



LOVE



OTHER

WILD

THINGS

FROM BESTSELLING AUTHOR

ALYSON ROOT

Summary

Ellie Bishop is America's sweetheart with a slew of award-winning rom-coms under her belt. Unfortunately for her, the sweet girl next door bit is tiresome and doesn't allow her to show the acting world what she's really capable of.

If only her manager would find the roles Ellie craves. When he comes with an offer for a reality TV show, Ellie is less than thrilled. *Wild Celebrities* is not the action-packed adventure she was looking for. In fact, this city slicker can't think of anything worse than shipping off to God knows where for a month with only a backpack and a survival expert to keep her company. Her need for several caramel frappuccinos daily is legendary. There is no way in hell she's going to subject herself to bugs and animals that could kill or eat her. No matter how much they offer to pay her.

Robin Stuart is looking for a new direction in life after working as a bodyguard for privileged divas. Not what she thought she would be doing after serving in the British Marines. That new direction comes in the form of *Wild Celebrities* when her best friend begs her to take his place. From the moment Robin finds out who her celebrity survivor is, she is sure of two things. One: Ellie Bishop is hot. Two: She's going to be useless in the Amazon rainforest. The show is going to test more than Robin's survival skills, of that she is sure!

When the unthinkable happens, Ellie and Robin and two crew members are catapulted into their worst nightmares. Robin is their only chance of making it out of the rainforest alive. Easier said than done. With lives on the line, can both women put aside their stark differences long enough to come up with an escape plan? Is there more to be found in the Amazon other than wild things?

Love & Other Wild Things

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Alyson Root



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Dedication

For Angelique, ma raison d'être. Je t'aime.

Acknowledgement

As always, the first person I have to thank is my wife. No one in my life has supported me the way she does. Effortlessly and unconditionally. It is no lie to say without her guidance and helping hand, I would not be in the position I am today, doing the thing I love for a living. To Monna Herring, my superstar, as I like to call her. Thank you for always taking the time to listen to my ideas, proof my work, and boost my confidence. You have been with me from my second book, and I'll know you will be with me down the road. I promise to keep the books flowing!

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Chapter One

Ellie

“I don’t want to do this, Gabe. Not one bit. Do you understand that?” I practically shout into the phone. Gabe Bishop is an asshole of the highest magnitude. I don’t care if he’s my brother.

“Ellie, come on, this is guaranteed gold.” As if that’s a valid reason for me to do what he wants. As if disregarding what I want is a valid reason to force me into something I vehemently do not want to do.

“Gabe, I’m the last person on this planet that needs money. I’m thirty-seven and could retire. Actually, I could have retired when I was twenty-five.”

“It’ll be fun. Come on, your career is in a slump. You need this.” Son of a bitch.

“My career is in a slump because you only put me up for the same tired roles. The girl next door should have been shelved ten years ago. I’ve begged you for grittier roles, but you keep peddling the same crap.” As well as being my asshole brother, Gabe is my asshole agent.

“But your face says girl next door. You need to play to your strengths. Your looks won’t last forever, you know.”

What a fucking tool. Sorry for all the cussing, but this ass drives me to distraction. “My face is going to be saying, ‘you’re fired,’ if you carry on.” I will never fire him because the backlash I would get from my mom isn’t worth it. Maybe a severe pay cut will do the trick. I might not have full control, but I have some, and I’m not afraid to use it.

“I kind of already sealed the deal, El. Look, it’s a month, that’s it. You do this show, then afterward, I swear, I’ll get you all the dark and arty roles your heart could ever desire.”

Breathe, Ellie, breathe. “You made a deal before talking to me.” Forewarning, the next part of the conversation is going to get very explicit. “You fucking prick, how fucking dare you do this? The next time I see you, I’m going to take my trusty baseball bat to your nuts, do you hear me? You’ll be lucky if you can—”

“Okay, okay, I get you’re angry, but that doesn’t change anything. You start filming in two weeks. I’ll send you over all the details.”

“Gabe, I’m from New York. I was raised in a fucking mansion that overlooked Central Park, as were you. I love comfort and nice things. In what world do you think I’m capable of spending a month in the motherfucking jungle?” Let’s be honest, he hasn’t thought about it at all. He saw the dollar signs and signed on the dotted line.

“New York is called the concrete jungle, and you do pretty well in that.” Oh, he’s got jokes, brilliant.

“The concrete jungle has a Starbucks on every corner. Restaurants open twenty-four-seven. Is that what I’ll get on this show? I don’t think so.” My life revolves around those kinds of things. That might sound shallow, but it’s true. I love and need coffee in my life. I love

going to restaurants whenever I want. I do it frequently. What I don't want is to be in the goddamn jungle. I'm a star, for fuck sakes.

"This is the most popular show on TV. Please calm down and see what an opportunity this is. The world wants to see the real Ellie Bishop."

"Then send a camera crew to my house, and I'll happily show the people who I am from the comfort of my own home."

"Ellie, it's done. Get on board."

If I grip this phone any tighter, it's going to explode in my hand. How I wish I could reach through the phone and strangle him. "Send the details over. And FYI, your salary has just taken a fifty percent dip, you dick." Having the last word hasn't even made me feel better, which is a first.

Well, crap! What the hell am I going to do now? I cannot survive for one month in the jungle. Ellie Bishop—that's me—is known for glamour. I'm the actress people want to debut their designs on the red carpet. I'm the actress everyone wants to wear their perfume or designer shoes. I'm a box office wonder. I'm not the actress who bumbles around the jungle in khaki pants—that have a thousand pockets—and chunky walking boots. Dear Lord. This can't be happening.

My phone rings again, and I'm ready to tear whoever it is a new one. Thankfully, I see the name before I answer. "Toni, thank God."

"Hey, honey, what's up?" Toni Fresh—yes, that is her birth name—is my best friend. We met on the set of my very first show when I was ten and she was fifteen. We bonded over long days, early call times, and the very attractive coffee cart woman. I was in awe of her when she came out a few years later and proceeded to ask out that very cute coffee cart woman.

"Gabe." I don't need to say any more. Toni gets it.

"What did that douche do now? Will you please just fire him?"

"Do you know the torrent of shit I would get if I did that?" I'm not exaggerating. Even from three thousand miles away, my mom can make me feel... Ugh, no, no, no. I can't start that train of thought now. My therapist is in the Bahamas, and I don't have enough medication in the house to dose myself numb.

"Well, tell Toni what he's done."

"I hate it when you talk in the third person, T, it's weird." It is, right?

"Ellie, spit it out."

"He's signed me up for the next season of *Wild Celebrities*. I start filming in two weeks. In the jungle. In the jungle, Toni!" The line is silent. Did she hang up? I check the screen. Nope, she's still there. Then the hysterical laughter starts. And it doesn't stop for a good five minutes. I put the phone on the side and leave her to calm down while I pour a large glass of wine. I down that and pour another.

"Oh, damn." She finally gasps. I'm a third of the way into my second glass by now.

"Yeah, oh, damn, indeed." My original boiling anger is now a simmering rage. Is that better or worse?

"He can't be serious. You! In the jungle? Ellie Bishop who needs a caramel frap with skimmed milk three times a day and weekly pedicures?"

“Yup, me.” I pour myself a third glass and wait for the second round of raucous laughter to die down. I’m pleased she finds it so funny. When I’m not seething, maybe I’ll find the funny side. Maybe not.

“Ellie, you can’t, honey.”

“I have zero choice. The sneaky toad has sealed the deal. I wouldn’t like to imagine how much it would cost me to buy myself out of the contract.” Honestly, it’s not the money, it’s the optics. If Gabe signed, I guarantee he’s already hot on the marketing. Which means that too many people know I’m committed. It’ll look so bad if I back out now, and the last thing I want is to be known as a troublesome person to work with or a flake. I’ve sculpted my reputation for years. I work hard, and I try to be easy. It doesn’t take very much in this industry to wreck all that and become known as a diva.

“Which jungle?” Toni laughs. She’s going to get something really shitty for Christmas. She’s enjoying this way too much.

“No clue. I presume it’ll be on the paperwork.”

“Will you need shots?”

“What for?”

“You know, diseases and stuff. Don’t jungle mosquitoes kill or something?” Wonderful, just to add to the nightmare that is this show, I now need to worry about dying from a bug bite.

“I can’t do this, Toni, I can’t.” Panic and anxiety are now coursing through my body. I put the wine down and stick my head between my legs. I can feel the room closing in on me.

“Hey, hey, hey. