle for herself.

With a shrug, Lauren tried not to smile. She hadn't completely intended to spill her drink on Sylvie, but she didn't regret having tripped as she walked by her. The horrified expression on her face had been priceless. Well worth the anal retentive demand letter she received later seeking repayment for the dress. The satisfaction was worth a couple hundred dollars.

“Okay, whatever. I'm different now, okay? That was over ten years ago. I've grown up and she hasn't.”

“One trip back to California with Jenny this summer and you're all zen? Is that what you're leading us to believe?” Melissa cracked open the water and gulped it. Her dark eyes never leaving Lauren's face.

“We did do that silent retreat,” she replied with a smile. “Maybe it helped me outgrow the stupid rivalry.”

“Even I know that's not true,” Dom said as he pointed at the Pastry King sign hanging across Lauren's tent.

Lauren furrowed her brow. “What's wrong with it?”

“Babe. Read it,” he said with a chuckle. “*Pastry King. The True Original Since 1970.* Does that sound like you're over this ridiculous baked goods war your great great great-grand-*abuelos* started?”

“I'm not in full control of the business yet,” she shot back.

“As if you'd change the slogan after your parents finally retire,” Melissa replied with an accusatory smirk.

“Anything is possible,” she decided, wishing she could be completely over the feud.

Intellectually, she knew it was silly to hate each other. There were a thousand Cuban bakeries in the county, and they hadn't been in direct competition for years. After so many decades, their clientele was firmly ensconced in one camp or the other. And yet, Lauren couldn't help but see Sylvie as a traitor. The descendent of the man who stole her great-

grandfather's recipes after having been his partner for years.

Even if she could forgive the ancient act of treachery, she couldn't forget all the crap Sylvie had pulled on her over the years. It was more than Dom and Melissa could understand.

After changing into their Pastry King tank tops, Lauren and Melissa stayed busy throughout the day and into the early evening when it was finally time to close down. Grateful that the dense crowd obscured her view of Sylvie most of the time, Lauren had managed to ignore her almost entirely. It was only when her annoying voice rose occasionally over the music that she remembered she was there. By the end of the day, she'd even managed to stop her lip from curling in response to the sound.

"Thanks so much for coming to my rescue today," Lauren said as she gave Melissa a side hug while they walked in the dark to the parking area. After packing the van and sending it off with her employee who showed up three hours late for her shift, Lauren was exhausted and grateful.

Melissa, who still moved with the poise of a ballerina, patted her hand. "I could almost thank you," she joked. "I've been kind of moping around since Yoly broke things off. This forced me out of the house and reminded me that there are indeed other women out there."

Lauren gave her a squeeze. "Well, feel free to come do it all again tomorrow if you want."

"And add to these unsightly tan marks?" She held out her arm. Her usually fair skin had taken on an unfortunate boiled shellfish quality.

Lauren's olive skin had mostly tanned or turned slightly pink, but the lines were just as unattractive. "Next year I'll get branded bikini tops," she joked before dropping Melissa off at her car and continuing to the far side of the lot.

As she approached her five-year-old red Jeep Wrangler with its black canvas top, Lauren rolled her eyes. Of course she was there. Parked next to her in a white Wrangler, so new it still had paper tags, Sylvie was loading the

contents of a cart into her trunk.

Before the interaction could ruin her day, Lauren looked down at the phone buzzing in her hand. Normally she wouldn't stop to read an email, but most emails didn't start with *congratulations, you've been selected*.

As Sylvie turned her head reflexively toward the sound of her phone dingling where she left it on the bed of her trunk, she nearly failed to read the message. Hot and tired after working outside all day, she was on autopilot. It was the *congratulations* that caught her eye and prompted her to read the email.

She stopped loading the leftover cases of soda and picked up her phone. Her pulse jumped the moment she noticed the sender.

“Holy shit,” she muttered as she read the first line of the message three times to make sure she understood.

After years of applying and being unceremoniously rejected, King of Pastries had been accepted to the prestigious Whitney Food and Wine Festival. Her heart raced as her vision blurred. The universe had finally corrected its oversight and rewarded her hard work.

“What are you so happy about? Did you find something small and furry to torment?”

The sound of Lauren's voice turned Sylvie's empty stomach. With a snarl fixed to her face, she straightened and glared at her.

Of course she's parked right next to me. Obsessed much?

“Lauren. What an unpleasant surprise,” she replied dryly as her foe pulled open the tailgate to her old-ass Jeep. “When did they start letting delinquents peddle their trash here?”

Lauren's tanned cheeks, already pink from the sun, brightened as she replied with an obnoxious smile. “Gosh, I don't know Syl. When did you get

your invite?”

With a deep breath, Sylvie turned away. She wasn't going to be baited. Not today. Not when she'd just gotten the best news of her life.

Ignoring the lifelong irritant behind her, Sylvie finished loading her things into her Jeep. It took all her self-control not to whistle as her imagination sped away with her.

The Whitney was the pinnacle of South Florida cuisine. People from all around the world descended upon the beach to see and smell and taste magnificent creations. Press from all over would be there too. It could easily be enough to catapult The King of Pastries into the stratosphere.

After that, there would be no doubt that they were the originals. Sylvie could vindicate her family in just one weekend. She could expose the Machados for the thieving frauds they were.

“Oh shit!” Lauren braced herself on the spare tire mounted to the back of her dusty, red Jeep. Her hand on her curvy hip.

Sylvie slipped into her driver's seat and blasted the AC. She was about leave her with a snide remark for the road when she noticed Lauren's gleeful expression as she looked down at her phone.

No. It couldn't be.

Lauren looked up, her dark eyes gleaming as she pulled off her sunglasses and bored into Sylvie with her mischievous gaze. “You got it already, didn't you?”

“Got what?” Sylvie snapped, irritated by Lauren's shit-eating grin.

“Don't play games. I see you listed in the selection,” she explained.

Sylvie regretted not having read the entire email. She'd gotten ahead of herself. As the AC cooled her sweaty body, Sylvie pulled her phone out and read the email more closely.

When Sylvie looked up from her phone again, nausea rocked her stomach, her head a helium balloon floating away from her shoulders. Lauren, meanwhile, leaned against her car, her legs crossed at the ankles

obviously waiting for her reaction.

“What did your family do? Who did you pay off?” Sylvie growled as she leapt from her car and invaded Lauren’s personal space. She hated Lauren’s height advantage and doubled down on her ferocity to make up for it.

Despite Sylvie’s invasion of her personal space, Lauren did her best statue impersonation—her chin thrust forward, her expression stony. “Who do you think we are? The Genoveses?” Her lip curled in the most infuriating half smile.

Sylvie’s skin flooded with heat as she clenched her muscles. She was well aware of the fact that they weren’t kids anymore and they couldn’t actually fight, but that didn’t diminish her urge to throttle her.

Without backing down, Sylvie pressed. “You found out we were selected and you pulled some shady shit to ruin it for me. Admit it.”

“You think that if we could talk our way into the Whitney we wouldn’t have done it years ago?” She laughed, her straight teeth gleaming in Sylvie’s face as her dimples appeared. “Does everything really revolve around you in there?” She pointed to Sylvie’s head, appearing not the least bit bothered by Sylvie standing inches from her face.

“You did something and I’m going to find out what. You’re not going to ruin—”

“If you want to find out *what I did* just read the message you maniac.” Lauren pulled out her phone, bumping Sylvie’s hand as she did. “We were both invited as part of a new thing the festival is doing to showcase the roots of Miami food culture.”

Disdain was an invisible string tugging Sylvie’s lip into a sneer. This couldn’t be happening. The Machados couldn’t be ruining this of all things. It wasn’t fair.

“Are you ever going to stop imitating me?” Sylvie stepped back. She didn’t want to be in her presence anymore. Her energy was turning a dream into a nightmare. “It’s gone from pathetic and into pathological.”

Lauren replied with an infuriating chuckle. “What time did you get your email?” she asked, leaning forward as if she could peek at her phone. “Let’s see who got it first and we’ll see who copied who.”

“That doesn’t even make any sense!” Sylvie screeched, her heart pounding as her grip on her self-control loosened. No one on the planet was as maddening as Lauren. “Just do the right thing and drop out.”

Lauren walked around the front of her own Jeep as Sylvie started to climb into her driver’s seat. “The right thing? Why is that the right thing? Under that logic you should drop out.”

“I hate you,” Sylvie decided before slamming her door closed.

In response, Lauren blew her a kiss. As her fingers left her lips, there was only one standing. The middle one.

CHAPTER 3

It took nearly an hour in afternoon traffic for Sylvie to drive five miles from Miami International Airport, where the King of Pastries had just opened a coveted spot, to the flagship store in East Hialeah.

The strip mall where the bakery acted as the anchor on the end, had seen better days since the 1970s when the area was new and growing to meet the huge influx of migrants fleeing Castro's Cuba. Sylvie's grandparents were among the masses who showed up in the mid-60s with nothing but the clothes on their backs.

From there, Sylvie's family rebuilt the hugely successful bakery business they'd had in Havana. First by selling their creations out of the back of a van, and then by opening their first store in Hialeah. All while dodging the Machados' attempts to undermine them.

When Sylvie arrived at the bakery, she carefully traversed the packed parking lot where cars routinely double parked and trapped others in. After several failed attempts, she bulldozed her way into a spot.

Too slow, she thought as she whipped around and into a space before another driver could get to it.

Outside, she smiled at a little old lady hobbling out of Berta's Unisex. The hair salon had been there since the shopping center was built. The octogenarian clientele inside was as old as Berta herself.

All day, old ladies moseyed over to the bakery with a head full of rollers or stinking like toxic fumes with towels clipped around their shoulders as they waited for their hair dye to set. It was usually black, but some old gals would go for a spicy burgundy.

She walked past the other storefronts on her way to the bakery. The shady medical supply store. The place that sold burner phones and lottery tickets. The *botanica* where the overwhelming stink of incense wafted from the door propped open by the waist-high statue of Saint Lazarus and the creepy dogs licking his wounds. Sylvie smiled. The East Hialeah store wasn't new and fancy like all their other locations, but it was where they started and that made it special.

As soon as she opened the door to the bakery, Sylvie was assaulted by salsa music cranked up to the max and a dozen people waiting to be helped. The chime above the door that would've announced her arrival was swallowed up by the noise.

Behind the glass cases full of *pastelitos*, the Cuban term for the phyllo dough confections, her godmother was working the enormous machine that halved oranges and squeezed them into fresh juice. The King of Pastries had changed very little since it opened in 1970.

Sylvie clenched her jaw and resisted the urge to snap. She reminded herself that this store had its own rhythm. That the people chatting amongst each other as they waited weren't expecting to run in and out in an efficient manner. It was a gathering place. An important fixture in the community.

Over the sound of people shouting their orders and blaring music, Sylvie called to her godmother and signaled for her to meet her in the back. She inhaled the scent of fresh-baked Cuban bread being flung over the counters as she made her way to the office.

Office was a generous term. What used to be the multi-million-dollar-business' corporate hub was essentially a glorified closet. These days there was nothing but a desk, two chairs, and a dock for when she brought her

laptop. It used to be packed to the ceiling with boxes of papers and all the other evidence of her parents' terrible record keeping.

The first thing Sylvie did when she started modernizing two years ago was go paperless and move the operation to her house. There, she had an entire room dedicated to the business, complete with secure servers and a three-screen setup so she could comfortably compare spreadsheets.

"I'd ask you how your weekend went, but I can see it in your sunburn," Regina, her godmother, a cherubic woman in her fifties, said with a laugh as she appeared in the open doorway.

Having only been a kid when her family moved from Cuba, Regina's accent was mild and merely cushioned the edges of her words. With Regina's naturally blonde hair, people didn't expect her to speak Spanish at all until she opened her mouth.

"It was fine," Sylvie said as she pulled her thin laptop out of her purse. "Can we go over this morning's deliveries? I want to make sure—"

"What do you mean *fine*?" Regina plopped down on the chair across from the desk. "I thought when you called me back here you were going to give me some good gossip about meeting a cute girl." She wiggled her brows.

Sylvie pursed her lips. "Girl? *Madrina*, I'm thirty-two. If I were dating *girls*, I hope you'd be calling the cops."

"*Aye*, you take everything so seriously, *mija*." She crossed one plump leg over the other. "My question is the same, okay? Did you make a love connection?"

"I was there to work," she replied stiffly, eager to get back to important matters.

"What's the point of sweating your butt off all day if you weren't going to use the opportunity," Regina lamented with a sigh and shake of her head.

"I'm the face of the bakery, *Madrina*. It's important that I do these things. I'm part of the brand." She hesitated and added the real reason. "Plus. . . Lauren Machado doesn't send employees."

Her godmother rolled her eyes. “*Los Machados*. I don’t know why you carry on such a stupid rivalry. It’s gone on about two generations too long if you ask me.”

Sylvie scoffed. “What do you suggest? Should we just forget that they stole our proprietary information and tried to screw us out of our livelihood?”

“*We? Us?* At the time of the split, you weren’t anywhere near born and my grandmother couldn’t tie her own shoe laces.” Regina laughed. “You know, I dated a Machado once. Your grandfather had an epic fit about it. That boy was a damn good kisser.” She smiled, still satisfied with her rebellion.

Disregarding her godmother’s details about a Machado she dated thirty years ago, Sylvie fixated on what she said earlier. “You’re right,” she decided as an idea began to form.

“I’m right about so many things,” she sighed, exhausted by her own genius. “You’re going to have to be more specific.”

“This *has* been going on too long between us and the Machados.” She sat up straight, excited at the prospect of ending the feud. “It’s time to settle this and prove that they betrayed us and stole our recipes.”

“What? That’s not what I meant—”

“*Oye, mi gente!*” Junior’s voice boomed in the bakery. “Where my people at?”

At the sound of her brother’s voice, Sylvie’s body tensed. There was only one reason he would rear his obnoxious head.

“Patience,” her godmother advised. “He’s your brother.”

Sylvie narrowed her eyes. “Why do people say that? It doesn’t make him any less of a dick. I’m not genetically programmed to like him. He’s literally the worst.”

“Sylvia! Don’t say that,” her godmother chastised.

Junior, his head shaved to conceal his premature balding, appeared in the open doorway. He had their father’s small stature but none of his charm.

“Don’t say what?”

Regina stood to kiss him, but Sylvie had no intention of moving. The best she could do was endure his unwanted kiss on the cheek for her godmother’s sake. He wouldn’t have bothered with the charade if Regina wasn’t there anyway.

“What do you want?” Sylvie asked directly.

He pressed his hand to his round chest as if she’d wounded him. “Can’t I just come by and check on things?”

Sylvie clenched her jaw. She was the one who put everything into the business. All her little brother did was manage to be born male. In their family that meant he got everything he wanted without having to do anything to earn it. There were no expectations. No demands.

“You’re not getting any money,” Sylvie said flatly as she stared into his light brown eyes.

He didn’t drop his intentionally obnoxious smirk. “I’m entitled to it just as much as you are.”

Rage took over Sylvie’s body in an instant. “What exactly have you done to deserve anything, apart from being born into this family?” She started bouncing her knee. “You want money? Go out front and help. I’ll cut you a check at the end of the day.”

Junior’s lip twitched but he maintained his irritating expression. “This still belongs to *Mami* and *Papi*. You can’t control what’s not yours.”

“Take it up with them if you have a problem, but you’re not getting a penny from me,” she said as she stood.

At just over five feet tall, Sylvie knew she was short, but she didn’t let that stop her. She lifted her chin and puffed out her chest in challenge.

“*Papito*, why don’t you come with me, honey. I’ll make you a little something to eat before you go,” Regina said before she led Junior out the door.

Sylvie glared at him until he was gone. Her hands were still shaking when

she opened the drawer to collect the invoices from that morning's deliveries. Forcing herself to focus, Sylvie set to work.

"I wish you could be a little kinder to him," her godmother said when she returned.

Sylvie swiveled around in her chair to face the door. "Kinder? His entire life he's been treated like the boy king. He can stand to be treated like a regular person. The world doesn't revolve around his spoiled ass."

Regina sighed. "We all have our own paths to walk. He's your brother."

Sylvie's skin heated as her stomach tensed. "We certainly have walked different paths. Have you forgotten that I had to buy my own place to be allowed to move out as an *unmarried woman*, but he got a condo for his twenty-first birthday?" She sneered. The decade old slight still stung. "You think he lays awake at night thinking about the dough to filling ratio in the coconut *pastelitos*?" she asked, exasperated by being the only person in her family to see Junior for the useless, entitled mooch that he was.

"Oh, *mi amor*," her godmother neared her and cupped her face. "If that's what you're doing with your nights, you might want to get back on those dating apps."

"I don't have time to date, *Madrina*. You know that." She took a breath, exhausted after her brother zapped her energy. "I'm in a long-term, committed relationship with the business, and considering I got us to The Whitney, I'd say it's going pretty well."

Regina leaned her thick body against the desk. "No one writes on their tombstone that they wished they had worked *more*, honey. You're too young to let your life pass you by. I don't want you to end up alone."

Faced with her genuine concern, Sylvie tried to relax. "I don't plan to be alone forever, but it's not like it's easy to date when my day starts at three in the morning. Sometimes I'm so busy I don't have time to eat unless it's while I'm driving from one location to another. How am I supposed to fit someone in there? Who is going to understand that my work has to come first for now?"

At least until its under my complete control.”

“What if you taught your brother—”

“Absolutely not,” she snapped. “I can handle it by myself. I’m not going to let him ruin everything I’ve already accomplished.”

When Regina went back to the front of the house, Sylvie reached for her cellphone. She wasn’t going to let her irritation at her brother distract her.

After scanning her contacts, she found Freddie. She’d dated her briefly before they agreed they’d be better off as friends, or rather, that their competing ambitions were incompatible.

Sylvie: Hey! Long time no see! Are you still writing for the New Times?

Freddie: Hey! Yeah, I am. What’s up?

Sylvie: I’m hoping to engage your investigative skills. I’ll pay for your time and expenses of course.

Freddie: What do you want to dig into???

Sylvie: I want to prove that the Machados were the ones that stole our recipes. . . To establish once and for all that WE are the aggrieved party.

Freddie: Haven’t you looked into this before and gotten nowhere? Memories fade after this long and that’s not taking into account the myths floating around both fams.

Sylvie: I looked, but I’m not a trained investigative reporter ;)

Freddie: Wow a winky face emoji? You’re really pulling out all the stops here, huh? LOL. I’m working on a long form piece right now, so I have bits of time here and there. I can’t promise quick results . . . or any results . . . but I’ll see what I can do.

After thanking Freddie and insisting that she bill her for her time, Sylvie tilted back in her chair and grinned. With any luck, she’d end the feud like her godmother suggested. She would expose the Machados for the thieving frauds they were.

CHAPTER 4

Entering through the back of the newest Pastry King still under construction, Lauren was greeted by the piercing clamor of a table saw. She moved through the brand new kitchen they'd renovated first and beyond the doorway they'd covered in plastic panels to keep the dust at bay.

"That's some serious progress, *Papi*," Lauren shouted over the noise to her father, his tall frame bent over the work table as he cut a piece of lumber.

At the sound of her voice, he turned off the machine and popped his safety glasses on top of his grey head. "Hi, honey." He walked around the mess of wood and tools to give her a hug. His *Vote Carla Machado for Councilwoman* t-shirt was soft against her cheek.

Lauren squeezed him back. "I thought there were going to be a few guys helping you today." She glanced around the construction zone that would one day be the modern face of the bakery.

"They never showed up," he replied with a shrug.

Lauren dropped her bag on an overturned bucket and picked up a pair of work gloves and safety goggles. "Well then, it's a good thing I wore close-toed shoes," she joked.

Jose smirked. "This isn't how a corporate boss is supposed to behave."

Tucking her t-shirt into her jeans, Lauren laughed. "Yeah, well, it's worked out pretty okay for you."

A few hours later, a sweaty Lauren picked up her dingy phone. She smiled at the message from Jenny before turning to her dad who was busy repairing the sheeting covering the reclaimed wood floors they'd installed themselves.

“*Papi*, be nice, okay?”

He looked up from where he was using blue painter's tape to stitch together a gash in the thick plastic. “I'm always nice.”

Lauren winced. “Just don't tease her so much, okay. She's trying.”

Jose stood to continue preparing the space for the mural installation. When she'd been unable to find the right wallpaper, she commissioned an artist to paint a bold backdrop for the entire bakery. With a rich, dark blue as a base, there would be bright green palm fronds and the occasional bright pink flamingo. Like *Miami Vice* but modern, Lauren hoped for vibrant results. Something to stand out from the zillion other Cuban bakeries.

“It's not my fault her parents didn't teach her how to be Cuban,” Jose decided.

“Now you sound like *Mami*,” she replied as she started for the front door covered in brown paper like the rest of the store front. “She grew up in L.A. It's just not the same there. You can't expect everywhere to be a mini-Cuba.”

“Says the girl pouring her heart and soul into trying to revitalize Little Havana,” he joked. “Listen, she's a nice person. I just don't know if she's the one for you. You've got big plans, *mi amor*. Don't you want someone who understands?”

“She gets it, Dad. She doesn't have to speak perfect Spanish to get it.”

Jose put his hands up in defeat. “I've got your back, honey. Whatever you decide. But your old man has these gray hairs for a reason. I've learned a thing or two over the years.”

Lauren smiled as she turned several deadbolts. “Did you just miss the opportunity to say that the devil is wiser because of his age and not because he's the devil?” She recalled one of her dad's favorite Cubanisms. They

never quite translated right.

Lauren opened the door.

“Hi!” Jenny, her dirty blonde hair loose under her shoulders, greeted her with three iced lattes in a carrier. “I brought fuel,” she added before kissing Lauren on the cheek.

“Thanks babe. Let me just wash my hands.”

“*Hola* Jose,” Jenny’s accent sharpened the consonants too much, but her enthusiasm made up for the deficiency.

While Jenny chatted to her father, Lauren washed her hands in what was going to be the bathroom, but was currently just a spigot and a covered hole in the cement subfloor. When she returned to the front of the shop, her dad was showing Jenny the progress he’d made on the counter they were building from wood salvaged from an old church before it was demolished to make room for *another* high-rise.

“Jenny, I want to show you something,” Lauren called, gesturing to the plastic covering the entrance to the kitchen.

“Okay,” she replied with a smile before slipping through the plastic.

“Let me just grab my coffee,” Lauren said before walking over to where her father had grabbed her drink out of the carrier.

With a grave expression, he took a dramatic sip of the national chain’s creation.

“Dad don’t,” Lauren whispered, her eyes wide in warning.

He couldn’t resist saying what Lauren was thinking. “She brought us burnt coffee when we make the best *café con leche* in town,” he whispered.

“She was being thoughtful.”

He cocked his head to the side and took another Oscar Award winning sip. “If you say so *cariño*.”

In the kitchen, Jenny had perched on a stool next to the stainless steel worktable at the center of the kitchen. Lauren smiled. She was every bit the California dream.

“I have something for you to try,” Lauren announced as she strolled across the kitchen.

“How was Pride?” Jenny asked, resting her elbow on the table. “I’m sorry I couldn’t make it. You know I don’t do so well with this humidity and those crowds.”

“I’m sorry I didn’t come over when I finished last night.” Lauren retrieved the covered glass container she’d left on the warming tray. “I was so tired I passed out on the couch as soon as I got home.”

“No worries. I understand.” She smiled and took Lauren’s hand as she approached. “I missed you though.”

“Try this.” Lauren held up a small, air fried *croquette*. It was one of several new creations she’d been working on for months.

Jenny took a bite and nodded. “It’s good.”

“It’s vegan,” she explained with pride.

“Cool.”

“That’s it?” Lauren chuckled. “All I get is an *it’s cool*? I made plants taste like a traditional ham *croqueta*. Aren’t you impressed by my alchemy?”

“Sorry hun.” Jenny winced. “I guess I’m just not a big *croqueta* person.”

Lauren clutched her chest. “How can you say that? You wound me. *Croquetas* are the single best food in the world. They can literally be anything. Sweet. Savory. Big. Small. Baked. Fried.”

Jenny pulled her in and wrapped her arms around her waist. “I love how passionate you are about this stuff. It’s so cute.”

“Cute?” Lauren chuckled. “I guess I’ll take that.”

Jenny’s green eyes shone. “So you never told me about Pride. Was it a raging success?”

Lauren pulled back. “It was pretty good. I got a ton of good feedback on my experimental stuff. Even though everybody always asks for the classics.” She popped the rest of the *croquette* in her mouth and brushed her fingers on her pants to get rid of the crumbs. “If Sylvia Campos hadn’t been twenty feet

away from me the whole weekend it would've been perfect.”

“You two.” Jenny shook her head as she rolled her eyes. “I don't know why you're always at each other. Like seriously. Who cares about some old competition or whatever.”

“It's not me!” she shot back defensively. “It's her. She's the one that can't let things go. And just for the record,” she started, unable to let her words go uncorrected. “It's not a competition. Our great-grandfathers were partners until hers betrayed mine and took off with our recipes to become our competition.”

“I know, babe. I'm sorry.” She pulled her back into her arms. “I didn't mean to be glib.”

Lauren eased into her arms. “That's okay. I'm so excited about getting into The Whitney Food and Wine Festival. Even having to see Sylvie's face there can't ruin it.”

