



PICK *Love*

Reality is she's mine...

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PICK LOVE

ELLA GOODE

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SUMMARY

When his producer friend's dating show is short one bachelor, reclusive tech billionaire Leo Davidson reluctantly agrees to fill in on one condition: he gets to play the villain. He's allowed to be mean, short-tempered, selfish, and rude. Deal made, he gets micced up and shipped off to the island. Once he arrives, he finds sand, sun, and Quinn. Suddenly, Leo hates his predestined role because how's he going to convince the love of his life that he's the one for her?

Quinn Severs has a growing social media presence—as the cat lady. No, really. Quinn and her family run a big cat rescue sanctuary where they take in leopards and tigers who have been abandoned or mistreated by private owners. It takes a lot of money and her family convinces her this dating show would be perfect to attract attention to their cause. She doesn't expect to fall in love on the dating show. No one really does that but Leo seems different. Under his surly behavior, she thinks if she pets him just the right way, he might want to stay by her side forever. But he's a big city guy and she's a wildlife sanctuary girl. Maybe they just won't fit.



CHAPTER 1

LEO

“LEO, PLEASE. I’M ON MY KNEES,” BINNIE CRIES. MY FRIEND is not on her knees but sitting in a chair across from me at our favorite Italian restaurant. The conversation is making me regret agreeing to meet her, but I’ve known Binnie since we were kids, and she’s never asked me to do dumb things before. I hadn’t realized I’d be walking into a trap.

“No.” I scrape the rest of the arrabbiata sauce off the plate with my bread and shove it into my mouth. I’m not letting a little thing ruin my dinner. There’s still tiramisu to be ordered and eaten. I wave my hand at Matteo, our waiter. He pops over right away.

“Tiramisu?” he asks.

“Yes.”

“On it. So, Binnie, I hear you’re casting for *The Island* again.” He touches his bow tie. “I think you need a little flavor this year. Heard your ratings were a little soft in the last season,” he adds. Binnie doesn’t appreciate that remark and growls at him.

I cock my head and give my friend a bright smile. “There you go. The last contestant for your dating show.”

Matteo’s eyebrows shoot up. “Really? I can’t believe it. I mean”—he cuts himself off and then lifts his chin—“of course, you’d want me. Who wouldn’t want a piece of this fine cut of manliness?” He waves his hand over his aproned front.

“I can’t have you, Matteo. We’ve already got one Italian, and he’s a real count. Has a whole villa overlooking Lake

Como and used to race the Formula 1 circuit. But we do need one more because my tech guy dropped out.”

“Dropped out is a cute way of saying he’s being sent to jail for hacking Google and selling three hundred million passwords.” Binnie texted me in all caps about how she was going to cut off the guy’s balls and feed them to her dog for ruining her show.

She makes a face. “It doesn’t matter why he’s gone, only that he’s gone and I’m short one bachelor.”

“I’m right here, Binnie,” declares Matteo, patting his chest and holding out his arms wide.

“He’s right there,” I add helpfully. Matteo would be good for her show. He’s young, and by the number of single women that come in here in hopes that he serves them, he seems like he’d be a good fit for Binnie’s dating show.

“Matteo, no offense, but I need to replace the tech guy with another tech guy. We have a lawyer, a doctor, a count from Italy, a former athlete, and I’m just missing the millionaire techie. We need to fill that spot because the audience has types.”

“Can’t you fill the tech spot with say, a professor?” I wonder.

“I could play a professor,” chirps Matteo.

“The techie is there because he’s rich not because he’s smart. You’re rich, and so you fit the profile.”

“I’m also smart, so that counts me out,” I say.

“I’m dumb as hell,” Matteo says.

“But not rich,” Binnie points out.

“No one would know. This is television,” Matteo argues.

“The viewers would know. They do deeper background checks than the FBI once the show airs. They would know you are a waiter at your second cousin’s restaurant and that your one moment of fame was when you were arrested for backing into the mayor’s car and fleeing the scene.”

“That was an accident!”

Having heard this argument before and knowing that it goes nowhere, I interject, “Am I going to get my tiramisu?” This is really the only important thing.

Matteo sighs in defeat. “On it.”

Binnie waits for Matteo to slide away before attacking me again. “Why won’t you do it? Anyone in the restaurant would jump at this chance.”

“Then you should ask the other men here.”

“They could be serial killers, and I’ve banned those types because they are bad for PR.”

“Do I have to kill multiple people to be ruled out or just one?” I quip.

“Not funny.” When I don’t respond, Binnie adds, “It’s just three weeks of your life. It’s nothing.”

“I have to live on an island and sleep on a cot in a tent with five other guys for three weeks with every move being filmed. I’d rather be fed raw cow intestines.”

“You get to go to a tropical paradise and sleep in a custom made canvas bed frame with top of the line linens and chances to go off the island to spend time on one of the most expensive yachts ever built,” she counters.

“I hate being on camera. I’m not going to date any girl who goes on a reality show. I’m too busy.”

“Doing what? Ever since you sold your app, you hike, take random classes on everything from pottery to pizza making, and watch too much TV. You told me two days ago you think you’ve seen everything on Netflix. You’re so bored you said you watched eight hours of some faceless person making 3D printed toys.”

“That channel has over four million subscribers,” I say defensively, but Binnie’s not wrong. For the last couple of years, I’ve been swimming in a sea of ennui. Nothing interests me.

“Then do this show. You don’t have to date anyone. Be the asshole on the island. Make everyone hate you. The show would be even better if there was a villain, but no one wants to play that role because of the real-life hate they get, but you wouldn’t care. Insult the guys. Be cold to the girls. Play with yourself. I really don’t care. Just please agree to be on the show. I will get on my knees if I have to.” Binnie’s face is full of genuine anxiety. This show is her baby. One she conceived four years ago and that she wants to keep going.

It’s only three weeks of my life. What’s the worst thing that could happen?



CHAPTER 2

QUINN

HOW DID I LET MYSELF GET INTO THIS SITUATION? I STILL can't believe everyone got me to agree to this. A dating show? I'm going to make a fool of myself on national television. Why would anyone think I was capable of doing this?

"I packed for you." Laura plucks the pen out of my hand midstroke.

"Hey, I'm trying to leave notes so everyone knows what to do and where things are." She slips the pen through her ponytail. I'd snatch it back, but she's much taller than me. Most people tower over me around here.

"We don't need notes. You do know some of us have been doing this longer than you've been alive."

"But—"

"No buts." Ethan strolls into the office area of the facility. His bare chest is covered in a thin layer of sweat.

I'd tell him to put a shirt on, but the man is called a thirst trap online. Girls fall all over themselves whenever I post something and he's in it. The more attention we get, the more donations we rake in. So his shirt stays off.

It's not cheap feeding and housing over thirteen big cats and twenty-eight small ones at the moment. We don't allow visitors. We're purely a rescue. It's not only about feeding and housing them. Some require special diets and medications. We rely on donations and grants to continue to run this place.

There are a handful of us that live on site. The closest town is over forty minutes away. This place is all I know. My dad

raised me here. The only time I left was when I had to go to college. Some of the courses I was unable to take online. I hated leaving. To be honest, it sucked, but I did it. I learn more here than I ever have in any classroom. Still, my dad thought I needed to get out into the world. I did, and then I came right back. This is, and always will be, my home.

“Why didn’t you guys put Ethan up?” I motion toward the thirst trap. “That sounds way more logical.” He’s even charming and has jokes. Actual funny ones.

“They wanted you.” He shrugs. “You’re the popular one.”

“Popular one?” I snort. “Maybe with the leopards.”

“Yeah, it’s the cougars that want me.” Ethan smirks. I can’t help but laugh at his stupid joke. “Seriously, though. They reached out to us about you. You’re the one the followers adore. I’m only eye candy.”

When I launched our social media platforms years ago, I had no idea how much it would explode across the internet. But it did, and we quickly picked up a ton of followers.

“Adore? That your nice way of saying I’m cute not sexy?”

“They wouldn’t know if you’re sexy. You always keep your shirt on.”

“Oh God.” I grab the straps of my overalls. “This show is being filmed on a beach. Will I have to wear—”

“A bikini? Yeah, I got you some. Like I said. I packed for you.” I glare at Laura. I’m scared to see what’s inside the suitcase. Laura is like a mom to me. She pretty much is a stepmom. She and Dad have been together forever. They aren’t married, but they might as well be. They’re a perfect match.

“I’m going to be the”—I make air quotes—“chubby girl.” It dawns on me. “That’s why they picked me.”

“What’s wrong with being the chubby girl?” Ethan asks. “Something to hold on to.”

“Shut up. You’re not even into girls.” There is nothing wrong with being a bigger girl. I just don’t favor the idea of

that being the reason I might have been picked. My second favorite thing to cats is trash reality TV. I have an idea of how these things work. At least I think I do.

“I like them big boys.” Ethan wiggles his eyebrows. I’m going to miss him so much.

“If you weren’t my twin, I’d feed you to Storm.”

“She’s a brat,” he mutters. Ethan hates that he can’t get one of our biggest female cats to like him.

“Storm is a sweetheart,” I lie.

“Unless you got a dick.” Ethan covers his junk. Yeah, she might be a bit sexist. I don’t know what it is about males of any kind, but she won’t tolerate them. She’s actually very protective of the other female felines.

I chew on my bottom lip, my anxiety starting to grow as the reality of this settles in.

“You signed a contract.” Laura reminds me knowing I’m thinking of ways to get out of this. I’m supposed to be leaving soon. “We got this.”

“Hey.” Ethan throws his arm around my shoulder.

“You’re sweaty.” I try to wiggle away from him, but it’s useless. He’s almost twice my size. He stole all the height and muscle in the womb. Big jerk.

“They’re going to be fighting over you.” Ethan’s face grows soft.

“I hate when you do that,” I huff.

It didn’t go unnoticed by me that when I was in college, I didn’t get asked on dates. This is going to be awkward. Ethan has pointed out a time or two when someone was hitting on me but I wasn’t aware of it. He swears James, one of the delivery guys, has a thing for me. I tried to see if I could notice, but I think James is just a nice, friendly guy.

I clearly don’t know how to try to date one man let alone multiple. What does scare me is the thought of no one wanting me. I know it shouldn’t bother me. I don’t need to date or be

with anyone. I'm fine here. I've got my cats and my annoying twin. But no matter how many times I tell myself that, it doesn't stop those thoughts from creeping in.

"You're worried no one will want to date you?" Laura looks at me like I've lost my mind. "You're turning into a crazy cat lady."

"You say that as though it's an insult." I might have resigned myself to die a virgin. A sacrifice to the cats. Okay, maybe I am going crazy.

"I honestly think you're going to enjoy this more than you think." Ethan drops his arm.

"Now you're the crazy one." I've already thought this through. Even if I did fall madly in love with someone, it couldn't go anywhere. My life will always be here. No man is going to give up their life to come live with a crazy cat lady in the middle of nowhere. I don't want to toy with the idea in my mind that one would.

It will make me want something I'll never have.



CHAPTER 3

LEO

“THERE ARE SIX PATHS FOR EACH MALE PARTICIPANT. YOU will all start at the same time. At the bottom of the hill is a fire pit. Inside the fire pit are six fireproof balls. Fish one out and then go to the tent number that matches the number on the ball. What you do in the tent is up to you,” instructs the director. She smacks her lips together and winks at me. I stare back stone-faced. I hope Binnie has written her will because I’m killing her after this.

“Maybe you could try smiling,” suggests another crew member.

I stare straight ahead.

“Or no. I guess the big angry man trope could sell.” In an overloud whisper, the same woman turns to her closest coworker and says, “Where did Binnie pick this Neanderthal up?”

“Friend, I guess,” is the reply.

The woman with the headset claps her hands together. “It’s fine. He’s hot and rich. He doesn’t need to smile. Everyone get to your marks. The cameras are on in five. You—“ She points a sharp nail in my direction. “I don’t care what you do on camera but remember being an asshole will only result in a lot of hate for you, and you won’t get any screen time if the audience doesn’t like you.”

Don’t give me any ideas. A makeup artist comes over to pat something on my face, but one glower sends her scuttling. “Have a shiny fucking face then,” I hear her mutter as she runs off.

I rub a hand over my nose. Killing Binnie won't be enough. I'm going to have to make it hurt. Like there's going to be some torture involved. I'll spend my three weeks in "paradise" to plan this out. Someone shouts that it's go time, which I guess means for me to walk out and meet the other contestants. I push aside the canvas flap of the large tent and start down the rocky path. The flames of the fire can be seen in the distance. I can also make out the figures of the other men. One of them is running. Given that none of us have seen the women and even if we did, we don't know what tent they are in, racing to the fire is senseless. That doesn't stop the other men from feeling challenged. They all start running. The poor camera crews assigned to each member are also running. They hadn't prepared for this. The camera guy and the person who handles his cords are running backward. The staff assigned to me start to look worried.

"I have no intention of moving any faster than this for three weeks," I tell them. Their shoulders sag in relief. I guess they're paid by the hour and not the number of minutes of screen time used because my sedate pace has to be boring material compared to the men who've reached the fire pit and are now busy rooting around the logs with long pokers. Sparks fly in the air, and I hear someone scream in pain as a stray cinder flies into the air and lands where it shouldn't.

When I finally reach the pit, the other men all have a ball at their feet. An extra one is rolling around in a small divot.

"We got yours for you," says one of them. He's tall with light reddish hair and a gym rat's build with overly bulky arms and thin legs. One hard wind on this island and he's on his ass.

"Thanks." I toe the ball over and read the number. Six. I give the other men a brief nod and start walking toward the tents.

"Hey, wait," another one calls.

I look over my shoulder. "You having a hard time reading the number?"

This man, blond and looking as plastic as a Ken doll, shifts awkwardly. "No, but don't you want to talk about your

number? We thought we could have a competition between us to decide who gets what number.”

“Do you know who is in which tent?”

“Uhhh, not really?”

“Then what’s the point?” I turn and head toward number six. It doesn’t matter to me who is inside the tent. I just want to kick off my shoes, lie down, and sleep. I spent most of last night packing and then writing down instructions for Binnie on how to take care of things in my absence. Basically, she needs to water my plants and get my mail. It struck me that I don’t have a very complicated life. For the first ten years post high school, I was caught up in the tech rat race, trying to one-up all the other eggheads on creating the latest and greatest piece of software. It was exhausting, and at the time, I thought it was rewarding, but now that I’ve sold my app platform, my life is feeling empty. I don’t have a girlfriend or even a pet. I just bought the plants a couple of months ago because I looked around my apartment with its white walls and black and gray decor and wondered if I was living in a prison. I guess one of my own making. Maybe I should be grateful for Binnie pushing me outside my comfort zone. Never in a billion years would I have agreed to be on a dating show.

I reach tent number six. Maybe this is my destiny.

I give myself a little shake. *Wake up, Leo. You’re not finding the mother of your children on a dating show.* This is a fame-hungry wench who wouldn’t know how to keep a secret if her life depended on it. She probably is here to increase her social networking status and not much more.

