

CHAPTER FIVE

mazernning: well that got toxic real fast

mags13: why do men have to act so insane online? We're just trying to have a fun book conversation here.

tyz7513: how do you know it was a man? They didn't have an avatar.

mags13: (eyeroll) women don't usually start calling other women bitches for no discernible reason. Also avatars are pretty meaningless.

tyz7513: I'll keep that in mind

MAGGIE VOLUNTEERED TO GO through the tires first.

"Uh-uh," Sanya said, shaking her finger. "You think I can't see that thing you keep doing, the one where you put yourself in front, trying to protect the rest of us? I'll go first this time."

"Maybe I wasn't trying to protect you," Maggie said. "Maybe I was trying to protect myself because I think that the traps might be triggered by the second person through."

"Don't expect us to believe that," Natalie said, and grabbed Sanya's arm. "Listen, I'll go first this time. You and Maggie have been doing the hard work through here, and all I've done is complain."

"No, you haven't," Maggie said automatically.

"Yes, I have," Natalie said. "But it's okay. I'm going to do my part, pull my own weight. So let me go first."

Maggie noticed Natalie's hands were shaking, a fine trembling that seemed to emanate up her arms and into the pulse in her neck.

"Are you sure?" Maggie said.

"Yes," Natalie said. "Anyway, I think I'll be good at this. I've run Spartan races before—you know, those big obstacle races where you end up covered in mud? I know how to handle these courses."

"Okay," Maggie said. "This is what we'll do. One of us will go every minute. Sound good?"

"Assuming I don't get blown up. Or get sliced by a falling blade," Natalie said.

"Ha," Maggie said. She understood the point of gallows humor, but it was hard to laugh right now. The image of #4 embedded in the wall was hard to shake.

Natalie took a deep breath, blew it out, then started running the course.

Maggie looked up at the clock hanging on the wall to the right, high above their heads. These clocks were omnipresent throughout the maze.

Guess we can't complain that they aren't being clear about how much time remains.

Almost four hours had ticked down already. Maggie wondered what would happen if they didn't make it through the maze in time. Would the cattle-prod guy send his little toy shock troops into the maze to find them, line them up against the wall for a firing squad? Or would they wait and see if the women managed to stagger through to the end, and then finish them off? How many men were in this place, anyway? Maggie had seen maybe twenty of them in the line outside of the maze. That wasn't a lot, all things

considered. If that was the maximum size of their force, and the men were dispersed throughout the complex . . . well, maybe they would have a shot at escaping.

"That's a minute," Sanya said. "I'm off."

"Wait," Maggie said, but Sanya was already jogging through the tires. Maggie had thought she would go next—she was still thinking about how to protect the others, even when she knew she shouldn't, even when she knew she ought to be thinking only of herself and Paige.

I'm bad at this, she thought. I'm bad at being selfish.

It was funny, though, how Noah had accused her of being selfish when she said she wanted a divorce, when she said she'd had enough, when she couldn't carry the burden of his addiction anymore. She'd wrestled with guilt for a long time, wondering if she could have done more, if she should have done more. If she'd actually been selfish.

"Okay, me next," Beth said.

Maggie realized she'd been woolgathering. She needed to stop thinking about the past and get her head in the present, otherwise she and everyone else there might get killed.

Natalie was pretty far ahead. She'd already cleared the brackish pond and was on to what appeared to be the sixth obstacle. Green slime dripped down her legs as she steadily pulled herself up a rope that had a bell at the top. There were five ropes in a row, meaning that the men who'd organized this had thought it unlikely that all ten of the starting racers would make it this far.

In an obstacle race, the racer was supposed to climb up the rope, ring the bell and get back down as fast as possible to move on to the next hurdle. Maggie meant to watch Beth, to make sure she was okay and that she was progressing at a decent pace, but she was mesmerized by the sight of Natalie moving so strong and steady, hand over hand, as she went up the rope. The ropes went

ascended

extremely high—maybe twenty, twenty-five feet. That wouldn't be a big deal in a gym with padded mats underneath, but there were no padded mats underneath these ropes. There was only hard wood. Natalie's hand reached out for the bellpull.

"No," Maggie said. "Don't!"