“And yet, here you are mentioning her again,” she replied with a smirk.

“It's unfortunately festival season. I'm going to see her everywhere for months.” She groaned. “It's a curse.”

“Why don't you just send someone else? You don't have to be out there in the heat getting all gross.”

“It's my chance to connect with people, you know? No one is going to sell the business like I will. It's more than just dishing out *pastelitos* and trying out new things. That's my chance for people to connect my face with the Pastry King instead of my parents.”

Jenny's eyes glistened as she gazed up at her. “You're so freaking hot.”

Lauren laughed. “Oh, yeah? Well, I think you're pretty hot too.”

“If only I felt as strongly about freelance writing as you do about the bakery.” Jenny rested her head against Lauren's chest.

Guilt tugged at Lauren's heart. After a year of long distance dating, Jenny had moved to Florida. She insisted that it wasn't just for her, but Lauren didn't believe her. To move, Jenny had given up her job at a local magazine

to work remotely.

“Dinner tonight?” Lauren asked before kissing the top of her head. “If you come over, I’ll cook.”

Jenny squeezed her tight. “There’s nowhere I’d rather be.”

CHAPTER 5

The Coconut Grove Passion Fruit Arts Festival, which took over several streets along Biscayne Bay, much to the chagrin of locals, was one of the best events of the season. Sylvie clicked on the fan positioned at the corner of her rectangular booth and stood in front of it to dry the perspiration that had accumulated in the hour she'd spent setting up. Even in the early morning and with the breeze off the bay, it was already stifling.

“How much do you have to pay to make sure you end up next to me?”

Sylvie turned toward the sound of Lauren's voice. With the most deadpan expression she could muster, Sylvie sighed. Part of her wanted to pretend Lauren hadn't spoken. To treat her like she didn't exist, but she couldn't control the sneer that tugged at her upper lip.

“I signed up for this last year,” Sylvie snapped defensively. “You're the one who followed me to Pride.”

Lauren laughed, sending Sylvie's blood pressure soaring.

“That's how you remember that?” Lauren's shit-eating grin dimmed as she rolled a cart into her booth. “What's it like to live on your planet?”

Sylvie crossed her arms over her chest and forced a sarcastic laugh. “You mean Earth? It's great. You should try it sometime.”

Unperturbed, Lauren, her dark hair falling in waves down her back, turned away. Even her silence was agitating.

Sylvie checked on the fresh bread she'd stored in the warming drawer. The crowds would start trickling in soon, and she couldn't let Lauren's nonsense distract her.

It wouldn't be easy to ignore her considering they were only separated by two folding tables. The permeable walls to their temporary kingdoms.

As Lauren set out her inferior offerings, Sylvie's irritation grew. Merely existing near her was too much to bear.

When they finished, Lauren rested her hands on her hips and peered over at Sylvie's booth. She made a sound. An indecipherable, nasally puff of air that seemed to ask *that's-what-you-brought?*

"What?" Sylvie's exacerbation broke through like a chain snapping off a bike.

"Nothing," she replied with exaggerated innocence. She tucked her hands in the back pockets of her denim shorts. "I was just wondering how you don't get bored making the same guava and cheese *pastelitos*. The same ham *croquetas*."

Heat spiked up Sylvie's back and wrapped around her face. "Oh, you mean how do I have respect for tradition? I can see how that would be confusing for you considering your need to bastardize everything." She nodded as if expressing empathy.

Lauren flared her nostrils. She was a bull stamping the ground with one hoof, even as she tried to maintain an aura of smug indifference. "Creativity must be very mystifying. It's easier to follow someone else's recipe than to take a risk with your own ideas."

Every word Lauren said was a punch to the gut. It was like she knew exactly where to strike for optimum damage. A byproduct of having been stuck together since pre-school.

"We'll see how much energy you have to run your mouth next Sunday." Sylvie tossed the barb as she prepped the espresso machine for an influx of customers.

“You mean the game your family has lost three years in a row? Yeah, I’m pretty sure I’ll have plenty of gas in the tank to point out your inadequacies on the field.”

“Oh, you mean the games you’ve stolen by cheating because that’s the only way you people operate?” Sylvie’s pulse danced in her neck as her attention darted over her shoulder to where Lauren was still standing. Lauren, who was trying to appear nonchalant despite being obviously chock-full of *chalant*.

“Cheating?” Lauren laughed, her irritating dimples on full display. “How are we cheating at a charity event exactly?” She crossed her arms over her chest, feigning ignorance.

Fire blazed up Sylvie’s belly and spread into her chest. “Isn’t that pathetic? That you’re so desperate to win that you’ll find a ringer to feel artificially superior?”

Lauren’s dark eyes gleamed as the sun broke through the clouds, shining a light on Lauren like a Noir detective grilling her for the truth. She was unrepentant. “*Ringer*? Do you mean my little cousin who plays high school baseball?” She smirked, endlessly amused. “He’s not Jose Canseco. He’s a kid.”

“You’re unbelievable.” Sylvie shook her head as she re-arranged the pastries she’d already organized to avoid looking at Lauren. “Are you physically incapable of fessing up? Confession is good for the soul. You think you would’ve learned that after twelve years of catholic school.”

“What do you want me to admit, *Sylvia*?” The name sounded harsh on her full lips. “That we have a sixteen-year-old *child* on our team who plays for his school’s team? Okay.” She held her hands out. “You got us.” She rolled her eyes.

Sylvie forced a faux smile. “If that’s how you want to paint it to make yourself feel better, go right ahead. It’s not the first time your frail ego led the charge on your decision making, and I’m sure it won’t be the last.”

Memories of a night fifteen years ago clouded Sylvie's mind. She couldn't let it linger when Lauren probably didn't even remember it happened.

"I don't even know what that means." Lauren scoffed. "But how is him playing any different than us playing? We played softball in high school. Unlike him, we even made it to the state championship."

Reacting to her sore spot being poked, Sylvie ignited. "We didn't play. You stole my position."

"You really do skew every memory, don't you?" Lauren shook her head. "We both tried out for shortstop, Syl. How do you suppose that I stole that exactly? I guess it's really true what they say. The thief always thinks he's getting robbed."

The use of her old nickname tossed Sylvie off balance, defying her anger in the process. Before she could recover, a tall blonde in a Pastry King tank top sauntered toward their booths pulling a beach wagon full of supplies. The sight of oat milk reignited her contempt.

"Hey, babe," the blonde Sylvie had seen around a few times called for Lauren.

Lauren's face softened into an unrecognizable expression. Relaxed happiness.

Turning away from Sylvie, Lauren greeted the woman. If someone held a machete to her throat, Sylvie would have to agree the woman was objectively attractive.

With an eye roll, Sylvie checked her phone. In a few minutes the event would open to the public. She couldn't wait to be too busy to notice Lauren.

"You look so cute in your little t-shirt," Blondie said as she wrapped her arms around Lauren's neck.

Zero decency. You're at a work event — not a bordello.

The sound of kissing turned Sylvie's stomach. Desperate to drown it out, she darted for the espresso machine to make herself a drink.

Like driving past a car wreck, Sylvie couldn't help glancing at the booth next door. It was worse than the year she got stuck next to the woman who made art from drier lint. They were both gross, but at least the lint was strangely fascinating.

"What time do you think you're going to be finished?" Barbie asked as she sat cross-legged on the huge marine cooler on wheels. With her eyes on her phone while Lauren worked alone to put away the things in the wagon, Barbie continued unperturbed. "Melissa wants to try that new oyster bar on the river. I told her we would meet her, but she wants to make a reservation."

She's allergic to shellfish, dumbass.

"I have to be back so early tomorrow," Lauren replied with much more patience than Sylvie expected. "I don't think I'll be up to going downtown tonight."

Sylvie shook her head before sipping her espresso. Lauren shouldn't have to remind her girlfriend how exhausting it was to spend twelve hours on her feet while working in the heat. At the end of the day all anybody wanted was a shower and to relax. Especially when they had to do it all over again the next day.

In response to Blondie's real-life pout, Lauren cocked her head to the side. She stopped working and cupped her cheek. "Why don't you go without me? You two always have a good time."

Whatever happened next between Lauren and the ungrateful brat, Sylvie couldn't hear. One of the artists displaying his wares appeared at her booth with an order for a dozen *café con leches*. She didn't have time to watch Lauren's pathetic dating life, and she shouldn't care anyway.

CHAPTER 6

Bone-tired from having gone out with Jenny, Melissa, and Dom the night before, Lauren yawned as she hurried toward her booth. Pulling the wagon full of her fresh-baked creations behind her, she only had minutes to set up before the gates opened to the crowd. As she rushed, she imagined what kind of obnoxious commentary Sylvie was going to have in store for her.