“Hope you’re decent because I’m coming in.” I unzip the tent opening and step inside.

The big eyes of a goddess blink up at me. Okay, fuck that. This is my destiny.



CHAPTER 4

QUINN

“AHH, HI.” I TUCK MY HAIR BEHIND MY EAR. WHEN I TRIED to put it up and out of my way, they’d asked me to keep it down.

I suppose they’d spent thirty minutes doing it so I should leave it be. It never dawned on me that they would want to doll me up. They hadn’t done much to the other women, but they all showed up already in full glam.

Which seems crazy to me since we’re staying in tents on an island. But I guess they all want to put their best foot forward to try to find a husband or maybe a hookup, so it makes sense. Not to mention we’re going to be on television. I try not to remind myself of that. It’s kind of creepy to think of so many people watching me.

“Hi,” the handsome man responds, staring at me. I try not to fidget under his gaze. It’s awkward standing here in a bikini while he’s got shorts and a shirt on. A bit unfair as well.

“You’re Leo, right?” I finally ask when he doesn’t speak. Is he disappointed that he got me?

“You know who I am?”

“Yes, they showed us pictures of all of you with names.”

“They didn’t tell me your name or show us anything.”

“Really?” That was not my understanding of what was to happen. “You didn’t read the cards after you got your ball thing?”

“I grabbed the last one and came to my tent.”

“They told us that you’d select a ball and then would be given a card with details of the girl inside the tent with that number. Then you could keep your card or put the card back and compete against the others for a different one if you didn’t think the girl was....” I trail off, not sure how to phrase it.

“Compatible?” He fills in for me.

“That’s a nicer way to say it. I thought appealing.”

“I took my number and left.” He shrugs. His eyes still linger on me. “What did your card say?” He steps farther into the tent. I’m not sure it should be called that.

When I think of a tent, I imagine it being green with some sleeping bags on the ground and in the middle of the woods. This is the exact opposite of what I was picturing. There are actually two full beds here. They are only a few inches apart from each other. They could easily be pushed together or farther apart. I thought about pushing them apart quickly before whoever picked me got here.

It’s more a hut than anything with wood floors and nightstands. A small house with the beach right there. The only thing it didn’t have was a bathroom, which was in another area that everyone shared.

“Not much. That I have a bachelor’s degree and work at a rescue sanctuary.” My card had sounded really lame compared to the other girls’.

They somehow described who they were while making it sound sexy. I have to admit that I’m a tad disappointed that he hadn’t picked my card. That he just took what he got. I was sure after reading the other girls’ cards, I’d be the last one someone would want to pick.

“Was I the name you hoped would show up?” He smirks. My face warms, and I know he can see that I’m blushing.

“Your name popped out to me.” I admit. Leo, what are the odds?

He had been the most attractive when I’d glanced over the board they’d pinned the pictures to. I wasn’t the only one who thought that either.

All the other guys posed for their pictures while Leo had an annoyed expression on his face. As though he wanted to be doing anything else besides posing for that photo. One guy was even flexing. I secretly prayed that I didn't get paired up with that one. Then again, Leo doesn't have to try to be hot. He is hot without effort. You could tell that even from a picture.

I have the urge to fidget, but I stop myself. I don't know why I'm so damn nervous. I mean, I work with cats that are twice my size every day, and I never feel this unsettled around them. And they could eat me for an afternoon snack in a blink of an eye.

"I'm Quinn," I blurt out, thrusting my hand out for him to shake. He looks at it for a second before his hand envelops mine, causing me to get goosebumps.

"You're not what I thought was going to be inside this tent." I jerk my hand back from his. "Shit, that sounded bad. I am going to be the asshole." He shakes his head. "Sorry, I meant I thought you would be some social media influencer who takes pictures all day."

"Right." I step back. That was a twofold smack to the face. One, I'm clearly not sexy enough to do such a thing, and two, I think I do fall under being a social media influencer. "And what is it that you do?"

"Not much. I'm the rich one."

"Trust fund baby?" He full-on smiles at my small dig. If he was going to give them to me, so could I.

"I used to dabble in tech."

"Used to?"

"Kind of retired." He's young to be retired, but I guess if you're rich, you can do whatever you want. His eyes linger on my lips. "Glad the cameras didn't follow me in."

"They don't need to." I nod to one of the three strapped to the corner of the tent's walls. "And you're not supposed to talk about them," I remind him. We're all supposed to pretend the

cameras aren't there. It makes the viewers feel as though this is real and not staged.

“Fucking hell,” he mutters. I bite my tongue not to point out that dropping the F bomb is another no-no. I don't think Leo would care. I'm actually starting to get the impression he wants to be anywhere but here.

“They're going to be everywhere.”

“We need everyone to gather outside,” a woman shouts. I go to leave the tent. Leo's hand comes down on my shoulder.

“Maybe you should put a shirt on.” I pull back so his hand falls from my arm. “The sun,” he quickly adds. I don't know if he made that last part up because he realized he was being rude or what. For someone that has a give-no-shits attitude, I'm not thinking it's the sun that he's concerned about.

“They haven't brought my stuff down.”

“Take mine.” He starts to pull his own shirt off.

“Don't.” I stop him. “You're playing your part well. The asshole.” I unzip the tent.

“Quinn,” he calls after me, but I ignore him, making my escape. Not that I can go far. I'm not sure how long Leo and I will be sharing a tent. I'm sure they will shake things up at some point.

I'm already a bit shaken.



CHAPTER 5

LEO

“YOU LOOK PISSED, BUT IT’S NOT OUR FAULT. WE TOLD YOU to stick around and you could have competed for one of the other girls,” whispers the tall blond who I’ve since learned is the real count from Italy. Emile has attached himself to my side because we Italians should stick together. “Like Serena, there, is a former Miss Galaxy.”

I don’t follow his discreet gesture because I’m too focused on how Quinn’s major assets are on full display and not just for the ten contestants but the cameras too. What did Binnie say her ratings were? Five percent? Two percent? What does that translate into? There are over 50 million people in the US. Even on the low side, it means millions are going to be staring at her tits.

“How many people watch this damned show?” I ask. Emile perks up at my question.

“Last season there were two million.”

“This is some bullshit,” I mutter. Quickly I unbutton the rest of my shirt and pull it off. Shirtless, I march across the sand and jerk Quinn to my chest. “Here, you’re wearing this.” She fights me as I struggle to put the shirt over her shoulders.

“I don’t need it. Oh my God, you’re naked now.” She struggles against my efforts, her arms pulling out of the sleeves.

“Is this part of the show?” a girlish voice says. “Is this how our next bedmate is picked?”

“Bedmate?” I bellow. “There are two beds in every tent.”

“I meant tent mates. We’re supposed to sleep together,” the one Emile pointed out as the beauty queen informs me.

“Are we shooting a porn or a dating show? Put this damned shirt on,” I order. Quinn seems tired of fighting me and resignedly shoves her arms into the sleeves of my white shirt.

“What about me?” the beauty queen asks.

I frown. “What about you?”

Her smile dims about five wattage points. She glances over at the camera crew. “Is this supposed to be happening?”

No one responds. They’re just here to record us, not to provide guidance, and I don’t need any direction. Quinn can’t be standing here looking all edible and squeezable while two million people look on. It’s not decent.

“I can’t believe you signed up for this,” I say. Even with my shirt on her, something doesn’t look right. Then I realize it’s because she hasn’t closed it. I can still see a strip of skin from her neck to belly button. Fucking outrageous is what it is. “Button up,” I snap.

“I put sunscreen on,” she grumbles but does what I say.

“I could use a shirt,” says another woman. She leans forward from the line and waves at me.

“I have one,” the count offers. He shrugs out of his polo and races over to the girl’s side. Soon all the other men have taken their shirts off and are offering them to the women. I stick close to Quinn and give the evil eye to anyone who even looks in our direction.

All the guys are standing next to a woman, which seems right to me. No one is left out, and no one is trying to get close to Quinn, but just to be on the safe side, I move her to my right so that she’s on the end and I’m between her and the beauty queen.

“If you wanted to stand next to Serena, just say that instead of moving me around like I’m a piece of luggage,” snaps Quinn.

“Who said I wanted to stand next to Serena?” Where did she get that idea?

“Why wouldn’t you?” asks Serena with a frown on her face.

“Yeah, why wouldn’t you?” parrots Quinn.

“Are you talking to my woman now?” says Emile, leaning forward so he can stare at me.

“I’m not your woman,” says Serena. “I haven’t made up my mind, and you can’t claim me like I’m some candy bar in the checkout line at Walmart.” She steps forward and holds out her hand to Quinn. “Come on, darling. You don’t belong to anyone.”

“Don’t move,” I order, but Quinn doesn’t listen to me. She actually scampers forward and grabs at Serena’s hand like it’s a lifeline.

“And we don’t need these either.” Serena throws down the polo that Emile had pressed into her hand. Quinn follows suit. She quickly unbuttons my shirt and tosses it onto the sand. She jerks her chin in the air and gives me a challenging look.

I swipe the shirt off the ground and am about to throw it over Quinn’s newly bared shoulders when a chime rings, and a disembodied voice rings out. “Citizens, now it’s time for a game. Please head to the beach where you will find a box. In the box are items and instructions on how to use those items. You will not be pairing off. I repeat, you will not be pairing off.” A chorus of confused murmurs rises up.

“What’s the point of a dating show if we aren’t pairing off?” says the gym rat. “The purpose of the dating show is to hook up. Contractually speaking, I didn’t sign up for this to spend the whole time alone.” He must be the lawyer.

Another guy, I’m guessing the athlete, laces his fingers together and then pushes his arms out. “You’re just worried because I’m going to beat your ass in whatever competition is going to happen and then I’ll get to pick first.” He glances in my direction. “I know who I’m spending the night with.”

Serena and Quinn move closer together as if his statement scares them. I walk forward into his line of vision and cross my arms. Athlete rolls his eyes. He must think that the contest will be physical and therefore he'll win, but he doesn't look stronger than me, and I doubt he's smarter.

"We don't need your protection." Serena shoves past me with her hand clasped in Quinn's.

"She's right. We're doing fine on our own," Quinn says. Her chin is high in the air.

I trail behind them as they all walk down to the beach. Serena is going in my black book. For whatever reason, she's interfering with my and Quinn's relationship, and that doesn't work for me. The beauty queen needs to focus on doing whatever beauty queens do and leave Quinn to me.



CHAPTER 6

QUINN

ALL THE WOMEN STAND TOGETHER WHILE THE MEN HAVE TO line up at the start of the obstacle course. At least that's what it looks to be. I glance up to see drones hovering over us.

"There's Owen." Christina's whole face lights up. I wonder if they know each other. She said that she was an actress.

"Who is he?" I ask as he walks toward us in a suit. It's a bit out of place considering how hot it is and the fact that we're on the beach.

"The host. Aren't you supposed to be the smart one?" Christina snips at me. Out of all the women, she's the only one that's been rude. I'm not sure what her problem is.

"I mean, I'll be the smart one," I offer. Serena laughs.

"I think someone has a crush on Owen. You know he's not one of the options, right?" Serena has become my favorite in the short time I've gotten to know the girls. There's just something about her that makes you feel comfortable.

We'd been together a bit before we were sent to our cabana tents, and got to mingle before we were called over. Between Leo, and trying to remember everyone's names, I'm overwhelmed. Serena is chill. I hadn't seen that coming. I might have had some preconceived notions about her coming into this with her being the beauty queen. But she's nothing like I expected.

Christina shoots a glare at Serena that could kill. It doesn't even faze her. I could imagine after experiencing the pageant

world that a glare is nothing to Serena. I'm sure she's had to deal with a heck of a lot worse.

"I don't get it," Serena whispers next to me. "His forehead is too shiny." I burst into laughter. All the men turn to glance our way. My eyes lock with Leo's. He is always staring at me. I'm not sure what to make of him. One second I think he's being rude, and the next, I'm not so sure.

"Don't forget you're wearing mics," Owen says as he steps onto a podium that's been set up.

Christina's face flushes. Again, Serena is unfazed that Owen heard what she had said about his forehead. A few people flock to Owen, one of them adjusting the mic in his ear while another brushes his face with makeup.

For his shiny forehead, Serena mouths to me. I bite the inside of my cheek so I don't laugh again.

"All right. We're going to start. No looking at the cameras or mentioning them at any time. Act as though they aren't there. It gives the viewers a more real experience," Owen tells us all. It was on the top of the list of things we can't do that was provided to us. There weren't a ton of things on that list, but that one was in big bold letters. You could throw a drink in someone's face, but you must pretend there is no camera crew lingering around at all times.

A woman starts to count down. The second she hits the number one, Owen snaps into a different person. His voice changes to do an introduction before he starts to explain the competition. It's not all physical. At one spot you have to solve a puzzle, while another, a riddle.

I'm really glad that the girls get to sit this one out. I might be able to do a puzzle and riddle, but there is no way I was getting up the wall at the very end. Not to mention I hate heights.

"I'm sure you all are wondering what the winner will get." Oh crap, maybe it's not fair that the girls don't get a chance to compete. "Now that you have all officially met, the winner can switch into whatever tent they want."

“Hell yeah!” Ryan shouts. Ouch. I try to remember who he was with. Then I see Christina’s face and know it’s her. The irritated expression on her face almost matches Leo’s.

He’s had a very *I don’t give a fuck about this show* vibe going on so far. I wonder if he’ll even try to win this. If he does and he wins, will he pick someone else? Probably. We haven’t gotten off to the best of starts. I guess that might be why they haven’t brought down our luggage to our tents. They were waiting until after this competition to see exactly where everyone would be.

I can’t help but wonder who I might end up stuck with. I go down the list of men, scratching off Mason. I think someone said he’s a lawyer. He reminds me of those guys on TikTok that are always in the gym. I already know what my twin would say about him. *Hey, man, you can’t be skipping leg day.* Mason is only buff from the waist up. His legs are scrawny, especially in comparison to Leo’s thighs.

Emile is snotty. Ryan is all brawn and no brains. I think he’s taken a few too many hits in those football games he used to play. That leaves Hudson. He’s been rather quiet. I know he’s some kind of doctor. If I had to pick someone else to get stuck with, I suppose it might be him.

“Are there any questions?” Owen asks.

“What if we win and don’t want to switch tents?” Leo calls out.

“We all know who Leo is interested in,” one of the other girls whispers.

“I’m sure things will change once people get to know each other,” another says.

A whirl of emotions fill me. This really is a competition. Leo is a pain in my ass, but I’m finding I don’t want him to be a pain in someone else’s. His bossiness happens to be weirdly charming. Not that I’d *ever* admit that out loud.

“Then you’ll get to keep Quinn,” Owen responds. Keep me? The hell? Leo seems to like that answer until Owen continues, “For now.”



CHAPTER 7

LEO

RUN FIFTY METERS, FLIP A TRACTOR TIRE FIVE TIMES, ARMY crawl under barbed wire in a shallow pond of cold water and colder mud. At the end is a puzzle box. You have to get it open to retrieve a key. The key will unlock the rope that you have to climb to ring a bell. The rope climb is one of the hardest on any obstacle course, especially if you wasted yourself on the tire flips. After ringing the bell and dropping to the ground, you go to the way station. There you have to solve a riddle. If you get the answer right, you go straight to the finish line, which is a flat fifty meters away. If you don't get the riddle right, you have to climb two hundred stairs, with the pack, to the finish line.

Mason will be wasted after the tire flip. That exercise comes from the legs. Emile doesn't look like he's lifted anything heavier than his wallet. Hudson, the doctor, might be a hidden card, but the athlete, Ryan, is my biggest competition. He has his eye on someone, but I'm not sure if it's Quinn or Serena since they stood close together.

I'm going to draft behind him, staying close but not ahead. Obviously, you want to get the riddle right, but by the time you reach the way station, you're going to be exhausted. Your mind will be muddled, and sorting through even an easy riddle is going to be a challenge. I'm banking that he won't be able to get the riddle. It's a risk, but taking risks is how I made my fortune.

"I hope that all these contests aren't physical. We aren't in a gym competition," says Emile in a loud, disdainful voice.

“Why? Did you think you could buy your way into a tent?” scoffs Ryan.

“I don’t know, ladies, would you rather have a diamond necklace or a sweaty man who finished crawling through mud for no reason?” Emile arches an eyebrow toward the line of women.

“I’ll take the diamonds.” Serena raises her hand.

To my surprise, Quinn does as well. “Diamonds for me.”

“I like diamonds,” another woman chimes in. I don’t know who she is.

“The actress,” Emile whispers helpfully. “Penelope, the one with the long dark hair, plays the violin, and Anna, the blonde, is the semi-pro tennis player who is coaching the up-and-coming tennis phenom, Sia Chandler.”

“I’m not going to remember all of that,” I reply. My focus is on Quinn. No one else here really matters.

“Fair enough. I will leave you to your delectable Quinn and enjoy myself with the rest of the bouquet of delicate flowers.”

“It’s the women who choose in the end,” the man on the other side of Emile says. It’s the good doctor, Hudson. He’s got sandy blond hair, and his face looks honest, which is unsettling in its own way.

“I shall offer any lady who is interested a diamond necklace to join me in tent number one,” Emile announces.

A whistle blows, and we all turn toward Owen. The sun bounces off his face and nearly blinds us.

“He needs a bit of powder,” Emile tells me. “That forehead is large enough to land a plane on.”

“There is no bribing the contestants. The women do not change tents. The winner of the contest decides which tent they want.”

“So much for allowing us to do whatever we like,” Emile grumbles.

“Let’s get this dog and pony show started,” shouts Ryan. Now that Emile’s money is off the table, the athlete feels secure in his win.

Owen blows the whistle again. He wants the damned race to start. Emile takes off at a surprisingly fast clip. When we reach the tires, though, he’s stymied. He can’t lift even one.

“Do you want a hand?” I offer. “There aren’t rules against us helping each other.”

“No. I will sit this out. Any of the ladies will suffice for me tonight.” Emile gives me a wave and walks off the field.

While I was talking to Emile, Ryan made swift work of the tires and is already at the barbed wire. “Shit.” I get to work, but Ryan’s got a good lead on me. He’s through the barbed wire and has the wooden puzzle box in this hand. To my surprise, he’s able to solve the puzzle and has the rope unlocked before I make it through the mud. I’m losing ground.

I speed up the crawl and drag myself to the puzzle box. Instead of trying to solve it, I smash the wood against the metal pole from which the rope hangs. The box cracks, and I fish out the key. Someone blows a whistle. “You’re supposed to solve the puzzle!” shouts a crew member.

“I did.” I insert the key into the lock and grab the rope that swings free. No one said how I had to get the key.

The rope climb burns my arms after the tire flip. I can see Ryan fading toward the top. If he doesn’t make it in this climb and has to drop down, it’ll be harder to finish. I guess he knows that because he pulls out a reserve of strength and rings the bell. Triumph flashes through his eyes. “Eat dust, loser,” he jeers as he slides down the rope.

My arms are telling me to give up and join Emile on the sideline, but the thought of Quinn spending even a second with this fuckhead enrages me. I power up the rope and ring the bell. Swiftly I drop to the ground and race toward the way station. There, a red-faced Ryan is yelling at a crew member.

“It’s impossible! There’s no answer,” he pants.

“There is.” The crew member shakes his head.

“Give me a different one then.”

“You have to answer this one.”

I grab a piece of paper out of the jar and read it out loud. “Can you name three consecutive days without using the words Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, Saturday, or Sunday?” I slap the paper down. “Yesterday, today, and tomorrow.”

The crew member nods and presses a button. A gate opens, and I stride through with the curses of Ryan ringing in my ears. Quinn’s mine now.



CHAPTER 8

QUINN

“DAMN,” SERENA WHISPERS FROM BESIDE ME. “WHAT DOES HE do for a living?” All the girls now have their eyes on Leo.

He killed the puzzle. He literally destroyed the entire box it was in to get the key out. But Ryan is still in the lead. Hudson and Mason both hit the puzzle at the same time while Ryan begins to climb the rope. Hudson is more athletic than any of us realized, while Mason is not.

“He said he’s the rich one.”

“The rich one? Poor Emile. He’s not going to like hearing that,” Serena jokes. “I guess Leo is the wild card. He’s more than rich.”

“Tech, he said he’d been in tech.”

“I’ve never seen someone in tech with those kind of thighs.” I chew on my bottom lip to fight the tinge of jealousy I feel. Could Serena now be into Leo?

I couldn’t help but notice his thighs too. They caught my eyes before the race started when I’d gotten a closer view of him in the tent. I also noticed the thin layer of hair that runs across his chest when he’d taken off his shirt. All the rest of the men’s chests had been bare. I’m not sure about Hudson. He hadn’t taken his off. Anna had told him she didn’t want it when he offered it to her. Not that I blame her. The woman has a killer body.

“He is rather attractive,” Anna says. “Athletic and smart. The best of both worlds.” Suddenly it’s me that has the urge to run and cover up Leo so they stop looking at him.

I try to ignore what the other girls are saying. I can't take my eyes off of him. He's not going full speed. I can tell by his stride and the flex of his muscles. He's preserving energy for when he needs it. It reminds me of the behavior of a leopard. How fitting with his name.

Leopards are the ultimate cats. Not only is the leopard the smartest, but they never let on to what they are truly capable of. How they can suddenly strike. They get a burst of energy that can come with the flip of a switch. One that was planned steps ahead after it already assessed its prey.

They aren't going to show you what they are capable of until they have to. Until you're in their grasp. Pretending they aren't as big of a threat as they truly are. That makes them the most dangerous. They are still the least understood feline to this day.

Yes, Leo is most definitely a leopard. I have no clue what to make of him or his intentions. He's unpredictable. At every turn, I'm not sure what he might say or do.

The leopard has always been my favorite. They're solitary creatures. They come out only to spend time with others of their kind for mating or raising their young. The rest of the time, everyone can fuck off. They are my biggest adversary to win favor with.

I watch as Leo closes the gap between him and Ryan. I expect Leo to grab the rope first and start to climb. Instead, he uses his momentum from running to push down hard with his right leg to spring forward. He grunts, grabbing the rope, using all of his strength to pull himself up. The muscles in his arm flex with each inch he climbs.

"Oh God." I gasp, scared he is going to fall. I'm wrong. He powers through, ringing the bell shortly after Ryan.

"Holy shit." A few of the girls whisper as Leo slides down the rope and heads toward the last part of the competition, the riddle. Ryan is already there, but I can tell he's frustrated that he's unable to solve it.

It only takes Leo a matter of seconds to get the answer before he strides through the gate to victory.

“Tech is hot.” Christina licks her lips. The hell? What about Owen? All the girls are staring at Leo now. Why does my stomach turn?

“Hey.” Serena bumps my shoulder with hers. “He wants to keep his roommate, remember?” she whispers. My face flushes because I know the mics can hear her trying to reassure me. I must have given something away on my face, and now anyone watching will know that when this airs.

I only hear part of what Owen is saying. Mark and Ryan both are super pissed. Their faces are probably as red as mine. At least only production can hear what is said in low whisper into the mics.

“What shall it be?” Owen asks Leo.

“I’ll be keeping Quinn.” His tone sounds possessive, but maybe he’s out of breath.

“Well, there you have it,” Owen announces. “We’re going to let everyone get comfortable in their rooms. At sunset, we’ll have a party down on the beach. I think everyone will be getting to know each other a lot better. Sparks are already starting to fly.”

“Got it,” a woman standing next to the man holding the camera facing Owen says. He pulls his earpiece out. Owen might be done filming, but cameras are on us at all times.

“I guess we should go get ready.” Serena loops her arm into mine. I catch Christina hurriedly walking in the opposite direction of the rooms. I’m sure she’s going to look for Owen, but it’s Leo she jumps in front of.

“Can you two talk about Leo and your feelings about how the competition went down?” the cameraman following us asks. “Serena, ask Quinn how she’s feeling about Leo choosing to stick with her,” he pushes, wanting us to engage in conversation. I tense up. Didn’t they already witness a flash of my jealousy? That’s enough for one day.

“Isn’t this reality TV?” Serena pushes back.

“Yes, but sometimes we need to push some conversations along. Ask the question naturally.”

“We need to go get ready.” Serena walks faster, making me do the same since our arms are linked together.

“Thanks,” I whisper.

“It will hold them off for now, but I don’t think it’s going to be so easy later. Careful,” she says before letting my arm go when we get to my tent. “See you later.”

She’s right: I need to be careful. I haven’t been here long, and I’m already getting jealous over Leo.

Ethan is going to find this all so funny. He’s going to have never-ending jokes about me crushing on someone with the name Leo.

At least someone is going to enjoy this.



CHAPTER 9

LEO

A CAMERA APPEARS IN MY FACE AS I'M WALKING TOWARD THE shower facility. "Why are you intent on keeping Quinn?"

"What kind of dumbass question is that? Have you seen her?"

"Can you repeat that but without the curse word?"

I start to tell the guy off, but then a thought pops into my head. "If I curse, you can't use the footage?"

"We can, but it's harder, and if you're not a fan favorite, we'll just edit you out completely." The camera guy acts as if this is a threat.

A smile breaks across my face. "Thanks, man. I'll fucking remember that."

I wink and then duck into the building with the stall showers. Emile and Ryan are occupying two of the booths. The shower doors cover them from their mid-chest to mid-thigh, which means...

"Yes, there are cameras here, if that's what you're looking for," Emile calls out as I'm scanning the corners of the room. "The only place there aren't is in the gentleman's lounge."

"Are you talking about the shitter?"

Outside, someone pounds on the door. "Don't curse!"

Emile and I share a grin while Ryan rolls his eyes. "Why are you even on the show if you don't want to be filmed?" he asks. "And don't swear while we're together. I need my screen time."

“They can’t hear well over the water, so they’ll probably use subtitles if this footage is even aired,” suggests Emile.

“How do you know?”

“This is my third dating show. I was on an Italian one and then another in Great Britain.”

To say I’m shocked is an understatement. Emile chuckles. “It’s fun. You get to meet lovely ladies in high tension settings, and sometimes a few of them are willing to engage in certain activities on camera, and off, that you wouldn’t ordinarily have the opportunity to do.”

“He needs the money,” Ryan scoffs. “I read up on you, and you can’t afford to keep your winery running due to some bad weather or bugs or something.”

Emile’s friendly smile drops away. “I’m surprised someone like you has the capacity to read, let alone remember anything from years ago.”

“Fuck you, I’m smart enough. Just because I didn’t get the riddle right doesn’t mean jackshit.” Ryan jerks his towel off the door and swiftly dries off, leaving the shower station with a bang.

“He’s right. I’m here for the money,” Emile admits. “I’m going to figure out who has the most and woo them.”

I duck under the hot spray. Let’s hope Quinn is broke. Once I’m clean, I go out in search of food and Quinn, not necessarily in that order. I find them both in the makeshift cafeteria where cooking takes place in a wood-fired stove and a giant cauldron set in a courtyard. There is a variety of raw vegetables and a platter full of seafood. Serena spots me and waves me over to join her and Quinn, who are bent over a pile of greens.

My stomach rumbles. “What’s for dinner?”

“Seafood gumbo. Anna is making it.” Serena points toward a blonde whose sharp bob looks like it was cut with a knife. Quinn doesn’t even glance at me.

“What can I do? I can’t cook, but I can chop stuff.” I grab a knife from a wood block and await instructions.

“Why don’t you devein the shrimp?”

I heft the big knife in my hand. “I will if someone explains how to do it.”

Serena bumps Quinn in the hip. “Quinn’ll do it, won’t you, Quinn?”

“Let me help you, Leo,” sings a new voice. The woman with dark hair reaches for my hand. “Come with me.”

Suddenly, a knife appears between us. The new woman jumps back. “Gosh, Quinn, do we really need to resort to violence? I’m sure there’s some prohibition against that.”

“You can’t use a chef’s knife to devein shrimp. You need a small one,” Quinn says. She plucks the big blade from my hand and replaces it.

Usually it’s the damsel in distress, but I see the advantages of this. I play dumb, and Quinn has to stick with me. “I’ve never used a knife in my life. I’m a tech guy, remember? I can cook up some code but don’t know the first thing about food.” It’s not really a lie. I’ve lived on takeout for most of my life.

“You looked like you could wrestle a bear out there on the obstacle course.” The new woman cocks her hip out. “A little shrimp is nothing for you.”

“Two different skill sets,” I reply. “Good thing I have Quinn here.” I grab her hand and drag her next to me. Behind us, I hear Serena snicker.

“Give it up, Pen. I don’t think an earthquake is going to shake Leo from Quinn’s side. Let’s see who else is available. The vet is tasty, don’t you think?”

“Vet?” Quinn turns back to Serena.

“Vet?” I wonder who that is. “Hudson’s a doctor.”

“Of animals.” Serena winks. “I heard him talking to Mason, the lawyer with the skinny legs. Mason asked Hudson

why he did so well on the obstacle course today, and Hudson said it must be all the big animals he carries around for work.”

Quinn actually leans around me to get a better look at Hudson. I squeeze the handle of the small knife tightly in my fist. She’s a sanctuary rescuer. Hudson’s a vet. Binnie probably had them paired up before either of them stepped foot on this island.

“Well,” drawls Penelope, “seems like he would be perfect for you, Quinn.”

“A vet,” Quinn repeats like it’s a holy word.

“Go and talk to him,” Penelope urges. “I bet you two have so much in common.”

“She’s helping me devein shrimp.” I don’t let go of Quinn’s hand.

