

THREE

CARA

That woman's so fake, she's got Botox in her DNA.
—@defpoetryslamama

Cara climbed over the sagging barbed-wire fence, snagging the sleeve of her jumpsuit, and jogged into the dry, brown grass. She had no idea whether she was headed north or south, east or west, but it didn't really matter as long as she got far away, as fast as possible, from the acrid smell of burning oil and rubber, and the sight of twisted metal, shattered glass, and broken bodies. She felt awful that the elderly couple who'd been decent enough to stop would see such gore but was thankful poor Bree wouldn't leave this earth alone.

Realizing she couldn't run inland because she'd end up in the front yard of a farmhouse, she sprinted parallel to the highway, moving from one sparse stand of trees to another in side-cramping bursts. Once past the house, she turned away from the road and jogged until she reached a rocky rise surrounded by dense brush. Panting and thirsty, she crouched to catch her breath.

Sirens blared nearby. More sounded in the distance.

Pushing on, Cara bushwhacked until her progress was stopped by a steep drop-off. She couldn't scramble up the rocky hillside or she'd be plainly visible. There was no time to turn back and head in a different direction. The only viable option was to drop down twelve feet or so—she hoped it was only that far—into the streambed below.

Cara refreshed the phone so it wouldn't lock up and tucked it into her uncomfortably small, prison-issue white bra. She bent over, and before she could think too hard about it, grasped an exposed tree root. She hoped her flimsy resin slip-ons would provide some traction as she found footholds on her way down.

They didn't.

Thankfully, the tree root held when the rock gave way, cracking only after she dropped into murky, ankle-deep water. Shock waves radiated up her ankles, but she landed on her feet.

Cara shook off the pain and sloshed along the gully, glad her otherwise useless footwear had holes that drained the water. She was well shielded by shrubbery until a small bridge appeared out of nowhere and crossed the streambed.

She moved closer until she could see it was part of a gravel driveway leading to a beautiful modern home perched atop a nearby rise. Movable glass walls—much like those in her Beverly Hills kitchen—opened onto a deck spanning the length of the house, affording an unobstructed view of the meadow before her.

Was anyone watching from behind those windows?

Cara crouched, scurried under the bridge, and dove into a field filled with feather reed ornamental grass. She knew the variety because she'd once bought bunches of it at the farmers' market to mix in with an arrangement of limelight hydrangeas. She'd spent the rest of that day styling a country-themed dinner-on-the-patio post, complete with metal buckets full of sunflowers, fresh herbs, recycled glassware, and gold flatware. Her Instagram story, *Before the Fall*, had gotten a few hundred thousand likes. *The Fall of Cara Campbell*—a photo of her scampering through golden grass, wearing the color of marigolds—would get millions.

Her chest tightened so quickly she began gasping for breath.

Forcing herself to breathe deeply and slowly, she tried to calm her panic with meditation. Her go-to mantra—*I create my own path and walk it with confidence*—was both too on the nose and no longer true.

What the fuck am I going to do next? was sure to make things worse. Instead, she zeroed in on the thrum of insects, birds, and the gentle breeze.

Be still and listen, she told herself, over and over, until she could.

She watched as a black-and-white-tailed hawk swooped down, disappeared briefly, and took off again with a field mouse in its talons. It was surely a sign—if not of her ultimate fate—of how many disgusting, sharp-toothed little rodents were scrambling through the grass along with her.

The hawk had spotted its prey with ease. She would be just as easy to spot via helicopter, drone, or the less expansive deck of yet another house she noticed just along the hillside from the first. How long could she possibly last out here? She was doomed to either quick recapture and a life sentence imposed by the State of California or the death penalty carried out by Mother Nature.

There was no calming her monkey mind.

Just focus on the task in front of you.

She spotted a cluster of boulders half a football field away.

Wiping the sweat from her forehead, Cara began to army-crawl across the field. She'd once beaten her fit-for-any-age husband in the mud crawl section of a Tough Mudder competition, surprising both of them. On race day, Karl motivated himself through the "Block Ness Monster" and "Everest" sections by whispering, Obama style, *Yes! We! Can!* while she propelled herself across the finish line by obsessing over snarky comments from Instagram trolls.

Daddy complex much?

You're nothing but a parasite in Prada.

If he doesn't cheat on you, he really should.

Ah, the lament of the trophy wife, Karl would say with a dimpled smile when she mentioned the haters and their inability to understand that she was just trying to normalize and destigmatize the very construct of gold digging, using their loving relationship as an example.

The kiss that followed always dulled the sting.

But now, as grass stalks whipped her face and pebbles dug into her elbows and knees, she had a whole trial's worth of indignities to work with. The prosecutor's smugness as he tricked Cara into confirming her height at five feet, eight and a half inches before asserting the killer was "approximately five-nine, based on Karl's head wounds." The mini-mart security video of a "raging argument" she'd had with Karl on the day of his death when they were only ribbing each other over his compulsive need to top off the tank and her tendency to drive on fumes. The hippy-dippy front desk clerk at the glampground testifying to a "weird, you know, vibe when I checked them in." The white-haired fitness freak who claimed Cara had been flirting with him in the saltwater pool, even though she'd reached for a towel the moment he pulled off his sweat-shirt to reveal his leathery abs.

Even Cara's own heartfelt social media posts had been blown up to poster size and mounted on foam-core boards to be used as exhibits against her: *Release your emotions, even when they're scary* and *Sometimes true love hurts*.

The worst insult of all took her completely by surprise. The prosecution's forensic accountant took the stand and "went off script" by testifying that Karl "had millions less than he claimed and was deeply strapped for cash due to being overleveraged on the construction of Campbell Cosmetic."

Karl had never even hinted that finances were tight. Before his death, after the big groundbreaking ceremony for his all-in-one surgical suite and five-star recovery facility, Karl was in great spirits about his investment and its profitability. There was no reason to believe otherwise, considering that a generous chunk of money appeared in her spending account on the first of every month without fail. Yes, he was an optimist who never dwelled on failure, but why hadn't he said anything about delays, unexpected costs, or other complications with the project? Did he feel he couldn't be honest because their lifestyle was so crucial to her brand? That thought was the most painful.

Cara seemed to be nearing the end of the field, but it was hard

to tell. At Tough Mudder, the finish line had been clear enough, with cheering friends, photographers, snack stations, and a beer tent. What she would give right now for a beer . . .

What she would give to be running for sport—for bruises that gave her bragging rights—and not for her life.

As Karl would have put it, she was *seizing an unexpected opportunity*.

Seeing a break in the tall grass ahead, she decided to ignore the heat, the pain, and the dust filling her nose and mouth. Instead, she focused on embodying Karl's can-do attitude—even if it was all an act.

“Sure, it would be nice to belly-crawl over sharp rocks through vermin-filled grass in moisture-wicking T-shirts and leggings like I had when I was sponsored by Alo,” she said aloud to her fellow field mice and God knew what else, if only to make sure the various creepy-crawlies steered clear. “But this prison jumpsuit is a lot more durable.”

Attagirl, she imagined Karl saying.

Had their *always be honest* promise to each other been a sham? What else didn't she know?

When the stand of boulders was close enough, she stood and sprinted over to a ten-foot-tall slab. She slid between it and a squat rock, peering back at the field she'd just traversed. She saw no movement and heard no sirens.

Scanning the route ahead, she thought she saw water about a hundred yards ahead. Lake water wasn't generally drinkable, but it had to be safer than the stagnant muck she'd just trodden through. She wasn't really thirsty yet, but everyone knew refilling your Stanley bottle throughout the day was the key to hydration. If she kept to the woods, she thought she could get there without being seen.

Cara pulled up her baggy pant legs and took off toward where the trees were thickest. As she did, songs from the 1970s rock anthems on Karl's treadmill playlist streamed inside her head.

Free Bird.

Why couldn't she live anonymously and free?

Dream On.

Universe willing, maybe she could figure out how to prove her innocence.

She was loping through the forest to the tune of *You Ain't Seen Nothin' Yet* when she tripped over a rock.

The cell phone flew from her cleavage, hit a tree, and landed with an ominous crack.

She landed even harder.