As she neared her tent at the end of the closed-off street lined with swaying palm trees, she was greeted by the sound of Sylvie yelling. A sound she'd grown familiar with over the years. The woman's frustration tolerance had always been abysmal.

Pacing her tent, Sylvie had her hand on her baseball-cap-covered head as she screeched into her cellphone. The immature part of Lauren vibrated with delight at seeing her in distress. Whatever had her so upset, Sylvie had either caused it or, at the very least, deserved it.

"*Madrina*, I need you to bring me a replacement, please." Sylvie charged along the right angle bend at the corner of her booth. "Just send the whole machine. I can't not have coffee all day. It's thirty percent of my sales." She hit another right angle. "Can't you call Chuchi? He can take it apart and bring it to me." Her hand slid off her head and covered her face as she stopped moving. "I know it's Sunday, but can't you make due with one machine for the day? It's better than—" She sighed. "Yeah. Okay. I know you're right.

I'll figure something out. I'll call the repair guy again and see if I can persuade him to come." She dropped her shoulders and muttered as Lauren slid into the adjoining booth. "If I can get him to answer the freaking phone first. *Bueno*, okay. Bye. I love you too."

Lauren gave Sylvie the benefit of ignoring her as she laid out the food she'd picked up from the bakery before sunrise. If she was dealing with a crisis, she'd hope Sylvie would give her the benefit of privacy.

With a curse, Sylvie threw her cell phone on the table and kicked a box on the ground. Glancing at her from the corner of her eye, Lauren could tell that a meltdown was imminent. As much as a little part of her wanted Sylvie to suffer, she hated to see anyone struggle. Even spiteful little creatures like her.

"Can I help?" Lauren asked when she finished stocking the large cooler under the table.

Sylvie's response was a suspicious glare.

Lauren put her hands up as if Sylvie's eyes were loaded weapons. "I come in peace, okay?" She smiled. "What happened?"

Sylvie's attention snapped to the espresso machine behind her. "It's not heating the water."

"Can I take a look at it?" Lauren asked, moving slowly as she approached the tiger's enclosure. Even wounded, a wild creature could still attack without warning.

"What are you a *cafetera* whisperer?" Sylvie snapped.

Lauren took her sarcasm as tacit acceptance of her offer. It's not like Sylvie was capable of talking to other people like a human being. Reaching under her own espresso machine, Lauren grabbed the hardshell case her father gifted her years earlier.

Using her tools, Lauren dismantled the machine's cover while Sylvie stared over her shoulder.

"How do I know you're not going to sabotage my machine?"

Lauren looked up from where she was squatting to get a good look inside the machine's expensive guts. She couldn't help but laugh. "You mean the machine that's already broken?"

Sylvie's pink lips twitched as if torn between a sneer and smile. She understood their confusion well, she was often torn between two distinct emotions when in Sylvie's proximity.

Turning back to the machine, Lauren identified the problem. "The coil is cracked." She pointed to the curling copper line leading from the heating element attached to the water tank. "See?"

As if the act itself was torture, Sylvie bent over next to Lauren to see where she was pointing. The scent of her clean perfume filled Lauren's lungs and transported her to another lifetime. It had been fifteen years since Sylvie had been this close, but Lauren remembered every detail of it like it was yesterday.

"How the hell does that happen?" Sylvie muttered, her face inches from Lauren's as she stared at the problem.

"Stress," Lauren replied just as quietly, her attention fixated on Sylvie's bright, honey-colored eyes.

Sylvie shifted her gaze from the coil to Lauren. With her lips parted and her expression surprisingly soft, she looked like she did at the dance. Her heart-shaped face and delicate features never matched the intensity burning inside of her.

"It's what happens when it gets too hot," Lauren explained, forcing herself to keep her attention away from Sylvie's lips, even if her eyes were just as dangerous. "Too hot and then suddenly too cold."

Sylvie dragged her teeth along her bottom lip. "I can see how that can break you," she replied, her words a loaded revolver aimed at Lauren's chest.

Lauren's suddenly racing heart jolted her to her feet. She couldn't do this with her again. "Unless you can get a replacement coil today, there's no way you're going to use that as anything but a paperweight. You can use mine."

The shift in energy brought them both back to reality.

“Why would you do that?” Sylvie demanded, crossing her arms over her chest like she was trying to keep something out . . . or maybe something in.

Lauren was already busy moving things off the tables acting as a barrier between them. “Give me a hand. I’m not doing all your work,” she barked as her fingers trembled from the burst of adrenaline cycling through her body. “I don’t want to hear you complaining that you would’ve done so much better than me at the festival if only you’d had your coffee machine.”

More comfortable bickering than talking, Sylvie sprang into action and helped Lauren create an alleyway between the two booths. “There’s always an ulterior motive,” she replied predictably, although her words lacked their typically venomous edges. Surprisingly, she was as easy to disarm as she was to detonate.

After they’d reconfigured their tents so Sylvie could go back and forth to use Lauren’s machine, Lauren pulled a bottle of water out of her cooler.

“Oat milk, though?” Sylvie’s eyes shot to the cooler as it closed.

Taking a swig of water, Lauren rolled her eyes. “Have you even tried it?”

“God, no,” she replied in disgust as if Lauren had just asked her if she drank blood.

“Then how do you know you don’t like it?” Lauren chuckled at how ridiculous Sylvie’s responses were for everything. “Unexpected things can be good if you’re not so narrow minded. If you don’t turn things down before giving them a chance.”

“I’m not saying there’s anything wrong with oat milk.” She perched her hands on her slim hips. “But, there are places that certain things don’t belong. A *café con leche* is by definition made with *leche*. Milk is literally in the name. If you make it with something else, well . . . then it’s something else.”

No one in the world was as stubborn as Sylvie. Lauren didn’t understand why she struggled to change perspectives. To think about things in new ways, even if it was foreign or even scary.

“Doing things one way just because you’ve always done them like that. . .” Lauren leaned against the table they’d positioned like a bridge between the two booths. “Does that really make sense to you?”

“Traditions exist for a reason,” she replied as she straightened. “It’s comforting to give people what they expect. What’s wrong with predictability?”

“Nothing. As long as it doesn’t become a prison that keeps you from ever reevaluating things,” Lauren decided.

Holding her in her gaze, Sylvie stared at her as if trying to determine whether they were still talking about coffee. Lauren held her gaze, equally unsure of her own intent.

CHAPTER 7

Packing up at the end of the weekend-long arts festival, Sylvie carefully wrapped the metal flamingo sculpture she'd bought from a local artist. As she did, her attention drifted toward Lauren.

Unsure of what strange spirit of cooperation had come over her rival, Sylvie had been grateful for her generosity in sharing the espresso machine. She'd bought the flamingo as a token of a gratitude, but now that Blondie had shown up to *not help*, she was taking the stupid thing home with her.

As sunset neared, Sylvie hurried to finish breaking down her tent before she lost all light. Sweaty and tired, she was more than ready to go home.

"Can't you take the morning off?" Blondie hooked her finger into the empty belt loop of Lauren's shorts.

Sylvie rolled her eyes. What did this woman not understand about their industry? There were no days off and especially not mornings. At best, with the hours they kept, they could offer evenings if they were willing to sacrifice sleep. Sylvie had yet to meet anyone worth the exorbitant cost.

"I've been away all weekend, babe," Lauren replied with significantly more patience than her girlfriend deserved. "How about dinner? That little Italian place close to your apartment?"

Turning her back to the nauseating couple as if needing to shield her eyes from a solar flair, Sylvie stacked silver serving dishes full of pastry crumbs

into her handcart. With a ringing crash, they landed one on top of the other as they bore the brunt of her frustration.

“Italian? Again?” Blondie complained like a cat with her tail caught in the door. “You know I don’t like to do carbs so late.”

“Gimme a freaking break. Who doesn’t like carbs,” Sylvie grumbled.

Clang. The last tray crowned the tower.

Sylvie turned just in time to watch Blondie bat her eyes like a deranged silent film starlet. With a vengeance, the acid from her late afternoon *cafecito* blazed a hole in her chest.

What the hell does she even see in her? She’s beautiful . . . I guess. But so what? Is that really all Lauren cares about? She doesn’t even get what we’re doing.

The vibrating in Sylvie’s back pocket was a gnat buzzing in her ear as she tried not to stare. With a yank, she pulled her cart closer to her leftover cases of water. As soon as she secured those, she could flee the gruesome scene.

Lauren succumbed to her girlfriend’s insipid charms, melting into her like a cheap candle.