“Why doesn’t Quinn decide what she wants to do?” Penelope raises her eyebrows and tilts her head toward the vet. “Talk about saving animals or cut out their guts?”



CHAPTER 10

QUINN

LEO KEEPS HIS HAND LOCKED ON MINE. HIS HOLD IS possessive. It should annoy me, but a small thrill runs through me. He wants me to stay with him. Penelope is eyeing him up. All the girls are except Serena. I think she's enjoying poking at Leo to get reactions out of him.

Penelope's eyes narrow on me, waiting for a response. She is rather beautiful. Everything about her is delicate and soft. She's a tiny thing really.

"I think I'll stick to the gutting for now. I'm hungry and pretty good with a knife." If Penelope is trying to make me squeamish, guts and blood aren't going to work. "You have no idea how much red meat I chop up every day. One tiger can eat eighty-eight pounds in one sitting." That should set the record straight.

Penelope's face turns to one of horror. "How many animals do you kill a year to keep your little cats alive?"

"Is she vegan? Someone tell me she's not vegan." Serena feigns her own horror.

"Storm can eat around forty deer a year." I give her straight facts because I know it will irritate her more than me saying something sarcastic. I'll leave that up to Serena.

"And you think that's a fair trade-off?" Penelope challenges, not ready to let it go. She's like a dog with a bone. For a second, I almost forget cameras are capturing every second of this.

“The circle of life.” Leo cuts in to defend me. It’s sweet, but I don’t need it.

“Here in the States, we have an abundance of deer. They reduce economic value, ecological stability, and species diversity of forests, in addition to reducing tree growth, which, in turn, diminishes protection from erosion and floods.” Once again, I take the high road and bombard her with knowledge. I’m not going to let her ruffle my feathers or make me look bad on TV. I’m here to raise awareness for my rescue. Nothing is going to stop me from doing that.

“Well—”

I cut her off and keep going. “For example, the white-tailed deer directly affects many aspects of *our* lives. Hunters, farmers, foresters, motorists, gardeners, and homeowners are all impacted by their overpopulation. Whether you like it or not, our government takes steps to stop that from happening. I merely put to use what would be tossed away.”

Penelope’s face flushes, but she tries to brush it off. “If you say so,” she sing-songs.

“I know so,” I reply, refusing to let her get the last word in. “You ready to get to work?” I turn my attention toward Leo, letting Penelope know I’m done with this conversation. I think she finally gets the hint.

“So, Penelope was way off base.” Leo smirks down at me. “A cat that can eat that much doesn’t sound *little* at all.”

I smirk back at him. “We have thirteen big cats at the moment.” I flick a glance toward Penelope, who is stewing with anger. “And twenty-eight that we classify as small.”

“Which ones are considered small?”

I take the knife from Leo’s hand to show him how to gut the shrimp. “A leopard or a lynx.”

“Those aren’t small.”

“More so when people try to keep them in their homes.” Unfortunately, at the rescue we see this happen more than I’d like to admit. People think they can keep these animals as pets.

“People really do that shit?”

“I find people often think they can handle more than they truly can.”

“By people, she means men,” Serena chimes in.

“Undoubtedly,” Leo agrees, making me laugh. While we cook and all through dinner, Leo asks me a million questions.

“There are two of you?” Leo’s eyes rack up and down my body. I’d changed into denim shorts and a top that ties around my neck, not allowing me to wear a bra. It’s not something I’d normally wear, but from the way Leo’s eyes are eating me up, I send a small thank you to Laura. We’re all supposed to go to a party thing and have drinks. A giant bonfire lights up the beach as we make our way toward it.

“My twin is a boy.” My eyes flick to the camera currently following us. “He’s a brat really,” I add in, knowing my brother Ethan is going to be watching. Leo chuckles. It sounds sexy as hell coming from him. I really want to ask him what he’s doing here. He doesn’t fit who one would think would sign up for a dating show.

“Hey.” Serena comes walking over, Emile right behind her. “You boys should get us some drinks.”

“Would you like something?” Leo asks me.

“Whatever is fine.”

“I’ll be right back.” He doesn’t look like he wants to leave me here, but he goes, taking Emile with him.

“That man is into you. You feeling it?” She gives me a teasing smile. I shrug. What I feel is uncomfortable. I’m still wrangling with the things I feel for Leo. I certainly don’t want to admit all those things out loud for the world to hear. And I’m trying not to lose focus on why I’m here.

“Ladies.” Hudson walks over.

“Hi,” I respond. I haven’t had much time to get to know a lot of the other contestants. This is the first time we’re all together in a relaxing environment.

“So, you’re a vet.” Serena pounces right in, wasting no time at all.

“Yeah, actually I was going to ask if you know Dr. Barns.”

“Of course. He’s come out to our sanctuary a few times. He saved two of our cheetahs when they became ill. None of us could figure out why they were sick.”

“He’s one of the best. When I realized who you were, I figured you’d met. I had the pleasure of doing an internship under him.”

“That must have been amazing.”

“What’s amazing?” Leo cuts in, handing me a martini glass with pink liquid in it. It smells good.

“Thank you.” I take a sip. It’s yummy. Normally I only have wine or beer, and that’s only occasionally. It’s all Ethan keeps around.

“We figured out we have someone in common is all.” Hudson answers his question.

“This is really good. I don’t think I’ve ever had a martini before.”

“Really?” Leo shifts his body, taking up all the space in front of me. “Not a lot of partying going down at the animal sanctuary?”

“Nope.” I laugh and take another sip. The liquid is warm in my belly.

“Do you guys have Wi-Fi out there?” he teases me.

“We actually do. Have you heard of SpaceCon?”

“Have I heard of SpaceCon?” He lifts a brow.

“Right, tech guy. Richards makes sure we have access. He is one of our sponsors.”

“You’ve met Nick Richards?”

“No, not really. Only over Skype. He’s ah—” I freeze, catching myself, almost insulting Richards on TV. The man has a giant ego, and hurting it would not be good.

“Knows his satellites,” Leo fills in for me, a knowing glint in his eyes.

“Exactly.” I finish off the rest of my drink. “Can we get another?”

“We can do anything you like.” Leo slides his hand into mine, leading me toward the bar and far away from everyone else.



CHAPTER 11

LEO

I MIX HER A COKE AND SOUR AND THEN LEAD HER ONTO THE beach. It's darker here with only the moonlight illuminating the ocean. It'd be fucking romantic if there weren't two camera crews trailing behind us—one for her and one for me.

“How did you end up on a show like this?” I ask, wishing I could turn off the mic.

“I'm interested in love, why else?” she quips.

“You said you run the social media account for your sanctuary?”

She nods. I guess she can't say that she's only doing this for clout because it would come off wrong on camera, but a girl like her doesn't need a dating show to find love. She probably has a line of men a football field deep wanting her time. I nearly choked on my tongue when she walked up earlier tonight dressed in denim shorts and some sort of top that tied around her neck. The fringe on the denim swings around the top of her thighs, and the shirt molds to her juicy rack. I don't know what she wears at her job, but if it is anything like this, the sanctuary must be raking in the ticket revenue.

“Do you fund the sanctuary via donations or admissions or what?”

“It's a little of everything. We accept donations, but a lot of people will only give for a big ticket item like a new cat or maybe an upgrade to a shelter. People want tangible evidence of their gift, but a lot of our expenses are eaten up by admin stuff or the unsexy day-to-day costs like paying salaries of

people to clean out the stalls, manage the software, deal with licensing.”

Meaning there’s a lot of stuff she needs money for, and pissing off the general public by being bratty on camera isn’t going to be on the top of her list.

“What about you?”

“A friend—” I catch myself. If I say Binnie’s name, the footage will be cut, which ordinarily I wouldn’t care about, but Quinn’s here for a reason. She needs to have her face on TV to increase interest in her sanctuary. I’d be selfish as hell to ruin this show for her. “A friend suggested it. I sold my business and haven’t been doing too much. She thought it’d be good for me.”

“Is it?”

I stare at her face, the outline of her jaw, the slope of her nose, the curve of her forehead. She’s so beautiful it almost hurts to look at her. “Yeah. It is.”

I reach out and cup her cheek. She turns slightly, and her soft lips brush against the palm of my hand. Electric shocks spark all the way down my arm and stop at my heart. It’s the most erotic sensation I’ve ever experienced. My cock hardens, and the urge to drag her into my lap and kiss her senseless is crazy strong. If I keep sitting here, cradling her soft skin, I’m probably going to make this show an R-rated one. “Hold that thought, kitten.”

I jump up to my feet and wade into the ocean until the chilly water reaches my waist.

“Is it cold?” Quinn yells from the beach.

“Not cold enough.” I glance down and glare at my uncooperative cock. He’s still hard. *You should drag her in*, my inner voice whispers. *She’d look so good wet.*

As if she could hear me, she rises to her feet. It’s too cold for her here, though. I raise my hand. “Don’t.”

But she doesn’t listen or hear me. She runs forward, releasing a scream of shock. “It’s freezing!”

I wade through the sand and water until I reach her. “Let’s get you out of the water.”

I grab for her, but she slips and falls, her head going under. I lunge forward and pluck her out of the water, but as she breaks the surface, her top slips down. She lets out a yelp.

“Oh my God.” Her hands fly to her chest. I swing her around so the cameras can only see my back. Earlier in the day, they had drones out, but there isn’t one around right now.

“You okay?” I ask.

“Yes, but my whole top is gone.” She sinks down until her shoulders are covered. “And I’m freezing so actually, no, not okay.”

The fact that she’s tits out and two inches away from me is not missed by my cock. It’s a good thing it’s dark, or she’d be in a staring match with the one-eyed monster.

“I’m going to shore, and I’ll get you a shirt or towel. Hold on.”

“Okay.” There’s a little quaver in her voice.

I mentally slap myself in the face. *She’s naked and in distress. Stop fantasizing about how you’d like to squeeze her tits together and rub your cock between her sweet flesh until you paint her with a five-gallon load of cum.* I trudge through the water with a massive hard-on. One of the camera crew gasps when I reach the shore. “You gonna put this on film?” I growl as I flip a towel over my shoulder.

No one says a word, but the camera seems focused on my upper face and torso. Thank fuck for small favors. I doubt this dating show is for kids, but I don’t need a close-up of my junk all over the internet.

I turn around and wade back into the water. By the time I reach Quinn, her teeth are chattering, and she’s holding her shoulders in each hand. “Swing around so your back is to me and then stand up. It’ll keep most of the towel dry.”

“I should’ve known the water would be cold. This is the ocean.”

“And I should’ve told you to stay out.” I wrap the towel around her shoulders. She immediately catches the sides and closes the ends around her.

“I would’ve come in anyway. It’s beautiful out here.”

“That’s because you’re here. Not because of the water. Hang on.” I pick her up and clutch her to my chest. The cameras track every movement, following me as I carry Quinn along the beach toward her tent. “I’m staying with you tonight,” I tell her.

“Don’t we already share a tent?”

“I meant bed.”



CHAPTER 12

QUINN

“IS THAT SO?” I LAUGH.

Leo keeps me tucked close as he heads back to our tent. When I peek over his shoulder, I don't miss the camera crew that's following us. Along with Penelope, Christina, and Hudson all watching us not make our way back over to the party area.

“You're freezing. How else will I keep you warm?” So many thoughts run through my mind of exactly how he could warm me up, but I keep my lips zipped tight.

“I could put on dry clothes?” I suggest. “Oh shit,” I whisper, my mouth next to Leo's ear, trying to be as discreet as possible.

“What?”

“My mic. I think it got lost in the water with my top.”

“Mine is still on,” he whispers back. “We get to take them off in the room anyway.” He's right. The only reason they allow us to remove them in the tent is because there are cameras mounted everywhere in there. The only spot there isn't one is a small changing area behind a screen. Leo pulls the tent door open, quickly shutting it behind us.

“You can lock them out, but it doesn't change anything.” My eyes flick around the room to where the cameras are mounted. He slowly puts me down on my feet, making sure my chest stays covered and out of view. I don't think it matters much, to be honest. I'm sure the network would blur it out if

something was showing. Nonetheless, I find it sweet that he's protecting me.

"Why don't you get out of those wet clothes?" Leo pulls his mic out from behind him, clicking it off. Now his eyes drift around the room, assessing the cameras. It's almost as if he's sizing them up. He is the tech guy, after all. I'm sure if he really wanted to, he could disable them in no time at all.

When I head over toward my luggage, I somehow misstep. One second I feel my knees begin to buckle, and the next Leo's arms snap out, catching me before I can fall. The towel isn't as lucky. "Those drinks were stronger than I thought," Leo grunts, one of his hands now full of my breast.

"Sorry." He apologizes but doesn't move his hand.

"It's fine. They'll blur it out." I'm not really that worried about it. It is what it is at this point.

"Doesn't mean whoever is on the other side won't get to see your tits while they blur them out." Leo's clean-shaven jaw flexes in irritation.

"You remind me of Storm," I laugh.

"The cock-hating cat?"

"You remembered?" I smile up at him. He really has been listening to everything I've been saying.

"As hard as it is to think with your breast in my hand, yeah, I remember." Are tech guys supposed to be this handsome?

"You know—" I turn my head. Leo knows what I want. He leans down so I can whisper into his ear. "No one has ever held my boob before." I burst into a fit of giggles. Yeah, I'm really feeling the alcohol now. I don't think sober me would have said that, but Leo has me doing and thinking about things I never have before I had one drink. The alcohol is only helping me to do and say what I really want to.

"Fuck, don't tell me that. I can't handle that kind of information." He kisses the shell of my ear. "Over to the screen." He guides me over to the safe zone. Well, at least

from being seen. I'm sure they can hear us for the most part. "I'll get you something from your bag." He releases his hold on me. His gaze lingers for a second. I don't try to cover myself. "There are going to be problems if they try to switch up the room situation." That perfectly chiseled jaw of his tenses again.

Leo steps back, leaving me behind the screen to go in search of dry clothes for me. I hadn't thought about that. I know the rooms are safe. We're under twenty-four-hour surveillance, and there are two beds. Ones that are very close to one another.

I think I hate the idea of him being in another room with one of the other girls more than me getting stuck with Ryan or Mark. That would be annoying. I could deal with annoying, but I'm not sure how my jealousy would hold up with Leo shacking up with the likes of Penelope. I see the way she stares at him. I need to get better at hiding my emotions. I'd bet anything if the crew catches on to it, they'll exploit it.

"What do you want out of here?"

"Anything. Laura packed my bag. I don't know half the crap she put in there."

"Your father's pretty-much wife?"

"Yeah."

"She has good taste." I poke my head from behind the screen to see Leo holding up a pair of purple lacy panties.

"That's not mine," I blurt out.

"It's in your bag." I can tell he's fighting a laugh.

"I mean that's her doing."

"I'll have to thank her." Leo pulls the tag off the panties.

"If you live. My brother and dad are going to see you playing with my panties."

"Is that worse to your father than them being his woman's panties?" I snort a laugh. He walks across the room to his bag and grabs a pair of shorts and a shirt.

“Hey, I need more than panties.”

“I got you more than panties.” He steps behind the screen. I stand there as he puts his shirt on me before handing me the panties. I reach under the shirt and pull my wet shorts and panties down. Leo gives me the panties next. I slip them on. He turns to give me his back as he drops his own shorts. I stare at his bare ass. I’d been so focused on his thighs I missed his very nice ass.

“You ready for bed?” It’s not really a question. He snags me around the wrist, pulling me back out from behind the screen.

“Which one do you want?” I ask.

“What side do you want to sleep on?” He lets go of my wrist. In one push, the beds slide together to make one. My teeth sink into my bottom lip. “I don’t bite.” He pulls me down into the bed with him. I go without hesitation. “Unless you want me to.”

“I want you to kiss me. That’s what I want you to do.”



CHAPTER 13

LEO

I DON'T NEED TO BE TOLD TWICE. I LAY MY MOUTH ACROSS hers and delve my tongue between her lips as I pull a sheet over our bodies to offer some level of privacy. Quinn opens without hesitation. Her arms wrap around my neck to pull me closer. I suck at her lips and then her tongue. She meets me tentatively, like a tiny kitty testing a new saucer of milk. Quinn might have experience in taking care of big cats, but kissing is new to her. The thought of her being untutored and untouched makes me dizzy with lust. I draw back.

“We can't go much farther, kitten. Not with the cameras. You're here for a reason, right? Millions watch this, and that could mean a big boost for your sanctuary,” I whisper into her ear.

“Yes. We were hoping the exposure would help.”

“I'm not going to ruin that for you, but I also don't want to show off this private thing between us for the world to see.” I want her like I've never wanted anything in my life, but I'm not taking her virginity while four cameras are rolling. “Tomorrow night, I'll disable the feed, but for now, we're going to have to settle for this.”

I glide my hand down past her ripe boobs over the softly curving stomach to a trimmed patch of hair above her wet sex. She sucks in a swift breath.

“You okay?” I kiss her forehead. We both are trying to keep our voices as low as possible.

She flashes me a shaky grin. “Okay isn't really how I'd describe myself at the moment.”

“I’ll be gentle. It’s your first time, right?” I prop my head up with my free hand, elbow on the mattress, hand under my skull, using my big body to block the cameras from capturing my actions.

She nods.

“You touch yourself at all?” I ask, my fingers resting lightly over her tiny button of pleasure.

“Some.” She seems a little shy. From under her lashes, she peeks at me. “Do you?”

“Yeah, cuz no one else is doing it. Too busy. Not interested,” I add when I see other questions light up her eyes. I increase the pressure, and her breath hitches. I rub her clit in short, slow strokes. “But if you were around, I’d want you to be handling me.”

My cock jumps at the words and bumps against her leg. Her fingers brush my thigh. “Should I?”

I give her a short nod. I won’t be able to last long, but I’m not saying no to her touch either.

“Gosh, you’re so big,” she gasps. “I can’t close my hand around it.” She tries to. Her grip tightens as she tries to bring her fingers to meet around my girth. I close my eyes and bite down on my tongue. Her touch is torture. I want to come. Just from her holding me. I let her stroke me a few times. My hips jerk forward to meet her strokes. It’d be so easy to let go, to spill all over her hand.

“Ahh, fuck, kitten, you’re killing me.” I move my fingers down farther until they reach her wet sex. “You’re soaked. Shh, that’s a good thing,” I say at the sound of her choked embarrassment. “It means you want me. That you’re ready for me.” I slide one finger inside. “Your cunt is hot and tight.”

“You’re not going to fit,” she breathes out.

“I will. You work with those big cats. You know I’ll fit inside of you. You feel like you were made for me. Your hole is dripping with heated honey. God, I want to taste you.” I pull my finger out and bring it to my mouth. I suck my finger dry, savoring her tart, juicy taste. Her eyes follow my every move.

“Wonder what it’s like?” I seal my mouth over hers and sweep my tongue inside. As I devour her with my lips, my fingers find her core again. This time, I press two of my fingers inside of her, scissoring her wider, making her ready for me. I won’t take her tonight, but I will take her. She’s going to be mine soon. She’ll be wearing my scent. Her cunt will be filled with my seed. Every inch of her body will have the imprint of my touch. “You’re going to be mine now. No one else can touch you. I don’t even like people looking at you. If I could, I’d brand you. Wrap a collar around your neck that says ‘mine.’”

Quinn’s mouth breaks from mine with a cry. “Leo, I don’t know...this is too...please.” Her fingers wrap around my wrist to pull at me while her hips drive up to meet my thrusts.

“It’s okay, kitten. Let go. Just trust me and let go.” I feather kisses over her forehead, along her cheek, making sure my frame still covers her protectively. “It’s just you and me.”

I move my hand with surety, diving deep inside her drenched folds. When I get inside of her, I’m not going to last.

Right when I feel her body tighten, I cover her mouth with my hand. She comes with a burst of cries that I muffle, her body jerking and her cream flooding my other hand. I keep my fingers moving inside her virginal channel, stroking her until her tremors subside. Only when her breath is semi-normal do I allow myself to slide onto my back and release her mouth.

“I’m going to lie here with you until you fall asleep and then I’ll move the beds back apart because if I wake up with you in my arms, I’ll forget we’re in a tent filled with cameras and do something neither of us want the entire public to see.”

“I’d argue with you, but I don’t have much in my head right now. I’m drained.”

“In a good way.”

“Yeah.” She gives a soft laugh. Her puffs of breath land on my chest like a caress. “I don’t think I can even keep my eyes open. Do orgasms come with a sleeping pill? I thought endorphins were supposed to make you euphoric.”

I give her pussy a light slap. “You telling me I didn’t take you to heaven?”

“No, you did. I guess the trip there and back tired me out.” She yawns hugely.

I watch as her heavy lids close and her breath evens out. Her warm body is curled into me, and I don’t want to leave it. My eyes go to the camera in the corner. Tomorrow I’m taking that damned thing out.



CHAPTER 14

QUINN

I WAKE TO AN EMPTY ROOM. LEO'S BED HAS BEEN PUSHED back away from mine. The blankets are still ruffled. The night before comes rushing back to me. I pull the blanket over my head, knowing that cameras are capturing every second of this. I'm not sure that me waking up would be footage worth using, but it's still weird to think someone could be watching me right this second. It's something I have to continuously remind myself of.

I run my tongue across my lips, remembering the kiss Leo gave me. The orgasm was mind-blowing. All of it was. It made me forget about the cameras for a second. Thankfully, Leo had more of his wits about him. That last drink probably wasn't my greatest idea. Not because I didn't want what we did last night, but I'd forgotten where I was for a moment. That the entire world was watching.

Leo managed to pull the sheet over us at least while whispering in my ear. He'd even covered my mouth with his hand as he made me come to try and muffle the sounds. Heat rushes to my face. I don't regret it. Not one second of it. Will he? Is it going to be awkward between us this morning? Doubt and questions start to fill my mind.

"They aren't going to let you hide under there forever." I pull the blanket back down to see Leo standing at the end of the bed with a tray in his hands. How does he always manage to look handsome? I bet I'm a hot mess. "Got you some food." He sets it down next to me. "How's your head? I don't think you were drunk, but maybe a bit tipsy." He comes around to

the side of the bed. I didn't think he could get any more handsome, but I was wrong.

"It's actually good." Leo leans down and drops a quick kiss on my mouth before going back over to his bed to sit down. "This is sweet of you." I pick up the orange juice and take a sip. I guess he's not having doubts. "Anyone else up?"

"Yeah." He lets out a sigh, letting me know he's not happy about it.

"Not a people person?" I laugh.

"I guess not. Especially when some of those people are trying to get my woman's attention."

"Your woman?" A small laugh bubbles from me. I swear Leo's cheeks pinken a touch. Maybe it was a slip of the tongue.

"Yeah."

"You're my favorite," I tease.

"Does that mean you have an order? From favorite to least? Who's below me?" I laugh harder at his question. He stares, his eyebrows furrowed together, waiting for an answer. I can see the flick of jealousy in his eyes. I should in no way enjoy it, but it goes a long way to help with my own. At least we're both on the same page.

"I was joking." His expression makes me think he doesn't believe me. "Did you eat?" I offer him a piece of my bacon. "Hey, you can't refuse bacon. I almost got my brother with a fork when he stole some off my plate once." Leo's lips twitch, and he takes the bacon from me. "He's a quick little shit. I missed, but he didn't try it again."

"If I had to get into cages with giant cats, I'd learn to be quick too."

"Touché." I laugh. "But we were only seven at the time. We weren't allowed on the land then. Not many cages unless there is a medical issue or transfer."

"Must have been interesting growing up the way you did." I often forget how different my life has been from other

people's. It's always been so normal to me.

"It was something my dad worried about actually. He thought he was keeping his own kids in cages, so he kicked us out."

"He kicked you out?!" I giggle when I see the expression Leo is wearing. Even pissed, he manages to be sexy. I'm sure in part it's his horror in thinking my father treated me wrong.

"That's what we say when we tease him. That he kicked us out." I shrug. "Really he made us go to college. Said we needed to see the rest of the world." I have to admit it feels nice to open up to Leo. He makes it easy, and I hope that he'll do the same with me.

"And how did that go?"

"I took extra classes so I could graduate faster. The city isn't for me." I'd been so pissed when Dad pushed us out into the world, but in the end, he'd been right. While I didn't love college, attending made it clearer that I knew where I wanted to be.

"City is all I really know." His offhand comment is a reminder of reality. Crazy since this is reality TV. Leo and I come from two very different worlds. Neither of us would enjoy the other's.

"I thought city people liked people."

"Right." He chuckles.

"Hey," someone calls before opening the tent door. Caral pops in. He's one of the people on the production crew.

"You could wait for us to say enter," Leo snaps.

"Am I really interrupting?" He nods to one of the cameras.

"What's up?" I cut in before Leo can land another bite.

"We need everyone on the beach by ten. You can dress casually."

"What are we doing?" I ask. "Will there be another competition for a room switch?"

“Not really allowed to say, but they want to mix people up today to hang out.” His eyes bounce between Leo and me.

“Okay.” I don’t care for his answer. I can tell Leo doesn’t either. He doesn’t speak again until Caral is gone.

“They’re going to try to ruffle my feathers and go out of their way to antagonize me.” Leo runs his hand down his face in frustration.

“What do you mean?”

“Provoke me. Get reactions from me.”

“Oh.” He’s right. “Put us with other people to see how we react.” Leo nods.

I think he’s right in part. They are going to try to provoke him. That’s what makes for good TV. Only I think they’re going to do it to me too. After all, I’ve already thrown verbal blows with Penelope.

I’ve been raised with cats, after all. We’re rather territorial.



CHAPTER 15

LEO

I NEED HER. THAT'S REALLY MY ONLY THOUGHT AS I WATCH Quinn being led away by the other women to a small section of the beach that has been set up with lounge chairs and a longer table filled with snacks. The production crew is using food to lure people into interacting with each other, and it's working. The women are allowed to get the food and then bring it to the man—or men—they want to talk to.

“You might want to rethink the angry face, brother,” suggests I-don't-believe-in-leg-day Mason. “No one likes being around someone who scowls all the time.”

“You'd think tech guys would be more easygoing. It's not like you have a hard job. You sit at a computer all day,” adds Ryan, the athlete. “You afraid someone is going to eat Quinn's cookies?”

My vision turns black. I lunge forward. Ryan's face is about to be shredded meat. Two sets of hands clamp down on each shoulder and haul me back.

“Hey, now, no physical contact outside of a game,” reminds Emile in a low-voiced whisper.

“The hell if I care.” I struggle against their hold. Ryan's face is full of mockery and smugness on the other side of the unlit fire pit.

“You'll get kicked out, and then Quinn will be here alone. I'm sure that's not the outcome that you want,” Emile says.

I hate that he makes sense. I clench my jaw and jerk out of their grips. “Fine. I'll behave.”

There has to be someplace on this island that there aren't cameras, and when I find it, I'm dragging Ryan there by his scalp and beating him to a pulp.

"The women are coming over." Emile nudges me.

"He's just saying shit—stuff"—Hudson corrects himself—"to get you riled up. He wants you to leave."

"Quinn's not interested in either of them. Or you for that matter," I warn Hudson in case he gets any ideas.

"I didn't think she was," the vet admits, but he sounds disappointed.

He's the one I'm most concerned about since he's a vet. I'm a city boy who likes the convenience of same-day delivery and a coffee shop on every corner. I lived on caffeine and takeout during my working days. When Quinn brought up how she's anti-city, I had a brain freeze. When I envisioned us together, it was in my apartment, going to my local barista, hanging out at my local pub, which was dumb as hell because I'm unemployed and she helps run a big cat sanctuary. Hudson, on the other hand, is used to that kind of life.

They fit together in a way that Quinn and I don't—at least on paper. If I was a better person, I'd step aside and let the two of them get to know each other, but I'm a possessive asshole, and I'd rather bury Hudson in a pile of sand than let him get close to Quinn.

I stride forward and intercept her before she can reach the other men. "I'll carry it for you. Don't know why you were sent to get the food. We have legs and arms."

"I think it's reverse gendering stuff. Like men are traditionally the hunter-gatherers, but this time it's the women."

"I'm very proud of you for slaying the"—I jostle the fruit tray Quinn was carrying—"bananas and strawberry plants."

"Thank you," she replies solemnly. "It was a challenge, but I managed to suffer through."

“She fought hard,” Serena chirps. “The pineapple mama was about to take her down but was no match for Quinn’s knife.”

“Sounds like a horror story. Might be good to tell around the campfire tonight,” I suggest.

“It’s too scary to retell. I don’t want to be responsible for anyone’s nightmares.” Quinn grins, and the three of us laugh until Penelope breaks in.

“You all sound like a bunch of kindergartners,” she snaps and pushes past us with a tray of sandwiches.

Christina sidles up beside me. “Don’t mind Pen. She’s hungry. Your jokes are cute. I want to hear more.”

I hear a small growl to my right where Quinn is standing.

“Oh my God, is that an animal?” Christina squeals. She grabs for my arm but misses because I’m jerking around to see if there’s an animal near Quinn. I let out an uneasy breath when I see nothing but empty space. On the other side of her, Serena covers her mouth and turns away, coughing slightly.

“You okay?” I ask.

She nods but doesn’t swing around. I shoot Quinn a quizzical look, but she lets out a whistle and stares at the sky.

“Huh.” There doesn’t seem to be any danger, but I’m going to keep an eye out.

An arm brushes mine, and I remember that the Christina is walking with us. She has a jug of lemonade in one hand and plastic cups in the other.

“Is that straight or laced?” I ask. Drunk people around Quinn could be a problem. The men might forget their inhibitions and natural self-preservation instincts and try something on her. Then I’d have to beat them into the sand, which would get me kicked out. I need to avoid that, so it means heading off potential problems.