Natalie yanked on the cord, and the rope disconnected from the plank. Maggie saw the look of confusion on Natalie's face, the flailing of her arms as she tried to grab one of the other ropes. Then Natalie was falling, falling, falling, and there was nothing Maggie could do except watch, and listen.

Natalie screamed, and then there was a thud and a sickening crunch, and no more screaming.

Sanya and Beth were standing still in the middle of their respective obstacles.

"Go," Maggie shouted at them, and began running the tires behind Beth. "Go, go, we have to see if she's okay."

But Natalie wasn't crying out, wasn't calling for help, and Maggie knew that there was likely no chance at all. But she had to hope, had to pray that Natalie had just had the breath knocked out of her or was unconscious from the fall. That crunch couldn't mean that she was dead.

But she fell a long way, Maggie thought as she hurried Beth through the obstacles to reach Natalie. She heard Beth's ragged breath, could tell that she was pushing the other woman too hard, but she couldn't help herself.

She couldn't bear the thought that Natalie had died alone, baffled, betrayed by what amounted to a deadly prank.

We keep expecting the men who arranged this to play by the rules, for the tasks to be straightforward. But they aren't. They'll do anything, literally anything, to make sure we get hurt.

Maggie waded through the pond, her fingers on Beth's wrist, pulling her along. The pond was disgusting, filled with thick green

slime and things that wriggled around Maggie's ankles. She heard Beth say, "Leeches," but she couldn't stop to acknowledge this, couldn't even take a second to be horrified or grossed out. Of course there were leeches in the pond, because some man in the group had probably seen *Stand By Me* when he was young and was traumatized by the sight of Gordie pulling a leech off his penis.

But Maggie wasn't a man, and she wasn't afraid of leeches—she was afraid of losing people, afraid of making mistakes that would hurt somebody else. Leeches were nothing because Natalie had fallen.

She saw Sanya ahead, crouched next to Natalie, green slime dripping from her legs. Sanya glanced back as Maggie struggled out of the pool, finally releasing Beth's wrist. The blood roared in Maggie's ears and black spots danced in front of her eyes, but she held on, she held on until she reached Sanya's side and finally saw Natalie.

Maggie stared down at Natalie's body, at the angle of her neck.

At least she didn't suffer. There is that, right? No suffering, no slow dying like being pinned to the wall by a scythe and bleeding out slowly, or having hundreds of spiders cover your body while you screamed. At least it wasn't like that. At least she just fell and she died and she wasn't hurting.

Maggie tried to tell herself that this made it better, but she remembered that Natalie had a sister, and Natalie's sister was in a room just like Paige was, and just like Roni's mother, and just like all the other hostages of the women who'd already died. Maggie wondered if those hostages had been eliminated already, or if the game organizers were waiting to see if any of the women made it through. It had to be more efficient to kill all the hostages at once.

Shame on you, Maggie, she thought. *Those are people's lives, people that were loved.*

She realized she was getting slightly hysterical, even if she'd done a good job of suppressing it thus far. And then she realized the danger of the maze, of all of those dystopic worlds that she'd carelessly read about and let herself be entertained by, was not the danger itself, *per se*. The danger was in watching the bodies pile up around you, in letting yourself drown in grief, or worse—becoming inured to it.

There were only three of them left in her little group, and maybe two in the other group if nothing else had happened. A third of the total time had passed, and half of them were already dead.

She didn't know how she got through the rest of the obstacle course. She moved through it mechanically, barely acknowledging Sanya or Beth. It wasn't that she'd been particularly attached to Natalie. It was that Natalie's death had seemed one too many, and Maggie's fierce determination to reach Paige was starting to seem like a willfully ignorant fantasy. The men who'd kidnapped them were not going to let them go. Somehow, some way, they would make certain that all the participants failed.

At least in the Hunger Games there could be one winner. There are no winners here.

But that wasn't quite right, either. In those books Maggie had loved (she didn't think she'd ever be able to read them again), the main character might *technically* win, but they always seemed to lose at the same time. They'd lose somebody they loved, or compromise their principles. They'd do something that anyone else might just consider survival, but that the protagonist would think was personally unforgivable.

What will I have to sacrifice in order to get me and my daughter out of here?

It was the first time she'd thought about it, the first time she'd considered the possibility that she might have to abandon the

others, or potentially hurt them, in order to escape. She didn't know if she could actually do it.

They moved forward, all of them quiet after Natalie's death. There was no more sense of "we're all in this together, let's try to lift each other up." There was nothing but furrowed brows and grim silence and the acrid smell of sweat.

They went through another obstacle, and another and another. Each was dangerous, difficult and potentially deadly—a swinging bridge over an actual pit of crocodiles, a stop where they had to put their hand inside a mysterious box and hope nothing happened (Maggie suspected that there were poisonous insects inside, but none of the women were stung), a challenge where they had to choose berries to eat and hope the berries weren't poisonous. Maggie went through each one in a fog, and somehow all three of them survived each time. They came upon another food-and-water drop but discovered that the group ahead of them had eaten everything.

"Assholes," Sanya said, crumpling up the empty wrappers that were left behind and dropping them on the ground in disgust.

"There are only two of them left," Maggie said tiredly. "I believe number two would act like this, but not number ten. I thought that maybe she was all right, that she would come around."

"Why would you think that?" Beth said, staring sadly at the empty water bottles.

Maggie shrugged. "She hesitated before joining the other group. She seemed like she wasn't certain about them. And then I thought after the others were killed, number ten would give up on number two for sure, because it's pretty clear that number two is only interested in using everyone around her as a body shield."

"Maybe number ten is planning on doing the same thing to number two," Sanya said. "Maybe she's going to throw number two in the fire and get herself out of here without any strings to hold her down."

"Maybe," Maggie said.

She had trouble caring about what happened to #2 and #10. She was so hungry, so tired, so run-down. She wanted to take a nap, or just a rest. But the clock kept ticking down, relentlessly, and she couldn't escape the sight of it. There were clocks everywhere they turned, always showing the inevitable march of time in the wrong direction, always showing how Maggie had fewer hours, fewer minutes, fewer seconds to find Paige, to keep her safe.

They kept going forward through the maze, connected now only by the most tenuous of threads—by the simple expediency of staying together while they could all maintain the same pace. Maggie noticed that Beth was having an easier time keeping up now. She wondered if Beth had acclimated to their speed, or if Maggie and Sanya had slowed down so significantly that it was easier for Beth to keep up. Regardless, Beth's breathing seemed to be a lot smoother than it had been at the beginning of the maze, and she hadn't clung to Maggie's shirt or arm since they lost Natalie.

Maybe she's realized she has to toughen up in order to make it. I'm glad.

She looked over at Beth, who was a pace or two ahead of her, just enough so that Maggie could see her face in profile. Beth's face was blank, and she was breathing smooth and easy, like she was a long-distance runner and she did this all the time.

Maggie frowned. Beth couldn't have improved that much, couldn't have had such a dramatic turnaround, especially under the stress of the maze. People with asthma didn't see their conditions magically improve without inhalers. Or maybe they did? Maggie didn't really know a lot about asthma.

But what if her condition didn't improve? Maggie thought. What if she—?

Maggie didn't have the opportunity to finish that thought, to follow it to its conclusion. They rounded another corner and discovered yet another obstacle.

In front of them was what appeared to be a boxing ring. And in the ring, #2 and #10 were hitting each other with all the savagery of an MMA cage fight. Maggie hated seeing even short clips of those fights, seeing people attacking one another with bare fists and feet, seeing the brutality and the blood. Noah used to make fun of her because she hated when he stopped on one of those fights as he was clicking through the channels. He'd say it was ridiculous that she could read books about teenagers murdering each other and not watch a few minutes of fighting.

"It's different," Maggie had insisted. *"In the books, no matter how much the author describes, I can put a limit on what I imagine. I don't have to see it unless I want to. But something like this, you can't escape it. It's all blood and viciousness, and it's completely in your face."*

Noah had laughed at her, and kept the channel on even when she asked him to change it. She should have known then what he would become, that the kind of man who couldn't even respect such a simple boundary would turn out to be an asshole.

Maggie, Sanya and Beth approached the ring slowly. #2 and #10 didn't seem to be remotely aware of their presence. #10's arms and face were scratched, and she weaved on her feet, but #2 was in much worse shape. Her scalp bled, her left wrist hung at a terribly wrong angle, and one of her eyes was, if not missing completely, then certainly damaged beyond repair. Blood and jelly ran over #2's cheekbone.

As they watched, #2 kicked out at #10's ribs and Maggie heard a solid *crack*. #10 cried out, but it was a puffy, barely oxygenated cry. She didn't seem to have the breath to speak her pain.

Then Maggie noticed something on the other side of the ring, and she sucked in a hard breath. She wondered if she was

hallucinating, if her desperate brain was creating an out where there was none.

"What is it?" Sanya asked.

"Look," Maggie said, pointing. "There's an exit."

A bright red exit sign hung over a plain white door set in the wall, almost invisible except for the presence of the sign. The door was several feet past the ring where #2 and #10 were presently trying to kill each other.

There was a way out. They just had to get to it.

"That door will be locked, for sure. Or it will be a trick, not a door at all," Sanya said, but Maggie heard the spark of hope in her voice nonetheless.

It was the same spark that surged in Maggie's own chest, a surge of energy that she thought she'd exhausted. There was a way out. This wasn't just an endless nightmare where they had to keep going through the maze until they all fell down, meaningless dominoes in some sadist's game.

"We can try it," Maggie said. "The door is right there. We'd be stupid not to try."

Some part of her wondered, though, if the exit was just a trap, just a trick to keep the men who were watching them amused. Would they laugh when Maggie and Sanya and Beth tried to get through it? Or would the door be temptingly unlocked, just another opportunity for death and horror in a different place?

What if the door is all part of their plan?

Maggie knew that it was a possibility. She also knew that she still had to try, had to make the attempt to get out of this place. She'd lost herself for a little while there, unable to get the sight of Natalie falling, flailing for the rope that couldn't save her, out of her mind. The exit sign gave her hope again, shot a jolt of energy into her veins. She could do this. They could do this. They could get away.

"But the obstacle," Beth said.

"What about it?" Maggie said.

"We have to, you know, do the obstacle," Beth said, pointing at the ring.

#2 looked like she was on her last legs, reeling around the ring like a drunk. #10 watched #2 with narrowed fox eyes, waiting for her chance.

"Looks to me like the obstacle's currently occupied," Sanya said. "And I don't see any instructions, either, that say we have to fight like those two idiots are doing. I think it would count as completing the obstacle if we just climbed over it."

Beth shook her head. "No, I don't think that's right. I think we're supposed to . . ."

Her voice trailed off, and Maggie gave her a hard look.

"We're supposed to fight each other, that's what you think?"

Beth gestured toward the ring again. "I mean, it's a fighting ring. So I think we're supposed to fight."

"Do you see any indication of that?" Maggie said. She had a suspicion about Beth, a suspicion that was growing stronger by the second. "Any sign that says we have to fight, have to be cruel to each other or hurt each other?"

Beth stared at Maggie with wide eyes. "No, I just thought—"

"I'm not going to fight anyone unless I have to," Maggie said, and thought, *Don't try to give me those big Bambi eyes now. Not when I'm onto you.*

"Looks like number two isn't doing so great," Sanya said. "Guess she wasn't a ringer after all."

"Yeah, but I think there's still a ringer here," Maggie said, looking at Beth. "I think there's someone whose job it was to make sure we all end up shredded into little pieces so we don't make it to the end of the maze. Someone who was always making sure we went in front of her. If there is an end of the maze at all, and I'm not convinced of that."

Sanya followed Maggie's gaze to Beth. "Really? You think it's her? She can barely get through this without collapsing."

"Sure about that?" Maggie asked. "Because I noticed that she hasn't had any trouble breathing for a while, no matter how fast we ran or how much stress she was supposedly under."

Beth grabbed Sanya's shirtsleeve. Maggie realized how purposeful the gesture was, how childlike, how it made you think that Beth was someone small and delicate who needed to be protected.

"Sanya," Beth said, and her voice wobbled convincingly. "You don't believe this, do you? Maggie, I think you're just really tired and really sad because of Natalie. I mean, you barely got through the last few obstacles. I had to help you a couple of times because you were really out of it."

"But not so out of it that I couldn't have made it on my own," Maggie said, and as she said it, she realized it was true. She'd been in a fog, but not so badly that she couldn't move her body or get through the tasks that had been set for them. Beth hadn't really helped her.

If anything, Maggie now realized, Beth had been a hindrance. It had been carefully done, not obvious unless you were looking for it, but Beth's supposed physical weakness and clumsiness had almost gotten Maggie seriously hurt more than once. She'd dragged the whole group down, made them go slower than they had to, made Maggie feel like she had to look out for her. And every time Beth would say, "I'm so sorry, I'm so sorry," or, "I was just trying to help."

Uh-huh, Maggie thought. Just trying to help. Just trying to help me get killed before we got to this obstacle so she could take out Sanya and then waltz out that exit, free and clear.

Sanya said, "I don't know, Maggie. It doesn't seem like she's been, you know, actively trying to get us killed. Both of us made it this far."

"But Roni and Natalie didn't."

"Yeah, and half of number two's group died before they got here as well," Sanya said. "I don't think that is really an indicator. Maybe you're, you know, just getting a little . . ."

"Paranoid?" Maggie said. "I'm not paranoid."

She tried to keep her voice steady and even, because that was what Noah had told her when she said he was acting weird and different and not like himself, when he was keeping secrets from her.

"You're just being paranoid, Maggie. I think those books you read are making you a little cuckoo. There isn't a vast conspiracy out there, waiting to get you."

But Maggie had known something was wrong from the start, had let him convince her to second-guess herself and all the red flags. She'd known he was becoming someone other than the man she'd married. She'd just wanted to believe the best in him, to believe that she could still love him and that he could love her the way he used to. That mistake, that naïve belief, had almost cost Paige her life.

Maggie wasn't going to let that happen this time. Nothing mattered anymore except Paige, except getting her daughter out of this hellhole safely.

"Did you notice," Maggie said, "that when all those spiders came up on us in the jungle, Beth got out way ahead of everyone? She was like a sprinter then, no trouble with her 'asthma' at all."

Maggie made air quotes with her fingers around "asthma."

Tears welled up in Beth's eyes, but didn't spill over.

She's good. I wonder how you do that, how you almost cry without letting it actually happen.

"I'm scared of spiders," Beth said, in a tiny, wispy voice. "I told you I'm scared of them."

"Yeah, and that was funny, too," Maggie said. "Weird coincidence, that the thing you're supposedly most scared of just happened to come after us."

"I didn't know that was going to happen. I don't even know how I got out of there," Beth insisted. "My body just took over, but in my brain, I was screaming and screaming."

Maggie heard a grunt, followed by another, and looked back at the ring. #2 and #10 toppled simultaneously, crashing onto the mat. #2 didn't appear to be breathing. #10 lay on the mat with her face mangled, her mouth open. She didn't seem able to move at all.

Who are you fighting for? Maggie wondered. Who did they take from you? Who did they threaten you with?

Even #2 had to have someone, or else she wouldn't have pushed so hard. Underneath that mean-girl exterior, she cared about someone.

People are never what you see on the surface. There's always a secret heart with a fortress around it, a hideout for their smallest and truest selves, the piece that they never show anybody else.

Inside her secret heart, #2 loved somebody enough to beat #10 almost to death.

Inside her secret heart, Beth cared so little about Sanya and Maggie that she would side with their captors, that she would work to ensure that all the other participants were hurt.

And she did it all while looking so sweet, so helpless, so innocent. But Maggie saw what was underneath. She saw that Beth was a traitor.

Sanya had taken a couple of steps toward the ring when #2 and #10 fell down, but stopped and looked back at Maggie. "I figured you'd be rushing to help anyone who got hurt, like usual."

"It's not safe to turn your back on a snake," Maggie said.

Maggie and Beth stared at each other. Sanya looked like she wanted to intervene but wasn't sure what to do. Maggie knew that Sanya thought she'd been pushed off the deep end by the maze.

"Stop pretending," Maggie said to Beth.

Maggie saw the shift, the calculation in Beth's eyes the second before Beth smiled.

"All right, bitch. Let's dance."