

The Glass Road

PRESCOTT FAMILY ROMANCE

BOOK TWO

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PROLOGUE

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THE FIRST RACE of the season, and Tess Prescott was already hyped on the thrill of competition and the chance to prove herself once again.

Languid waves lapped against the red and white hull of the troller boat, the seawater unaware of the anxious energy pulsating across Mission Bay Beach. She checked her watch for the tenth time.

Eleven minutes to go.

Excitement radiated through her limbs. She cranked the volume on her earbuds and blasted Katrina and the Waves' greatest hit into her ears. She hummed along and finished the last of her stretches.

The bay's briny scent rolled off the water and mingled with the cloud of coconut sunscreen rolling over the crowded beach. For an early February morning, the San Diego skies had peeled back their usual fog, and warm sun beat down on the triathletes. The water was fifty-seven degrees, according to the morning report, and everyone was ready with their full wetsuits and swim caps in place.

"Okay, Tess," she whispered to herself over the hum of the music, "you've got this."

A rough hand tapped her on the shoulder, and she glanced up to see her coach, Ryan. His blond beach-boy waves skipped in the breeze, and he wore a smile meant only for her. He motioned to her ears, pantomiming for her to turn her music off.

She turned down the volume and gave him her full attention.

“Done giving yourself a pep talk?” He gave her arm an affectionate squeeze. “Looks like you’ve got the perfect day for a warm-up race. I know it’s the beginning of the season and all, but I stand by what I said. With the right times, and a little luck, you could qualify for the U.S. Team at the National Championships in August.”

Tess had been working her entire adult life to make the Olympic Team, and this was her year. Something great was about to happen. This had to be it. By God’s grace, she’d made it this far. He wouldn’t let her down now.

She readjusted the strap of her goggles and tucked a strand of chestnut hair back inside her teal swim cap. She was all in. “I’m walking on sunshine.”

“Good. Now remember,” he spoke over the crowd of voices around them. “This is the first race, so it’s okay to take things easy. Especially after that sprain you got back in December.” His Ironman sweater stretched across a muscular torso when he folded his arms.

After working together for seven years, he knew her well enough to expect an argument, but that never stopped him from trying.

“Yeah, you know me. Like I’d ever take a race slow. Besides, it was only a minor sprain. The doctors gave me the all-clear weeks ago.” She’d iced her ankle earlier that morning for good measure and detected only some slight stiffness when she stretched it.

Ryan shook his head, and a shock of sun-bleached hair fell over his designer sunglasses. “That’s what I like about you, Prescott. Never one

to take the easy way out. Keep it up, and we'll all be watching you take the podium in Paris in a few years.”

He pushed his sunglasses onto his head, and his wink made her head spin. The warmth seeped into her shoulders and stayed long after he'd left to join the other coaches and spectators beneath the blue and white banners.

Prerace banter complete, Tess channeled her focus on the course ahead. She scanned the water while Elton John's "Don't Go Breaking My Heart" rocked in the background. A 750-meter swim through Mission Bay, followed by three laps around Fiesta Island on a bike, and a five kilometer run through the park to the finish line. Piece of cake. Tess had competed in this race the past five years and could trace the route in her sleep.

She took a last sip of water and set it beside her bike and running shoes before they called her heat to the starting line. All set, she padded up to the brisk water to wait her turn with the other competitors.

Tess's breaths grew long and slow. In and out. Sea air filled her lungs, and she zeroed in on the rippling water ahead. She checked her High Sierra GPS watch, her sponsor's logo cheering her on while she reviewed the racecourse one last time. As the timer drew closer to zero, the crowd hushed, and then out of the stillness, the starting gun cracked, propelling the racers into the cold water.

Tess cut to the front of the group with ease and rounded the first buoy. Her freestyle strokes sliced through the water, and her feet flutter-kicked in a steady rhythm. Each breath tingled her tongue with a salty spray, and she relished the familiar taste.

She pulled ahead, along with a handful of other athletes, taking full advantage of the draft-zones of the other swimmers. They turned right at the next buoy, and the gap grew wider within the heat. Arms and legs

beat the surrounding water, and she occasionally felt a hand cut dangerously close to her head.

They came to the last turn and circled back toward the beach, where throngs of spectators cheered them on. Tess imagined Ryan's smile, and she kicked her legs harder. The water grew warm as they reached the shore. Tess dug her feet into the soft sand and sprinted across the grassy field toward the transition area.

In ten seconds flat, she'd stripped down to her sleeveless tri-suit and dropped her swim cap and goggles onto the discarded wetsuit. Without socks, she slipped into her cycling shoes, secured her helmet, and raced toward her lime-green ten-speed. One leg over the frame, she kicked away from the asphalt and clipped into the pedals with lightning speed.

Dunes and shrubs passed in a blur of green and brown. Others slowed behind her, waving at family members and friends along the sidelines. All Tess needed to know was that Ryan was there. They could celebrate after the race, just the two of them, as usual. Despite her family's support, it was a rare occasion that any of them came out to watch her compete, and while she would have appreciated the show of support a few years ago, she'd found solace in Ryan's friendly encouragement a long time ago.

Tess pushed her bike to a breakneck speed around Fiesta Island. A sharp wind threw needle-like sand against her skin, and the sun dried the remaining seawater from her low ponytail.

The space between her and the other cyclists grew, and the crunch of their tires over the road faded like a muffled baseball card against the spokes of her childhood trainer bike.

You can do this. She clicked up a gear and flew ahead. *This is your year.* She repeated the mental pep-talk and finished the last lap.

Back in the transition area, Tess leapt from her bike and switched into her running shoes with an extra shot of adrenaline in her veins. She didn't waste a single second with the speed laces before jumping back into the final leg of the race. It had taken years to perfect her swim and cycling times, but as soon as her feet hit the pavement, she was free.

Three-point-one miles was not a run, it was a sprint. Like in a hundred-yard-dash, Tess bolted down the palm-tree-lined path with one goal in mind:

To win.

The next runner had to be over two-hundred yards behind. Her legs burned with each stride, and a muscle twinged in her ankle. Almost there. She pumped her arms to keep up the momentum and blitzed around the last turn.

Through the trunks and palm fronds, the finish line came into focus. An enormous banner stretched across the road, and the crowd stood, waiting for the first woman to cross beneath the blue and silver flag. Ryan's loud cheers permeated her concentration, and she looked up in time to see him pump a fist in the air at her sure victory.

Their victory.

Tess was so focused on his tanned smile beneath the arc of balloons that she didn't notice the commotion to her right until it was too late. A monster of a German shepherd came barreling up from the beach and broke straight into Tess's line of vision.

Before she could stop, the animal cut her off. Tess flailed her arms to keep her balance. The tread of her shoe caught on the textured concrete, and she twisted in midair. Something snapped in her left ankle, and a searing pain shot through her leg as she crashed onto the unforgiving sidewalk. Her wrist smacked against the hard surface, shattering her watch with the sudden impact.

Tess clutched her chest and forced the air back into her lungs. Time slowed. The outside world grew dim. A steadying hand wrapped over her shoulder, and she blinked into the bright sunlight as a man in uniform knelt beside her. His voice barely registered in her consciousness, but he kept his steady gaze locked on hers.

The pain engulfed her senses, flooded her ears with a radiating throb that drowned out the approaching footsteps and voices. She opened her eyes and saw the paramedic talking to her, his face pulled into a grim line that seemed to make the pain grow worse.

Ryan. I need Ryan. She opened her mouth to say so, but all that came out was a stuttered moan.

A second person knelt on her opposite side and began a series of ministrations with her foot. Another bolt of pain shot up her leg that made her stomach churn.

Tess didn't catch the question the second EMT asked her. Or if she did, the words didn't register in her numb mind.

The only thing she could hear was the sound of her dreams shattering across the road like glass.