Gross. Get a freaking room.

“How about . . .” Lauren’s smile was lightning cracking in Sylvie’s belly. “I’ll take care of everything really early tomorrow while you sleep in.” She tucked a strand of blonde hair behind her girlfriend’s ear. “Then I’ll pick you up and we can spend a few hours together before I have to get back to work. Sound good?”

When Blondie craned her neck to kiss the taller Lauren, Sylvie averted her eyes. Even with her Costco-sized Catholic guilt, she could only self-flagellate so much.

How can you date someone and not know how important their work is? Do you have to try and be that selfish? They were tasked with carrying on generations of handiwork and sacrifices. They were in charge of protecting dynasties. With growing them. Loser Lou’s was built on fraud, but still. How

could Blondie just not get it!

Tipping the handcart, Sylvie balanced its weight on the back wheels before giving it a hard tug. She'd known before moving it that she'd overloaded the thing, but couldn't endure a second trip. She much preferred the aches in her back and arms. The pain in her chest and stomach triggered by being around Lauren and her girlfriend were too much.

Lugging the cart like she was trying to dispose of a dead body while sirens blared in the background, Sylvie hurried to the sanctuary of her car. Her biceps burned as she pulled the cart off the asphalt and over the grass to the loading zone where her Jeep was waiting with the rest of her stuff.

The buzz in her back pocket returned. A short blast this time. A reminder that a message was pending.

Sylvie waited to check her phone until she'd packed the back of the Jeep. Drying the sweat from her forehead with the back of her hand, she plopped into the front seat and cranked the AC to full blast. Her muscles twitched and trembled as they recovered from the exertion.

Her phone displayed two missed calls from Freddie and a voicemail. Guilt twinged in Sylvie's chest, but it wasn't strong enough to stop her from checking the message.

Freddie: Hey Sylvie. I found something. It's not much but it's a start. I'm getting on a plane to a conference in Ontario right now. I'll be gone a few days. I'll call you when I'm back so we can meet up.

After listening to the message twice, Sylvie leaned into the headrest. Her mind raced. She couldn't guess what Freddie uncovered.

There was something to find. An answer? She wouldn't keep me waiting if it was definitive answer. Maybe a clue? Which way does it point?

She listened to the message again, straining to detect any hint one way or the other in Freddie's tone.

It was impossible. She was so neutral it would make Switzerland jealous.

Lauren and her girlfriend appeared in the distance, causing Sylvie to

straighten and shift her Jeep into drive.

After a long weekend she was sick of seeing Lauren's face. At least that's what she told herself as she drove off, reflexively glaring at the blonde in her rearview mirror. She couldn't stop looking, even if it was like absorbing a punch straight to the gut.

CHAPTER 8

Sunlight shone directly into Lauren's eyes blinding her. She struggled to see around the old softball glove she was holding above her head.

Plop. The softball landed next to her foot, cushioned by the grass instead of her glove. In her mind, she heard the eleven other people practicing on the field groan.

"Lou! You have to get your glove under that!" Her uncle spiked his *Vote Carla Machado for Councilwoman* cap into the dirt.

Using the worn, brown leather glove as a visor, Lauren shielded her eyes from the sun. She found her uncle on the far side of the field, his hands in the air as if his favorite team just bungled the Super Bowl. Her father's brother had married into the great bakery feud, but he took it just as seriously as her mother's side of the family.

"I couldn't see, *Tio!*" Lauren reached for the ball at her feet.

"That's no excuse!"

"I don't even play outfield!" She leaned back to pick up momentum as she launched the ball as far as she could.

"You do for this practice!" he countered.

Lauren rolled her eyes. Her uncle was giving his son a chance at her infield position, but they all knew he wouldn't cut it for the big game. Her uncle's *macho* pride about his son's athletic prowess, or lack thereof, was no

match for his desire to win. Sooner or later he would admit that his son was more suited to dicking around in left field. He always did.

For years Lauren had been just as enthusiastic about the annual match-up against the Campos clan as the rest of her family. She'd even flown home from UCLA every spring to play. But with each passing year it seemed a little more ridiculous. More childish.

Her family wasn't even that fond of sports, and yet every year they spent weeks practicing in the heat to play one game no one but the Machados and Campos' cared about. She was getting sick of continuously doing things just because they'd always been done.

"Wake up out there!"

Lauren's attention flashed to her uncle. After setting the ball on the tee, he swung the bat as hard as he could. With a crack, he sent the ball flying toward Lauren again.

Holding out her glove, Lauren positioned herself under the ball. All she had to do was stay where she was, but her stubbornness flared. She wasn't in the mood to give him the satisfaction of obedience. It would be like admitting she needed someone to show her how to play the game. She didn't.

With a step to the left, she moved out of the ball's way and watched it land in the grass. Her uncle's reply was a string of Spanish curses bluer than a Smurf's rear end. Lauren paid him the respect of biting the inside of her cheek rather than overtly laughing at his overblown tantrum.

"Let's take a break!" Lauren's mother called from the cluster of lawn chairs positioned under one of the sprawling banyan trees in the park.

Like she did when she played in high school, Lauren put her glove on her head like a hat and jogged along with the others toward the large cooler full of drinks. *Vote Carla Machado for Councilwoman* t-shirts swarmed the single, shady point. Despite the November election being six months away, her mother had been working endlessly to turn everything into a merch opportunity.

“You shouldn’t stress your poor *tio* out like that,” Lauren’s father put his long arm around her shoulder as he whispered.

Lauren smirked, her gaze cutting to the other side of the field where her uncle had walked off on his own like a real-life drama queen. “He shouldn’t make me waste my time standing out there. I don’t know why you let him proclaim himself team captain every year. It goes straight to his bald head.”

Her father’s gentle face creased as he smiled, his head cocked to the side. “It makes him happy. Gives him purpose.” He looked around to make sure the rest of the Machado tribe was too busy rehydrating to hear him. “He needs the boost. You know how sensitive he is about little Andy’s lack of coordination.”

Reflexively, Lauren glanced at her cousin who was struggling to get his straw in the fruit punch pouch he’d grabbed from the cooler.

“Sports aren’t for everybody,” she decided with a laugh before her mother waved her over.

“Lauren, your phone has been ringing, *mija*.” Her mother pointed at the bag she’d left with her while they practiced. Even in a t-shirt and cap, she was polished and composed. An enviable trait.

As soon as she read the text messages waiting for her, Lauren’s shoulders dropped.

“What is it?” Her mother’s dark eyes searched her face as if expecting bad news.

“Nothing,” she lied, but disappointment emanated from her like a stench.

Her mother raised a dark, micro-bladed eyebrow. The look was a hand twisting her arm behind her back.

“It’s just Jenny. She’s not coming.”

Lauren dropped the phone back in her bag. She didn’t respond to Jenny’s question about coming over later. To do so, she’d have to re-read the garbage excuse she’d offered for getting out of dinner with her family.

Her mother telegraphed something to her father with the briefest glance.

Something judgmental. It was a finger poking Lauren in the chest.

“What?” Lauren could guess what her mother’s look meant, but she wanted to hear it.

“*Nada, mi amor*. I’m sorry she can’t make it.” Her lips were so tight they clipped the end of every word.

Lauren crossed her arms. “You’re never going to make it in politics if you can barely pretend to tolerate her. How will you fake it with all the people of Miami Lakes?”

“I don’t have to *like* my constituents,” she corrected, a wry grin curling the corner of her enhanced lips. “All I have to do is represent them well.”

Lauren accepted a water bottle dripping with melted ice. “You’re getting good at those canned politician responses.” She chuckled. “You might just win this thing.”

“With the dent it’s made in our savings, I hope so,” her dad muttered under his breath before taking a swig from his bottle.

“It’ll be well worth it,” her mom promised, hooking her arm around his slim waist. Tucked under his arm, she looked unusually small.

After practice, Lauren sat in her Jeep. With the top down and the doors off, she enjoyed the breeze cooling her overheated skin.

She glanced at her phone. More texts from Jenny.

Ignoring them, Lauren watched the sun set before starting for home. From the park to her house was a short, tree-lined drive. She’d purchased a foreclosed home in the overpriced Miami Lakes neighborhood. Anywhere else, her sixty-year old house, which had been a wreck before the bank took possession, wouldn’t be worth much at all. But, it was in a desirable zip code.

A place where upper middle class Cuban-Americans moved to obtain status in society. A place for them to whitewash their less prestigious Hialeah roots. A place that boasted about low crime rates, but only because white-collar crimes didn’t get nearly as much attention as burglaries.

Even with the renovations only half finished, Lauren could sell the

property for an easy, and hefty, profit. A crazy notion to Lauren, but she couldn't ignore the Porsches and McLarens parked on her street.

Apart from having been an incredible investment, it was only a couple of miles away from her parents' gated community. Having been in Los Angeles for four years, she'd been eager to be close to them again. This was as close as she could be without living in the pool house.

Her phone buzzed in the cup holder as Lauren waited for her garage to creak open. It had barely lumbered awake when it screeched to a halt midway.

Damn it. Not again.

Picking up her phone to call her father, Lauren couldn't avoid the inundation of texts.

Jenny: *I'm really sorry about missing your practice. I didn't think it would be such a big deal that you'd be this mad and ignore me*

With her foot propped up against the open car door, Lauren stared at the ellipses at the end of the last message. She tried to determine the meaning behind the most passive aggressive punctuation.

Lauren: *It's cool. Don't worry. I just got home.*

Truncated sentences were a little more direct. They made it clear that she was annoyed even if her words didn't.

Jenny: *Can I come over now? I'll bring you some of that gelato you like.*

Lauren: *Don't worry about it. Honestly. I'm kind of tired after practice. It was so hot today and I have to get up early.*

She slid off her seat and slung her bag over her shoulder. Taking the cracked concrete path to her door, Lauren barely made it into the house before Jenny responded.

Jenny: *. another 2am start?*

Lauren narrowed her eyes at the dots on her screen. Jenny knew she always woke up between two and three. The question was a thinly veiled complaint.

Looking away from the phone, Lauren took a beat before responding. She was too tired and annoyed to trust any knee-jerk reply.

Taking off her shoes not to damage the reclaimed floors she'd just installed, Lauren moved from the foyer, through the original 1960's kitchen, and out to the back patio.

By the time she plopped into the plastic chair angled in front of the empty pool in need of serious repair, Jenny had texted a few times.

Jenny: I just wish you could hear me.

Jenny: I'm just trying to get you to see things from a different perspective because I care about you and I worry about how hard you work.

Jenny: Like . . . I'm just asking . . . What's the point of running a business if you can't put yourself first?

Taking a deep breath, Lauren dropped the phone in her lap. As she stretched, she pulled her hair tie out of her hair and let her long, wavy brown hair tumble down behind her. With both hands, she rubbed her scalp, focusing on where her hair had been in a tight bun.

When she was less reactive, she picked up the phone again. She was glad that meditation was working.

Lauren: I know it's hard to date me when I'm so consumed by work. It's not fair that I'm always limiting you, and I promise it won't be like this forever. Right now I'm just proving to my parents that I'm ready to take over completely. Once I'm fully in charge things will be different.

Jenny: Maybe I just don't get it, Lou. Not for nothing, but you're their only child. . . . It's not like there is any real probability that you're NOT going to get the business. You've been taking care of it for at least the year we've been together. . .

Jenny: Are they really going to take it from you if you live more of a normal life?? Like, seriously. Who are they going to give it to?? Your cousin who's never stepped foot in the bakery and doesn't even speak Spanish?!?!

The tone in Jenny's message was sandpaper grating Lauren's skin. With

her heart pounding in her ears, she regretted having vented to Jenny about her frustrations. She didn't expect her confessions to be used as ammunition.

Jenny: I'm sorry. I shouldn't say it like that. Can I come over, please? We're going off the rails, and if I could just look at you while we talk, I know you'll see I'm coming from a good place.

Clenching her jaw like she was holding a hand-grenade pin between her teeth, Lauren forced her breath to remain steady. Jenny was a good person, she'd proven that to her when they were friends in college and after when they reconnected a year ago. Her intentions were pure, even if her execution was sloppy.

Lauren: You don't have to apologize, babe. I know you mean well. It's been a long day. How about we meet for lunch tomorrow? Sushi?

After cementing plans with Jenny, Lauren leaned back in her chair and looked up at the night sky through the hole in the roof of her covered porch. In these moments, she wished things were easier. That Jenny could just understand without it taking so much effort to communicate. She just wished that they spoke the same language.

CHAPTER 9

King of Pastries in Coral Gables was as different from the flagship store in East Hialeah as Wagyu beef was from ground chuck. The posh, upperclass neighborhood with its million dollar Spanish style houses and tree-lined streets was nothing like the colorful chaos of the rusty industrial zone.

Here, Sylvie didn't have to go nuclear to get a parking spot in a lot so poorly planned that her old Jeep had been as pockmarked as a golf ball. Instead, she followed an orderly line of luxury cars to get around the perfectly landscaped shopping center. Around the back, there weren't any illegally parked cars or piles of garbage stinking up the street. No one had stolen her reserved space near the back door.

"*Buenos dias,*" she greeted the two elderly ladies working in the kitchen. They'd been making *pastelitos* for the bakery since before Sylvie was born. It was how they maintained pitch perfect flavors people came back for over and over. The flavors that reminded them of home.

After a quick spot test while chatting with the ladies dressed in matching hairnets and King of Pastries t-shirts, Sylvie popped a ham *croqueta* in her mouth and slipped through the swinging door to the front of the house.

She checked her watch. Freddie was arriving in a minute. Trying to keep her nervous excitement in check, Sylvie set to work filling a large, white box with the store's logo stamped on the side. The image had remained

unchanged for decades. A crown atop the “P” in Pastries. *The Original Since 1970* stamped at the bottom.

While selecting an assortment of their best items, Sylvie’s mind raced. She couldn’t imagine what Freddie found. A tiny part of her, smaller than a hairline fracture, worried that it wouldn’t be favorable.

She banished the fear almost as quickly as it came. Both Campos and Machado grandfathers had died when Sylvie and Lauren were in high school, but she was sure her families weren’t the thieves. Sylvie could recite her grandfather’s version of events from memory. His father had extended his hand out to his longtime friend and was met with alligator jaws chomping off his limb.

“Sylvie!”

Sylvie glanced up at the door as she placed a coconut *pastelito* on top of the neat pile of sweet carbs. Freddie, her light brown hair piled into a messy bun and her pretty round face behind huge glasses, smiled as she walked into the bakery.

“Freddie! I’m putting a little something together for you to take to the office. Sit and I’ll get you a *café con leche*.” With her chin, she pointed to one of the small round tables lining the plate glass window overlooking the parking lot.

“Thanks! Just a *cafecito* would be fantastic. I’m off sugar.”

Sylvie delivered the large pastry box to the table before signaling for one of the ladies behind the counter to bring them two shots of espresso. “Can you take these to the office?”

“Can I?” Freddie laughed. “I’ll be the most popular girl in school when I walk into my little community paper with that.”

After some friendly chit-chat, Sylvie was so tense she could easily remain in the seated position even if someone pulled her chair out from under her.

“So here’s the tea.” Freddie knocked back a second shot of espresso. “There was a lawsuit in 1979.”

“A lawsuit?” Sylvie leaned back in her chair and crossed her legs. With her brain working, her body had a chance to relax. “For what? With who?”

“Pastry King versus King of Pastries and then a countersuit going the other way.” She paused as if dramatic *dun dun dun* music was going to fill the space. “My guess is a dispute over trade secrets.”

Sylvie leaned in, her body twitching in anticipation. “Guess? Don’t you know what the lawsuit stuff says? What the outcome was?”

Freddie shook her head. “It’s a super old case which would be problematic enough on its own, but everything is sealed. I’m working on whether I can get my hands on some of the documents. I have a call in to legal to see what’s what.”

Deflated, Sylvie’s mind raced. She’d never heard anyone mention a lawsuit. Her mother would’ve been young, but she would’ve been around. Why wouldn’t she have ever mentioned it?

“You might want to see if somebody in your family knows what happened. All I’ve got is a suit, counter suit, and a notice that the record was sealed by court order. Even that was hard to get. Obviously nothing is electronic.”

After Freddie was gone, Sylvie finished some administrative tasks in Coral Gables and jumped back in her Jeep to brave the Miami traffic again. The drive to East Hialeah would’ve only taken twenty minutes if it wasn’t for the crushing traffic tripling her driving time.

A call to her mother revealed nothing. She didn’t remember anything about a lawsuit, but sounded just as troubled by its existence. She promised to call her own mother to find out what she knew, but neither of them were hopeful. After a stroke, her memory was spotty.

By the time Sylvie arrived at the flagship bakery, the unanswered questions were a corset crushing the air from her lungs.

Slipping in through the back door, she crossed the busy kitchen and popped her head into the store to get her godmother’s attention. The thick-

waisted blonde signaled that she would meet her in the back.

While Sylvie waited for her in the microscopic office, she didn't even have the benefit of pacing. The only thing she could do with her nervous energy was continuously pop the cap of a highlighter that had been left on the mostly empty desk.

She couldn't care right then that someone had sat at her desk and left it in disarray. Her brain couldn't get off the lawsuit. More specifically, why had there been no resolution? Why had it been sealed?

"*Mija*, what's wrong?" Regina kissed her cheek in greeting, her King of Pastries t-shirt so tight across her ample chest that only *ing of Past* was visible. "I haven't seen you so upset since your parents said you couldn't go to the Jingle Ball when you were a kid."

Sylvie glared. "I was almost fifteen and they knew full well Shakira was my favorite."

Her godmother laughed, her full cheeks bright. "We all knew, honey. I think that poor boy you were pretending to date was the only one in the dark."

Sylvie waved away the irrelevant conversation like trying to clear smoke from a burning toaster oven. "Do you know about a lawsuit in 1979?"

The strangeness of the question caused a crease in Regina's forehead. "I was like eleven or twelve then, who am I supposed to have sued?"

"Not you." Sylvie shook her head. "We sued Pastry King and they sued us, or vice versa. I'm not sure. The point is we sued each other but the record is sealed and I can't see what happened."

"Did you ask your grandma? If your grandpa sued somebody, she would know about it."

"*Mami* is going to ask her. You know my presence stresses her out."

Regina laughed. "It's probably because you remind her so much of your grandpa. You're both two bulls rampaging in china shops. Your passion can be—"

“A bit much?” Sylvie had heard the comparison all her life.

“I’m just saying, too much stress will send you into an early grave just like him. Let this stuff go, *mija*. Who cares about some old legal dispute?”

Sylvie swatted away the reasonable question. “I care, *Madrina*. What if there’s proof in there? A way to finally expose the Machados for what they did?”

Regina sighed. “Anybody that did anything is long dead, *mija*. You can’t carry on this ridiculous war. Look at this softball game we all have to go to now in the supposed name of charity. Can’t we just donate money to an actual cause? No, we have to spend a day sweating to keep this old pissing match alive. You have a chance to change this. To move on and focus your energy on yourself rather than wasting it on other people.”

Nodding, Sylvie agreed. “That’s a great idea. Everybody is going to be at the game. Somebody there has to know what happened.”

Rolling her blue eyes, Regina shook her head. “Didn’t you hear a word I said?”

“Of course I did, and I just said it was a great idea to talk to the family when we’re all going to be together.”

By the late afternoon, Sylvie had made her way to all seven locations scattered around the enormous and congested county. Tired, she was finally starting for home in her tranquil little corner of Miami Lakes.

By the time she made it beyond the security gates guarding a slew of villas nestled around one of the many man-made lakes that gave the city its name, she had a list of targets for the softball game.

CHAPTER 10

Dressed in a crisp white softball uniform with their logo in dark, red letters, Sylvie pulled on her cap and jumped out of her freshly washed white Jeep. From the back, she grabbed the pristine black and light blue bag with *Our Lady of Solitude Softball* emblazoned on the side. The late April morning wasn't suffocatingly hot. At least not yet.

As soon as she started for the field, she rolled her eyes at the Pastry King food truck parked at the edge of the lot as close to the park as possible. Of course they would use this opportunity to make money.

Gross.

Choosing to walk in the dirt in order to skirt the truck as if it might give her lice, Sylvie focused on her primary task. She wasn't just there to beat the Machados at a game, there was a bigger picture. She was going to find a way to defeat them permanently.

On the field, the families were divided into two dugouts. The Machados were dressed in red uniforms with Pastry King etched in white letters. It was such a ripoff that the uninitiated would think it was just the *away* version of the Campos' uniforms.

Sylvie's attention was snatched against its will as she caught sight of Lauren. Her long, dark hair poking out of the back of her cap in a neat braid as she played catch with a young man. All she was missing was a blue ribbon

at the top of her braid to be back in high school.

Memories kidnapped Sylvie out of the present and dragged her fifteen years into the past. No one in the locker room but her and Lauren.

Sylvie's heart raced it's way to her throat. How serious had Lou been? About the dance. About her feelings. About their future.

Phantom fingers grazed Sylvie's cheek and her skin reacted. Fifteen years later and she still remembered the weight of her touch. The softness of her skin.

"Sylvia!"

Her aunt's voice jarred her out of her thoughts. Clearing the sticky knot blocking her airway, Sylvie coughed. She hadn't realized that she'd been walking toward the Machado's side of the field. That her legs had nearly made her a traitor.

Turning away from her accidental target, Sylvie adjusted the bag on her shoulder and hurried to her team dugout. Inside the covered space, she dropped her bag on the bench next to where her aunt was standing.

"You okay?" Her sixty year old aunt, who paid a small fortune to look forty, wore a face full of makeup and false eyelashes. "Are you working too hard?" She shifted her weight on the cleanest cleats in the family. An easy feat considering she was the only one who refused to play.

Sylvie forced a smile as she greeted her aunt with a kiss to the cheek. *Wouldn't everything be too hard to a person who's never worked a day in her life?*

After getting pleasantries out of the way, Sylvie began her inquiry. Her aunt was older than her mother and might remember. "Tia, do you know about a lawsuit in 1979? The one between us and them?" She gestured toward the practicing Machados with only her eyes because she'd been raised not to point.

Her aunt straightened but her expression gave nothing away. It was more a testament to someone's skill with Botox injections rather than her aunt's

poker face. “I don’t know.”

The clipped response was hard to read, but it was obvious the question hadn’t surprised her. Hadn’t jolted her. Hadn’t unnerved her. Hadn’t so much as confused her.

“You don’t know or you don’t want to tell me?”

“I don’t know anything about any legal fight,” she clarified stiffly. “Who told you there was a lawsuit?”

Sylvie cocked her head as she regarded her aunt. She wasn’t a master at reading body language, and she couldn’t tell what had shifted in her energy, but she was almost certain there was something her aunt wasn’t saying.

“Tia,” Sylvie whispered as she leaned in close, getting a nose-full of her expensive perfume. “Do you know something and you’re not supposed to say?”

Artificially blue eyes darted like they were chasing a disoriented mosquito buzzing around Sylvie’s face. After an awkward beat, her aunt laughed. “Have you ever known me to keep a secret?”

Sylvie remained silent in tacit agreement. Her aunt had single-handedly ruined at least three surprise parties and a gender reveal. Could a person who told everyone about her own affair keep a secret for over forty years?

“*Oye caballero*’ let’s start getting warmed up!” Sylvie’s dad, his bald head covered in a team cap and his belly hanging over his white pants just a little, clapped as he started wrangling them.

“Better go get in game mode,” her aunt said, practically shoving her out of the dugout as she prodded her to the opening at the end of the chain link wall meant to keep errant balls from hitting its occupants.

“Since when do you care about the game?” Sylvie stopped on the dugout step.

“Since we’ve lost so many games in a row. Do you really want me to go out there and show all of you up?”

“And risk the masterpiece your third husband has created?”

Her aunt chuckled, the tension dropping from her slim shoulders at the change in subject. “What can I say? Wilbur likes to spend money on beautiful things. Now, go on. We have a game to win.”

Her aunt’s sudden enthusiasm for sports added to Sylvie’s suspicion that she knew something, but why wasn’t she talking? What could there possibly be to hide? There was no way either family would drop the suit if they could win, and if they’d somehow agreed to stop hemorrhaging money litigating something neither of them could prove, why seal everything? It just didn’t make sense.

Accepting that her aunt wasn’t going to give her anything, she joined the rest of her family. There were still plenty of people she could interrogate. Someone had to know something.

In the vast green space to the side of the softball diamond, the King of Pastries clan broke up into pairs. Avoiding her brother who was so up his own ass that he’d be of no help, Sylvie darted for her mother’s second cousin. A large man capable of carrying a lot of information.

By the time she’d gotten through most of her top targets, Sylvie was hot and frustrated. Her aunt had been the only person not surprised by the existence of the suit. It was easy to believe they didn’t know anything, but she couldn’t stop wondering what happened a decade before she was born. If she was going to completely take over, she needed to know absolutely everything. How had her mother taken control while being in the dark about something so important?

Sylvie’s mounting irritation peaked as she jogged onto the field. As she headed for the shortstop position, she couldn’t ignore Lauren warming up to be first at bat. She tightened her jaw, ready to face the ultimate source of her vexation.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



I am an independent author writing about fictional lesbians of all varieties. I am a Scorpio woman (I know, I know, but I'm a nice one I PROMISE) happily married to a uniquely wonderful Cancer lady. Together we have several fur babies of the feline and canine varieties.