The other men rush to greet us when we arrive with the food.

“You’re an angel, ladies,” shouts Emile.

“What about me?” I grumble. “I carried the fruit tray.”

“You are not an angel, sorry. Fruit doesn’t count as food,” Emile says.

“I carried the fruit most of the way,” Quinn interjects.

“Oh, fruit is definitely nectar of the gods, and you are a goddess,” the other man declares.

Quinn grins at this compliment. Emile must want to die.

“Let’s play a get to know each other game,” suggests Christina. “I haven’t been able to spend enough time with all of you.”

“Actually, I have a better idea.” Mason strides forward with an empty beer bottle. “Let’s play spin the bottle. Winners get a little tent time.”

I open my mouth to object, but everyone else clamors at how great of a plan this is, and before I know it, I’m seated on the sand with an amber colored bottle lying in the midst of us. It looks innocuous, but I’m fairly sure I’m going to end up punching someone before the game is over.



CHAPTER 16

QUINN

ARE WE REALLY ABOUT TO PLAY SPIN THE BOTTLE? I GLANCE around at everyone in the circle, not wanting to kiss random people. How the hell do I get out of this? I flick a glance over to Leo, who is glaring at Mason. There's no doubt in my mind that he wants to take his head off. Of course, it was a man that suggested it. Aren't we a bit old for this?

"I'll go first," Mason says. Before I know it, the bottle is spinning.

My stomach tightens for a second. What the hell? I'm an adult, and I don't have to partake in this if I don't want to. Everyone can fuck off if they don't like it. There is no way I'm kissing random ass people. I never even played this game as a kid, and there's no way I'm playing now. Plus, Ethan would tease me relentlessly for the rest of my life if I kissed Mason. I'm not sure which would be worse, having to kiss him or dealing with my brother.

The bottle starts to slowly come to its final stop on me. Of course, it does. A smile lights up Mason's face, revealing his too-white teeth. They're almost blinding.

"I swear to—" I shoot my arm out, blocking Leo from launching himself at Mason.

"I'll shove that bottle up your ass," I tell Mason. "If you want a kiss from one of the girls, do something to make them want to kiss you."

"Not it," Serena blurts out. The smile drops from Mason's face. A glimmer of anger flicks in his eyes. It's so quick I almost miss it. Someone doesn't handle rejection well.

“You don’t have to be a bitch about it.” I’m not sure if he’s talking to Serena or me. It doesn’t matter. Leo easily gets around my arm. He’s not the only one going for Mason either. Hudson is out of his seat too. Mason’s eyes grow wide, fear taking over his face.

“Break it up!” Two men in all black come out of freaking nowhere. One of them grabs Mason and swings him around before Leo or Hudson can get to him. I see the word *security* written across the man’s back that grabbed Mason.

“Let me go. I’ll fuck both of them up.” Mason suddenly gets brave, pretending he wasn’t about to piss himself a second ago now that he has someone there to prevent a fight.

They must have known shit was going to get bad. This is the first time I’ve noticed security. They could have been there all along, and I mixed them in with the camera crew. To be honest, it never occurred to me that they would need security here, but I’m thankful that they are. I know without them stepping in, Leo would most definitely have been kicked off the show.

Now that I think about it, I wouldn’t be surprised if that was part of Mason’s plan. Thinking if two of the most desired men were off the show that it would make it easier for him. I think that production does want fighting; they just don’t want it to be physical.

“He’s not worth it.” I grab Leo’s arm, not wanting him to do anything he’ll regret.

“Are these men really fighting over the chubby cat girl?” Christina whispers to Penelope. I notice Hudson’s eyes flick to Serena. Yeah, I don’t think Hudson was pissed for me.

“Mason shouldn’t be calling any of you ladies names,” Emile chimes in.

“Both of you would pay top dollar to have her ass,” Serena snips back in my defense to Christina and Penelope. Leo’s hand slips down my back to rest there.

“You know how many lunges I do and I still can’t get an ass like that.” Anna winks at me. My face starts to warm. I

hate that the attention is focused on me.

“Enough about her ass,” Leo snaps. All of us stand up a bit straighter. Holy shit. The authority and finality not only gets everyone’s attention but shuts everyone up along with it. Except Serena. Her facial expression says a thousand words. I’m sure it’s what all of us ladies are thinking. Who knew a tone of voice could be sexy?

“I think it’s time to break. We’re going to do speed dating in activities. The men need to head over to the main hut, and the ladies can stay here,” Nina announces. I’m starting to see she’s in control here. I’ve noticed her along the edges issuing orders and such to the crew. All of them seem to follow her direction.

“You said we were getting a break.” Leo isn’t letting me or my ass go for a couple minutes.

“Fine, all of you have an hour. Ladies report back here, men at the hut. You, I want a word with.” Nina points to Mason. The security guard that is blocking him nudges him along to follow her.

“You okay?” I rest my hand on Leo’s chest to draw his attention down to me. His body is still filled with tension.

“Speed dating?” he mutters.

“I bet they put us girls each at some station doing something like cooking or learning a dance, and the men will rotate.” Serena surmises. I was thinking the same thing. The only benefit is that it will at least keep the men apart. Leo does need a second to cool down.

“Good, now everyone will get a chance to actually meet without others monopolizing people’s time.” Penelope smirks at me.

“She’s talking about me.” Leo gives my ass a squeeze. “I don’t share well.” I fight a laugh as Penelope scoffs. We all know she’s talking about me. It’s on the tip of my tongue to tell her she’s starting to come off as pathetic, but I really don’t want to sink to their level. I need to remain focused.

“Come on.” I grab Leo’s hand and pull him away from everyone. “You need to cool down.”

“Being alone with you is the last thing that’s going to do that for me.”

“You know I never played spin the bottle,” I tell him.

“We aren’t starting now.”

“Nope,” I agree. “But I’ve heard of another game.” I lead him toward the bathroom. It’s the one place that doesn’t have cameras, and no one else will be there right now.

“Where are we going?”

“To play another game.”

“What game is that?”

“Seven minutes in heaven.”

“Quinn.” Oh, there’s that tone of his again.

“We can change the rules.” I lick my lips. “It doesn’t have to be seven minutes.”



CHAPTER 17

LEO

“I’VE NEVER PLAYED THAT GAME. YOU’LL HAVE TO TEACH ME the rules.” The cameras tracked us to the doorway of the bathroom, but inside this small space, we’re alone.

“I don’t know how to play it either, to be honest, but in school, my friends who did would giggle, and it wasn’t the giggle of someone who’s getting tickled or told a funny joke.” Her cheeks are red. I want to eat her up.

“We can make up our own rules. I can send you to heaven in seven minutes.” I swing us around so that her back is against the door and then lower myself to the ground until my face is level with her thighs. Her hands come down to my shoulders. “You’ve got beautiful legs, kitten.” I run my fingers up the backs of her legs, coming to a halt when I encounter the fabric of her shorts. I press a soft kiss on a tiny mole on the right. Her legs tremble slightly. I bite the skin around the mole, and her knees buckle. “Lean against the door. Let me do all the work.”

“We’ve only got seven minutes,” she reminds me.

“It’s probably six now.” This situation sucks. I hate the cameras. I hate that I’m limited in what I can do with Quinn. I want to carry her off the island and to—my mind halts. Not to my apartment. She’s not a city girl.

“Leo?”

Hearing my name, I realize that I’ve paused, like a video character frozen due to bad buffering. “Thinking about which area I should kiss next,” I reply, and nose the hem of her shorts higher. I can smell her musk, and it makes my cock hard and

my mouth water. Who cares about where we're going, as long as we're together, as long as I can do—

There's a banging on the door. "Guys! Guys! Come out."

"The seven minutes isn't up," I snap.

"There's a storm coming! The producers say we need to meet."

I sit back on my haunches in defeat. Above me, Quinn releases a soft giggle. "Maybe it's not meant to be," she says.

"Don't say that." I stare at the outline of my still hard cock. "I can only handle so much disappointment at one time."

The pounding is back. "Guys!"

I recognize Serena's voice now. "We're coming."

Quinn gives me a sympathetic look and pats my shoulder. "It's okay."

"You saying that only makes me sadder." And gives me boner death. I throw open the door and scowl at Serena. "What's this about a storm?"

"Sorry for the interruption, but yes, a big tropical storm has suddenly stirred up, and they're trying to decide whether they have enough time to evacuate us or whether we are going to stay here in our tents."

"Why is there even a debate?" I grab Quinn's hand and head for the production building.

When we arrive, all the cast members are huddled in the corner, and no one looks happy despite what appears to be booze in their hands.

"Because the storm is rapidly approaching and there isn't enough time to get everyone off the island safely, we're going to have you stay here. The tents are all mounted down into the ground. We'll leave you enough food and water to last a week even though the storm will pass after a few hours. So long as you stay inside, there shouldn't be a safety issue," announces the lead producer.

"And where will you all be?" Emile asks.

The producer waves her hand. “Here. We’re all bedding down here as we always do.”

I hadn’t given much thought to the crew, but I guess it makes sense that there are sleeping quarters for them since they’re on the island the whole time with us.

Emile shuts his mouth, too, coming to the same realization.

“This is bullshit,” Ryan shouts. “I didn’t sign up for this.”

“Actually, you did,” says Mason. “The contract says that you have to stay on the island until the end of filming regardless of death, disaster, or other circumstances outside or within your control or forfeit your participation in the show as well as your appearance fee.”

“Fuck you.” Ryan gives Mason the finger and stomps over to the corner and kicks the water cooler. It starts to tip over, so I go and rescue it.

“Be an asshole. Have a tantrum. I don’t give a fuck, but don’t mess with our food and water.” I set the cooler back upright.

Hudson comes over and drags Ryan away. “No fighting either,” I hear the doctor hiss to the athlete.

I gather up some food boxes the production staff prepared and then fetch Quinn. “Let’s get to the tent,” I tell her.

She glances over at Serena, whose arms are full as well. The beauty queen winks. “See you in the morning.”

Quinn blushes and then ducks her head. As we’re walking out, she asks, “Does everyone know what we are planning?”

“Nah,” I lie for her comfort. When we get to the tent, the wind is picking up. I duck inside and pile the boxes in the corner. Once Quinn is in, I zip up all the windows and doors. The lights flicker overhead. A storm is coming, and the electrical connections are unsteady. It wouldn’t be a huge stretch if the cameras went out. The problem is that I can’t be seen dismantling the cameras or it might adversely affect Quinn’s exposure on this show.

Quinn cocks her head to the side and studies me. “You’re plotting something.”

I flash her a grin. “I am.”

There are cameras in the four corners of the tent. I can take out one by tripping into it but I can’t use that excuse twice. Still, one’s a start. I raise my arms when suddenly the whole tent goes pitch black. Quinn gives out a little squeal of fright.

“Give me a minute, kitten. Wait in the middle of the tent.” I yank the wires out of the camera closest to me and then repeat the process at each corner. When I’m done, I find Quinn and pull her into my arms. I whisper in her ear, “I disabled all the cameras. We’ll blame it on the blackout.”

“So, we’re alone?”

“Just you and me.”



CHAPTER 18

QUINN

I WRING MY FINGERS TOGETHER. ALL OF A SUDDEN, I'M feeling vulnerable. I've wanted the cameras gone, and now they are. Why is that freaking me out? It's only Leo and me. We don't have to act anymore. Not that I really was before, but I was trying to keep some level of composure, knowing the viewers were watching.

"Kitten?" Leo strokes his hand down my cheek. I lean into his warm touch. His fingers are rougher than I'd thought they'd be for someone who is a tech geek. Not that one could tell that's what Leo is from glancing at him. He looks like a normal handsome guy. I don't think his broad build is from hours each day in the gym. Probably lifts a few weights and runs merely to keep active. His build is natural. "We don't have to do anything just because the cameras are gone. You know that, right?"

"Your hand is rough," I blurt out. He pulls it back from my cheek. "I didn't mean it that way." I grab it and yank it back. I'm terrible at this. I mean, it's not my fault that I don't have any experience. I've been surrounded by cats for most of my life. How is it that I'm both shy and mildly aggressive when it comes to this man?

Leo turns his hands, palms up to show them to me. "Sometimes you have to actually get your hands dirty when you work on a computer. You can get scratched up."

"Oh, I thought you just did things like on the internet. You know, like the Matrix green lines of numbers and letters sort of stuff." Leo lets out a chuckle. "I can do it all, but sometimes I

get bored and want to use my hands and build things. Someday I might build a machine of some type or computer.”

“You saying you could build a WALL-E?”

“I could.” He shrugs. Why does that turn me on too? I bet it’s the fact that he’s the full package. Super smart and sexy as hell.

I can’t even comprehend how to do that. I still smack my screen when the computer freezes as though that will make it work. Ethan hates when I do that. Damn, I actually think my brother would like Leo. I hadn’t given a ton of thought to what my family would think of him. I’d more thought of who they wouldn’t like and would give me shit over.

“I’m sorry,” I blurt out next.

“Kitten, there is nothing to be sorry about. Shit.” He runs a hand down his face, taking a step back. “We barely know each other. I was pawing at you in the fucking bathroom. When I think back on it, I’ve been—” I launch myself at him, cutting him off. There is no way I want this man thinking I don’t want him. I’ve enjoyed every second of the things we’ve done together.

He catches me. I wrap myself around him, pressing my mouth against his. A deep, sexy groan rumbles from him.

“That’s not what I meant,” I manage to get out between kisses as Leo carries me over to the bed. My back hits the mattress a moment later. “I’m terrible at this.”

“The last thing you are is fucking terrible at this.” Leo’s mouth travels down my neck. I had no idea how hot it could be for someone to kiss you there. “You don’t have to do anything. Just say I can have you.”

“You can have me.” Finally, I blurt out something good for once.

“Clothes off,” he grunts, but I think he’s talking to himself because he’s ripping my clothes off for me. Leo doesn’t stop until I’m laid out naked for him on the bed.

“What are you doing?” I ask, sitting up on my elbows when he gets up off the bed.

“I’m never going to last.” His eyes eat up every inch of me. I swear he’s about to pounce, but he’s holding himself back. I don’t want him to hold back.

“I’m not going to last!” I press my thighs together, needing pressure there. My clit is starting to throb, my breasts feeling heavy and tender all of a sudden. Oh, God. Is this what it’s like to go into heat?

“Show me, kitten. Spread your legs wide open. I want to see every inch.”

“You too.” He’s still fully dressed while I’m naked. Leo reaches behind his head with one hand and pulls his shirt off before he goes for his pants next. “Hey,” I huff when his boxer briefs don’t come down too.

“If I take my dick out, I’ll be inside of you.” I lick my lips. The hard outline of his cock is intimidating, but I don’t care.

“Isn’t that kind of what we’re doing here?” I let my thighs fall open.

“You’re not ready.” He puts one knee on the bed. His eyes drop to my sex. I’m so wet it’s almost embarrassing. I hope this is normal.

“Not ready? I was ready years ago.” At the rate I’m going, I’ll die a virgin. It really never bothered me before Leo came into my life. I’d read a dirty book and get a little turned on. I started to think maybe I wasn’t into sex. But Leo has permanently changed that for me.

I’m seeing now I hadn’t found what I was into yet. It couldn’t be found between the pages of a book. It’s all Leo. I don’t know what it is, but from the second I laid eyes on even his picture, I was drawn to him. My crazy mind has been comparing it to mates. I wouldn’t tell him that. I say enough strange things as it is.

“You didn’t know me years ago, kitten.” Oh shit. That tone again. How does he do that? It makes me wiggle around

feeling like a naughty schoolgirl. Which I shouldn't like, but I do when it comes to Leo.

“Well, maybe you should have found me sooner or something.”

“I should have.” His hand wraps around my ankle. “I'll make sure I don't lose you.” He pulls me down the bed. I let out a small scream of surprise. He drags me down until my legs dangle off the side. Leo drops to his knees between them. “Going to make up for lost time,” he says before burying his head between my thighs.



CHAPTER 19

LEO

SHE TASTES BETTER FROM THE SOURCE. THE SMALL AMOUNT I licked off of my finger is nothing compared to drinking her nectar at the fountain of her pussy. I drag my tongue across her pussy lips and then spear it inside of her. Her fingers dig into my scalp. I can tell she loves it. Her response drives me wild. I start to fuck her with my tongue, darting in and out, getting her used to the rhythm and feel. Soon it will be my cock inside of her. I tease and taunt her. I make her tremble and shudder. Her legs tense and her ankles pound against my back. I keep at her until she's at the edge and then I pull away.

“Wait,” she cries when my mouth separates from her cunt.

I sit back on my haunches and swipe my mouth with my forearm. “Why? You don't want a piece of this?” I cup my junk and give myself a tight squeeze. I'm so ready to bust inside of her.

“I do, but...”

Her legs are wide, and her sex is exposed. Her visible cunt is hungry for more. “I'm going to fill you up, kitten. Don't you worry.”

I shuck off my boxer briefs and take my cock in hand.

“Kiss me,” she says suddenly. “I need to be distracted from the monster in your hands.”

A swift grin flashes across my face. “Your sweet words are only going to make me bigger.”

She's laughing when I cover her mouth with mine. Her lips are quivering as I get high off her giggles. The smile slides

away when I place my cockhead at her entrance.

“Don’t think about it,” I whisper against her lips.

“How can I not think about it?” she whispers back.

“You’ve been waiting for me. Your body has been waiting for me.” I part her lips with the round tip. I slide a little more inside of her.

“Is that it?” she says in a small voice.

I choke back a laugh. “No, kitten. There’s more.” A lot more but I don’t tell her that.

“I think this is enough.” Her eyes are wide.

“Just focus on me. On how you’ve dreamt of this moment, of the one you’ve been waiting for to come for you and claim you. The nights you’ve spent alone with your hand between your legs are over because I’m here now. There won’t be an empty space beside you in bed. The pillow next to you will always be warm from my body.” I push another inch inside. “And it’s the same for me. I worked all those years for you. I waited all these years for you. It’s you and only you I want.”

My words open her up, and I push home. Her head falls back, and her fingers clutch around my biceps. Nails dig deep.

“I’m going to be slow and gentle, kitten. Put your trust in me.” I withdraw and return, taking it slowly, letting her body accept this brute invasion. I want her to come. I want her to scream my name. I want her to want me. At all times. At every moment.

I kiss her again, tonguing her deep. This time, she kisses me back. Her legs and arms wind around me, and her hips begin to move. I match her rhythm. The world starts spinning. I try to maintain control, but it’s hard.

She looks so beautiful. Her eyes are wet and glittery. Her face is flushed. Sweat has made her hair stick to her shoulders and to me. She closes her eyes, and her utter trust and faith in me makes me want to explode.

I grind the back of my teeth because I want this moment to last. Who knows when we’ll have these moments of privacy in

the coming days? We might be reduced to seven-minute quickies in the bathroom stalls. This single night may be all we have until the end of the show.

I lean forward and kiss her chest. I find her nipples and suck those into my mouth. Desperate lust rides me. I want to plunge in and out of her hard and fast. I want to make love to her for hours. I want to take her standing up, from behind, on her knees. I want to fuck her in front of a mirror so I can watch her tits bounce up and down like juicy balloons. I want to pound her ass, slipping in and out of her tiny, slick hole until she's screaming so loud the neighbors call the police.

I want her to come. I reach between us and play with her clit. She nearly jumps out of my arms. "Oh!" she cries in surprise.

"Like that, do you?" I pinch her tiny button and then rub the sting away. Her cunt grips me tighter. I repeat my actions, pinching and rubbing until her legs stiffen and her pussy starts pulsing around me.

"God, Leo, please, more."

"Hold on to me, kitten." I drive a knee into the bed and drive into her. She takes all of me. She comes all over my cock, cream smothering my shaft, leaking out between us. I can't hold back anymore. "I'm coming. Fuck, I'm coming!"

Her cum, my cum. It's hard to tell which is which. Our fluids are mixed together to the point that we're one being. Her pussy clamps down, holding me inside of her. I collapse to the side and gather her close.

"Kitten, that was incredible."

She's quiet for a half beat and then says, "How soon can we do it again?"

My cock stirs at her question. "Ordinarily I would say at least a day, but I think if you give me a minute, I'll be good for a second session, but this time"—I roll us over until she's on her knees—"I'm going to pull your hair and take you from behind. You'd better brace yourself."



CHAPTER 20

QUINN

“IS THAT A HICKEY?”

“What?” I slap my hand to my neck. How did I miss that? I spent an hour in hair and makeup without noticing it. Did Leo really leave a hickey on me? I honestly wouldn't be shocked. The sexy tech geek has a very dominant possessive side to him that simmers under the surface. I should probably be upset about it, but I kinda like the idea of him leaving his mark on me.

“Got you.” Serena gives me an evil smile. “I take it you enjoyed your tent time?”

“I was enjoying it,” I huff. We got locked away for about twelve hours before they had to evacuate us. I wish we could have stayed in our little cocoon forever.

The storm was going to be much bigger than they realized. The forecast for the next few days showed heavy rains and wind. There was no way we could stay in the tents. We didn't even have bathrooms in them. Once the decision was made, we all scrambled to get our crap together before they got us the hell off the island. Don't get me wrong, it was beautiful there, but I'm so over the cameras. Now we're in LA waiting to hear what we'll be doing next.

The women had been separated from the men. All of us had to do interviews with production people who have been asking us random questions. That was hella awkward. I'm glad that's over.

They held nothing back in their questions. It ranged from why Penelope and I did not get along to if I was in love with

Leo. Which I totally am. I admitted as much because I knew when they asked, my face likely showed my answer anyway. Then they went and asked where we'd go from here. That one question I didn't have an answer to.

"I don't know what the point of these interviews are. I think this whole thing is going to be a bust."

"Hopefully they will set us free." Anna drops down in a chair next to us. She has a bad case of cabin fever. She's a wild animal needing to be released from the cage. I bet she normally runs miles a day on a tennis court. Her legs are a testament to that. "I was stuck in a tent with Emile. The man never stops talking."

"With Emile?" I didn't think Anna and Emile shared a tent.

"You"—Anna points to Serena—"owe me for that. I had Hudson before the swap. He was chill. Nice and quiet."

"Wait, you tent swapped?" I ask. This time it's Serena whose cheeks turn pink.

"Hudson isn't quiet." My mouth falls open. Anna bursts into laughter.

"And here I thought all those grunts were coming from Leo."

"You could hear!" I put my hands over my face. The cameras might have been gone, but I hadn't thought about how close everyone was around us. On one hand, I'm slightly embarrassed, but on the other, I'm not. Now it should be crystal clear to everyone that Leo is mine. Not that it matters at this point since we're most likely heading home.

"Like I said. Could have been Hudson. Serena said he's not quiet."

"You and Hudson hooked up?" Nina pops out of nowhere to join our conversation.

"Me and my big mouth," Serena mutters.

"I'll take that as a yes." She glances down at the tablet in her hand. "Good, neither of you have done your exit interviews." She points out to Serena and Nina.

“Can we leave? I did my exit interview. Is this over? What’s happening?” Anna stands, ready to get the hell out of here.

“If you did your exit interview that should be all. I have someone working on transports back home now.” She motions across the conference room we’re in to a table with a man and a woman at it with laptops. “You can speak with them.”

“Thanks,” Anna throws over her shoulder, heading for the table already.

“You can head down to Conference Room C, Serena. They’re about ready for you. Leo is almost done with his interview.”

“Yippee.” Serena sighs. Nina heads off, leaving us alone. “You’re not going to see about getting out of here?”

“I, ah—” I glance to the table not in a hurry to get anywhere now.

“You guys haven’t had the talk yet? If this was all fun or if it’s serious?” Serena asks.

“I don’t know.”

“You don’t know?”

“I mean he says stuff when we’re like, you know.”

“Banging it out?”

“You put it so elegantly.”

“You think it might just be dirty bedroom talk? He seems rather possessive of you. I’ve been around a lot of men. I can normally get a read on them quickly. He’s one of the good ones. And from what I can see, that man is totally into you.” I do believe that Leo is into me, but my fear is that won’t be enough. Our real lives are so different.

“I know he’s a good one.” That’s not my problem. We might want to be together. It doesn’t mean it could work.

“Walk me over. You can ask him for yourself.” I go with her.

“Can’t I wait for him to bring it up?” I hate how shy I suddenly am.

“If you want. I’m sure he’ll say something.”

I nod. “Sometimes I feel like I know Leo so well, which is crazy because it’s been such a short time.”

“Girl, trust me, I know.” Wow. She really has fallen for Hudson. Serena is good at hiding her emotions.

“I still doubt it, though. If it’s all in my head and I’ve made it bigger than it is. I mean, I think I know Leo, but I also don’t think he’s the kind of man to sign up for a dating show.”

“Oh, I know the answer to that one. He knows one of the producers. Her name is Binnie. He did it as a favor. Overheard that earlier. They were talking. She’s here somewhere. The tiny redhead. Kinda makes sense. Leo has had an *I don’t want to be here* vibe from the start.”

I think Serena believes that information will help. It only freaks me out more. He could have been acting this whole time. This was a favor he did for a friend. Serena pulls open the door to Conference Room C.

Curtains are pulled up blocking off the interview area. They staged these set areas for them. I spot the redhead Serena must have been talking about. She brings her finger to her mouth to tell us to be quiet. We both nod. My ears perk up when I hear Leo’s voice. He’s still recording.

“So, are you going to tell us? Are you in love?” the interviewer asks Leo. Both Serena and I lock eyes.

“That’s not something I’m going to answer,” Leo responds.

“What if I told you that we asked her the same question and she answered? Would you want to know her response?”

“No,” Leo says without missing a beat.

“You’re really not going to give us anything?”

“It’s a reality show. I’ve given all I can.”

“Well, some might say—”

“Binnie.” Leo cuts the guy off. “Can I go home now? I’ve answered a million questions.”

“Chill, a few more and you’re free,” the redhead says, stepping around the curtain to talk to Leo. I quickly slip out of the room. Serena follows after me.

“Hey, I wouldn’t put much into that.”

“Serena, you can actually go into Area D. It’s open now.” Nina comes walking down the hallway. “Here.” She hands me a packet. “Plane tickets. You have to catch three flights to get home? That’s insane.”

“Yeah, it’s not an easy spot to get to.” I’d taken four technically to get to the island.

“I don’t know how you live in the middle of nowhere like that.” Nina shakes her head. “Come on.” She motions for Serena to get going to the other conference room.

“Don’t go anywhere.” Serena points her finger at me as she goes.

How can I not put much into what Leo said? He wants to be free. I’m far from free. I’m chained down to one place. It’s not a chain I want out of, either. Do I really think there is a chance Leo would ever consider moving for me? You have to want to live that kind of life. It’s not for everyone.

My own mother couldn’t be bothered to stay. Why would anyone else?



CHAPTER 21

LEO

“WHY WOULDN’T YOU GIVE ME THE *I LOVE HER* ON CAMERA?” Binnie whines as the assistant unhooks me from all the sound stuff. It’s taking way too long, but I remind myself that this is the last task I have to do before I’m free. “The ratings would be so good. We could sell that there is a real-life couple that got together.”

“The first time I say those words isn’t going to be on camera when I haven’t even said it to her.”

I roll my neck to ease the tension. I’m sick of this camera stuff. If I never see another lens in my lifetime, I’ll die a happy man.

“You have too much money.” Binnie rises from her chair and walks with me toward the exit.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“If you were poor, I could bribe you with things like a reward vacation or something like that.”

“Basically, you’re saying you wish that I was more financially vulnerable so you could manipulate me.”

“Or control you, yes.” She’s shameless. “Anyway, if you were a true friend”—she holds up a hand when I start to interrupt—“I know. I know. I’m a vulture. You have to be in this business but fine, go. Don’t forget to send me an invitation to the wedding.”

“Where is she?”

“Area F probably? That’s the off-loading zone. Tell her that I welcome her to the family.”

I give her a chin nod and push my way through the door. Based on my memory, Area F is about a mile away. There are golf carts that can take me there, but none are available, and I don't want to wait. It's nice out, so I set off on a brisk pace. It doesn't take more than about ten minutes for me to arrive at Area F but when I enter the large studio space, it's empty but for a couple of staffers wearing lanyards and holding tablets.

I wave to get their attention. "I'm looking for Quinn Bancroft."

The two exchange looks of puzzlement. "She's about this tall." I hold my hand to my shoulder. "Long brownish-blond hair, from the dating show."

Recognition dawns. "She left with a tall blonde."

"Serena?"

They nod.

"Where'd they go?"

"To the airport, I guess?"

"Airport?" Panic sets in. "How long ago?"

"Not too long? Maybe ten, twenty minutes?"

I book it out of the stage. Fuck. The airport? Twenty minutes? The airport is only thirty minutes away. She could be through security by the time I get there. I don't even have a ticket. I thought we could spend some time together here in the city before she went back to the sanctuary. I could introduce her to my parents. We could get coffee at my favorite shop. I could make love to her in my own damned bed. I start running because even if I have to fly to her sanctuary, she's not getting away from me.

LA traffic is a nightmare, and I don't get to the airport until an hour later. Quinn's flight already left the gate. Frustrated, I clench my jaw so I don't shout at the poor ticket agent.

"I'll take the next flight out."

"It's not until tomorrow, sir."

Why'd she leave? Is she having doubts about us? Does she think there's no us at all? Or that it was some vacation fling?

"I'll take—" I stop. What am I doing here? I'll rent a jet. I've never done that before because it's a waste of money and energy, but if there's ever a case for a private plane, it's this one. I get Binnie on the phone because she knows everything and everyone in this city.

"She's left."

"Quinn? Why?"

