



Juicy Central

Tia

Optimistic, genuine, dedicated, critical

Diva

Book 10 | Ayshia Monroe

CHAPTER

1

Tia Ramirez was the only girl heading into senior year at South Central High School who did two hundred sit-ups every day at four o'clock in the morning.

“Nishell? Can you count them for me?” Tia snapped on the harsh overhead light. Her bedroom was as spare as a prison cell. She had a bed, desk, chair, and a poster of Mexico City on the far wall. That was it.

“Tia. Come on. It’s summer vacation. And it’s four in the morning!” her friend Nishell Saunders protested sleepily. She’d

slept over at Tia's place. "Whatchu doing? Gettin' in shape for *Ultimate Fighter*?"

Tia stretched out on a rubber workout mat. She wore just panties and a white bra. Her lush dark hair was back in a ponytail. She was barely five foot two and had a cute figure that no one would guess at, since she usually hid it under conservative clothes. Recently, she'd started wearing glasses for nearsightedness but didn't need them for her morning workout.

"This is what I do when I get up." She got a mischievous look in her eyes. "Unless you want to do them with me?"

"No!"

"I didn't think so. Now, are you going to count, or am I going to have to hurt you?" Tia asked with a wink.

"You crazy, girlfriend," Nishell told her, rubbing some sleep from her eyes. "But I'll help you. Show me what you got."

Tia started crunching. Nishell started counting.

“One. Two, three, four—dang, girl, slow down, you trying to set a world record? Eight, nine, ten ...”

With each crunch, the noise in Tia’s head quieted; life got simple as her muscles and her body took over. She called this her workout zone, and she loved it. Her workout zone took her mind off the stresses of her life, and especially the coming year, when she’d be a senior at gritty South Central High.

Nishell would be a senior too. The two girls had met at yearbook club, which everyone called YC. At first, it seemed like they had nothing in common. Nishell had a white mom, no dad at home, and used to live in a homeless shelter. Tia and her family were new Americans, having moved here fourteen months ago from Nuevo Laredo, Mexico.

Her parents had begged, borrowed, and scraped enough money together to open a little bakery. They gave new meaning to the words “working hard.”

Tia had their work ethic. She was one of the two best students at South Central High School, even though English was her second language. During the summer, she toiled at the Northeast Towers day-care as a counselor, plus helped her parents at the bakery, plus was doing all her summer reading for senior year and starting to think about colleges.

“I don’t know any kid who does what I do,” Tia thought as she crunched. “Since I’m new in America, I have to work twice as hard to succeed. This is a country of so much opportunity. I can’t take that opportunity if I am lazy.”

“Fifty-five, fifty-six,” Nishell counted in wonder. “Day-um, girl, you got abs of

steel! An' everyone at school think you just a brainiac diva."

Tia laughed. "I'm just warming up."

"If I did this many crunches, I'd have abs like yours," Nishell observed.

"Yup."

Nishell giggled. "It ain't worth it."

Tia smiled. Nishell was so beautiful; blessed with curves that she would never have. Guys on the street loved her awesome booty. She was a great photographer, funny, and loyal. Nishell would never turn on her unfairly, the way some of the other girls in YC had turned on her.

The Butler twins, for example. Sherise and Kiki. *I still can't believe they ganged up on me and—*

"One hundred ninety-nine, two hundred!" Nishell declared, as Tia ripped through the end of her crunches.

“All right! Time to run.” Tia put thoughts of the Butler twins aside and popped to her feet.

“Tia, you are barely breathing hard,” Nishell observed.

Tia was already pulling on shorts, a T-shirt, and running shoes. “Like I said, just warming up. Next is three miles. You coming?”

Nishell stared at her. “You kidding?”

“Nope.” Again, Tia got a sly look. “How about I cut it to two and a half. Just for you?”

Nishell hit herself in the forehead and laughed. “At this hour it’s enough I remember to breathe. I’ll see you when you get back.”

Tia glanced at the small alarm clock by her bed. “I do seven-minute miles. It’s four fourteen now. See you at four thirty-six.”

She stretched one calf and then the other. She loved her morning run. The

streets were still dark and quiet except for those folks who rose early—the firemen and the cops, the garbage guys, maids, and hotel workers. People who did their jobs, played by the rules, and earned an honest living.

“Last chance. Sure you don’t want to come with?”

“Very sure,” Nishell declared.

“The coffee’s hot; my parents are in the kitchen,” Tia told her. She was already heading out the bedroom door. “See you in twenty-one minutes and thirty seconds!”

Twenty-one minutes later, sweating only a little, Tia let herself back into the half of a duplex that the family shared with some distant cousins. She made her way through the living room to the small kitchen. Downstairs were those two rooms; upstairs were bedrooms for

her, her little brother, Tomás—who was still asleep—and her parents.

Most norteamericanos would call this apartment a dump, but it's a lot nicer than what we had in Mexico.

She found her parents, Carlota and Manuel, with Nishell at the breakfast table. Her folks were dressed in white shirts and white pants for the bakery. Her mom's dark hair was in a bun. Her father's beard was neatly trimmed. Both were full of energy. Not like Nishell, who wore a T-shirt, jeans, and held her coffee cup to her lips like caffeine was the only thing that stood between her and an early death.

“Good run, Tia?” Carlota asked.

Nishell perked up. “You guys speak English at home?”

“Tia says we need to learn English, no matter how hard it is,” Carlota said gravely. “Tia works hard at everything.”

Manuel looked at Carlota. “My beautiful wife, it is too early for an argument. But our daughter needs to learn that a person should work to live, and not live to work.”

Tia smiled as she sipped her coffee. She adored how her father called her mother “beautiful wife” though they’d been married twenty years.

I want a love like that. Someday.

It wasn’t that Tia had no interest in guys. She’d hung out during junior year with Ty Kessler. When Ty went to South Carolina for the summer, they’d decided to just be friends. That was fine with Tia. She knew that guys could be a distraction from family, school, and the future. Those were the really important things.

Nishell put down her coffee and turned to Carlota. “What I want to know is how Tia keeps track of everything she does.”