My wounded feelings are soothed a little by her exclamation of shock. "I don't know, but I'm going after her. Where can I get a private plane on short notice?"

"I'll book it for you if I can send a film crew."

"If we were together in the same room, you'd have to run from me."

"Okay, okay. But can I at least get a selfie video after you propose?"

"We'll see. Text me the contact."

"I'll book it for you at no cost," she says grudgingly. Somehow I know I'm going to pay for it later, but I don't care. If she had held out, I would have agreed to the film crew, too. I'm that desperate.

After what feels like forever, I finally land at a tiny airport about forty minutes from the sanctuary. Despite the luxurious interior, I couldn't sleep. I don't even have Quinn's number. We hadn't had time to exchange them before we had to be debriefed by the show's producers.

A car is waiting for me, courtesy of Binnie. I do owe her something. I text her a thank you and then take off. By the time I get to the sanctuary, I'm dead tired, smell rank, and probably look worse. I need to shower, sleep, and eat, and at this point, I don't care which order those take place. It's dusk, and the sanctuary gates are closed. I tell the driver to wait before exiting the car. I walk towards the entrance and swing

myself over the bars of the gate. A security camera swings toward me, and I wave to it. She should know I'm coming.

I jog down the long driveway paved in pea gravel and lined with large eucalyptus trees. The clustered leaves allow a tiny bit of light through, leading me up to the main building which, of course, is closed. I drag my hands through my hair. Where is she? Do I throw a rock through the glass door to get her attention? Where in this complex does she put her head at night?

I spot some buildings to the left and head that way. A large roar from farther in catches me off guard, as does the sound of tires on the gravel. I swing around to see Quinn and another woman speeding toward me in an electric golf cart. I step into the path of the vehicle and hold out my arms. She's going to have to kill me to get me to leave.



CHAPTER 22

QUINN

WHAT THE HELL IS HE DOING? THANKFULLY LAURA IS DRIVING and is quick enough to slam on the brakes. The cart slides on the gravel, stopping mere inches from hitting him. I stare at Leo in shock. I didn't believe it when I saw him on the screen.

Laura had grabbed my arm and pulled me out to the cart when she realized who it was standing outside. Laura, my dad and brother all came to pick me up from the airport. I gave them a small rundown of what happened on the drive back home. For the first time in my life, I hadn't been excited for that drive out to the middle of nowhere. Each mile put Leo farther from me, returning us back to our regular lives, which couldn't have been any further apart. Or so I'd thought.

"Have you lost your damn mind?" Laura shouts at him. "You were almost Storm's dinner."

"I'm glad I won't go to waste."

Laura snorts a laugh. "That car out there waiting for you because you're only going to be here for a few minutes or you got bags in it?"

"Bags." Leo never takes his eyes off her.

I bite the inside of my cheek. I know that stern gaze of his all too well. He might be giving Laura a smile but he's pissed and tired. That makes two of us. I only made it back here ten minutes ago. Leo almost beat me home somehow. I'm not even sure how that's possible considering I left while he was still doing his exit interview. The one that had sent me running.

“Let the car in,” Laura radios in. “And come get these bags.”

“I’m not the fuckin’ bellhop. I just brought in Quinn’s bag,” my brother huffs over the line.

“You’re going to want to see what the cat dragged in.” Laura cackles at her own joke.

“I can get my own bags,” Leo says as the vehicle pulls down the drive once the gate opens.

“We need more room anyhow.” Laura shrugs.

The driver gets out and pulls two suitcases out from the back before he and Leo exchange a few words. Then the driver gets back into the car and just leaves. What the heck?

“Cat got your tongue?” Leo asks, making Laura laugh harder.

“Your car left.” I finally speak. I wince at my own words. Why is that the first thing I said? There are so many more pressing things. Like how the hell is he planning to get out of here? It’s not like you can just call a Lyft or Uber whenever you want. It could take days to get a driver to come out this way again. And most of all, I should’ve asked what he’s doing here.

“Don’t listen to her. She was raised in the wild. Her manners aren’t always the best.” Laura breaks me from all the thoughts that are racing through my mind.

“Hey, you helped raise me.”

“Is this the heartbreaker?” I groan at the sound of my brother’s voice. He pulls up next to us. His cart has barely stopped before he springs from it. At least he put it into park. He strolls toward Leo.

“Pretty sure your sister is the heartbreaker,” Leo responds. I must have heard him wrong because I could’ve sworn he just said that I broke his heart. Don’t you have to be in love to be heartbroken?

“How do you know I’m the brother? Maybe I’m the ex.” Ethan tries to bait him.

“You’re not wearing a shirt, and the eyes. I’d know those eyes anywhere.” I sink my teeth into my bottom lip. The only same thing about my brother and me is our hair color and eyes.

“Are you flirting with me? You’re not normally my type but—”

“Ethan!” I snap. “You’re going to scare him.”

“Scare me? I’m flattered.” Leo holds his hand out. My brother stares at it for a long moment. I roll my eyes. Ethan finally takes his hand and shakes it.

“Maybe you should be scared.” Ethan doesn’t release his hold on Leo. “Since my sister came back here all teary-eyed. And you’re the cause of it.”

“I wasn’t teary-eyed.” I lie. I totally was, but Leo doesn’t need to know that.

“Liar,” Both Laura and Ethan say at the same time. Whose side are these people on?

“She ran from me,” Leo points out.

“Running is the quickest way to get caught. At least around here.” Ethan releases Leo’s hand. “My sister damn well knows that.” My cheeks warm. He’s not wrong. You don’t run. You’ll never make it. You have to stand your ground. Pretend to not be fazed or scared.

Except with Leo, I couldn’t pretend. Was this what I was hoping for? To see if he was going to pounce? I think I got my answer. I’m just not sure how this will ever work, but he’s here, nonetheless.

“Come on. Let’s get inside. I’m sure Leo is as tired as I am.” Ethan grabs one of his bags.

“You can ride with me. She’s still freaking out.”

“I am not!” I hiss at my brother. Why is he calling me out? The big jerk. He only winks at me as I glare at him.

“I take it we’re going to your cabin?” My brother wiggles his brows at me. I only nod my response, my face warming more.

“You okay?” Laura whispers as we drive back.

“He’s here.”

“He is.” She smiles at me.

When we get to my cabin, Ethan helps bring Leo’s bags in, setting them next to mine. I’d quickly dropped them when I got back and immediately went to check on things. Before I even had a chance to see how things were going, Leo was here.

“We’ll see you two later.” Laura grabs Ethan’s arm, pulling him out. The door closes behind them. It barely clicks shut and Leo pounces.

“You thought you’d get away from me?” He pins me to the wall. I wrap my legs around him.

“How did you get here so fast?”

“It doesn’t matter. I’m here. Now stop avoiding my question. You thought you could run from me?”

“I heard you.” I glance away from him, unable to meet his eyes, but he’s not having it. He grabs my chin and pulls my attention right back to him.

“Heard what?”

“This can’t work!” I shout, not wanting to say it.

“Heard what?” He pushes right back. Leo is really pinning me down here.

“That you don’t love me.”

“You think I don’t love you?” His expression turns to one of disbelief.

“I thought maybe it was a fling.”

“A fling,” he repeats. “How many times did I take you without protection, kitten? Anything about that scream fling to you?” I suck in a deep breath. That thought hadn’t even dawned on me. Jesus, I’m naïve. “I love you. I wasn’t giving that to those fucking cameras. I love you more than anything. That’s why I’m here, and that’s why I’m not going anywhere.”

“I love you too.” I sniff. “I’m not crying.”

“Liar.” He smirks right before he claims my mouth in a hard, possessive kiss.

I think Leo is going to fit in here way more than I ever thought.



EPILOGUE

LEO

“THE CATS ARE HUGE,” SERENA SAYS AS SHE COLLAPSES IN A lounge chair.

“That’s what she said,” chirps Emile. It surprised Quinn and me that these two ended up together. Quinn had said that she thought Serena would end up with Hudson, the vet, but after the show, the two lost touch. Serena was on vacation in Paris when she ran into Emile, and the rest is history.

Serena rolls her eyes and accepts a glass of lemonade. “I can’t wait until the baby comes out so I can have wine again. Marrying an Italian with a whole-ass vineyard and I can’t even drink a bottle is some kind of crime. How did you survive?” she asks Quinn.

“Distraction.” My wife’s eyes twinkle, but she doesn’t dare to look toward me because if she did, she’d likely turn red as a tomato. Already the tips of her ears look pinker than the rest of her body. We spent most of Quinn’s pregnancy fucking. Every spare second, I was taking her, whether it was in the feeder pen bent over a railing, in the kitchen on the table with her legs spread on either side of my ears, or the shower, the bathtub, the barn, the garden—which was a bad idea because I had spider bites on my ass for three weeks—the golf cart, which we drove to the back of the sanctuary to watch the sun set, and yeah, the bedroom.

“If you’re talking about sex which I know you are because your ears are red, forget it. I feel decidedly unsexy. The most I want from Emile is a foot rub.” She slides one of her flat

mules off and plops her foot into the count's lap. He downs his glass of wine and starts rubbing.

“As you are carrying my child, I'm happy to serve.”

“If I wasn't carrying your child?”

“I'd be rubbing something more than your foot.”

“Fair, but that's how we got into this situation.” She leans toward Quinn. “Thank you for drinking lemonade with me in solidarity even though you don't have to.”

Quinn clears her throat. “Well, actually—”

“Don't tell me you're knocked up again,” Serena squeals. “We're having babies together! Yay!”

Quinn beams. “I'm thirteen weeks along.” We have two others that are bedded down for the night.

“Mine will be older than yours, but they can still be besties, right?”

“Of course. Although you do live in Italy, and I live here.” Quinn waves her hand around the sanctuary.

“I'll just have to spend more time here, and you can travel to us in the winter months. Ever since the show, you've been bursting with visitors, haven't you? Enough that you can take time off now and then?”

“Yeah. It worked out really well. I'm amazed that they were able to use the footage and make it last six weeks.”

“I think it helped that the cameras followed us around afterward. Two couples lasting from a dating show has to be some kind of record. Did you hear about Hudson?”

Emile heaves a sigh. “Why are we bringing up the vet?”

“I wanted to know if Quinn had heard the latest.” Serena wiggles her eyebrows. “Have you?”

Quinn shakes her head. “Of course, you haven't. You're busy with your big cats.” Serena sends a wink in my direction. “So, after he ghosted me following the show, he apparently got addicted to pain killers and was nipping from the animal

pharmacy. His boss caught him, and he had to go to rehab. When he was in rehab, guess who he met?”

“Who?” Quinn is all ears. To be honest, Emile and I are caught too.

“Mason, the lawyer with the tiny legs. Substance abuse is a big problem in these professional circles. Anyway, one thing led to another, and supposedly they’re sort of seeing each other. Anna told me this.”

“Wow.”

“Right? The reunion show is going to be lit. Four babies, three couples, and a few fights.” Serena switches her feet out on Emile’s lap.

“Who’s fighting?” Quinn wonders.

“Whomever Emile and I can rile up, right, darling?”

“You got it.” Emile smiles. “More screen time for us.”

“As well as being entertaining. I cannot be pregnant at that show, though. I want to be able to drink.”

“Noted. I’ll tell my sperm to stop being so powerful.”

“On that note”—I get to my feet—“I think my wife needs to retire. The baby tires her out.”

“I’m not ti—” Quinn cuts herself off when she sees my expression. “Tippy. I’m not tipsy but I am feeling drowsy.” She throws out her arms and fakes a big yawn.

Serena throws a napkin at Quinn. “I know you’re off to have sex, which is fine. I’m not jealous.”

“You said you weren’t in the mood.”

“I am now. It was all the foot rubbing.”

Emile jumps up and has Serena in his arms before I can blink. He runs off toward the guest house without another word.

“He moved faster than our big cats,” Quinn murmurs.

“Nothing motivates a man more than sex or the promise of it.” I sweep Quinn into my arms and carry her across the

terrace into our bedroom.

“And here I thought it was love that moves you,” Quinn says cheekily.

“It is love.” I grip myself. “There’s a whole lot of love here for you.”

My woman laughs. She’s still laughing when I capture her mouth with mine. Her smile doesn’t go away when I enter her, and after she comes, a look of pure joy settles into her features.

“I love you, kitten,” I murmur against her sweat-dampened skin.

“I’m so glad you went on the reality show. I don’t think we would’ve ever met otherwise,” she says.

“Nah.” I drag my hand over her ripe ass and pull her close. I’m going to fall asleep with my cock in her hot pussy. “I would’ve hunted you down like a big cat and claimed you. We were meant to be together no matter what.”

Her hand comes to cup my face. “Love you so much, Leo.”

“Not as much as I love you.” My spent cock stiffens inside of her, and all thoughts of sleep fall away as I show her, once more, the depth of my devotion. It’s always and forever for us. That’s the reality of our lives.

MY LOVES:

Can you believe it is the end of March already? Time seems to be going by so fast. How do we stop it? Let’s all resolve to take a break today. Read a book. Take a walk. Smell the roses (or cherry blossoms).

I love you,

xoxo Ella

ALSO BY
Ella Goode

Marked with Love

Rocked with Love

Chasing Series

Chasing You

Chasing Us

Swiped for His Taking

Claiming His Bride

Heiress

Knocked Up by Love

Justice Series

Socialite and the Cowboy

Heiress and the Cowboy

Princess and the Cowboy

Billionaire and the Cowgirl

Secretary and the Cowboy

Insta Holiday

Connected to Forever Mine

Making Her Mine

Protecting What's Mine

Friends to Lovers

Forever Mine

Make Me Yours

The Vieth Orphans

(loosely based fairy tales)

Claiming His Queen, Stealing His Princess

A Cherry Falls Romance

123 Secret Ln

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Make Me a Match

Got a hankering for young love?

FU High: Ace of Hearts, Deuces Wild, and Two of a Kind

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Other stories that feature safe, sexy heroes and a safe, sexy romance.

Cuffed for Love

Captured by Love

Protecting Her

Built for Love

Against the Rules

Always Loved You / Still Love You

Killer Love / Killer Crush

King's Castle / Alpha's Castle / Beast's Castle

Secret Baby / Love's Secret Baby / Rock 'n Roll Baby

Spark

Priceless

Smooth Kisses, Sweet Kisses, Saved Kisses

Finding Home & Bring Him Home

Captured, Kept, Stolen

Make Me Yours

She's All Mine

Pretty Prize

The Wolf's Mail Order Bride

Beauty in Summer

My Secret Valentine Baby

Wrap With Love

(a collection of past holiday stories)

Christmas Stalking

Three of Us (Twins #1) and Belong Together (Twins #2)

I wrote a few motorcycle romances when I first started out.

Their Private Need (Michigan, Easy and Annie)

His Bold Heart (Chelsea & Wrecker)

Her Secret Pleasure

Captive Ride

My one and only LGBTQ romance.

She's the One & My Only One

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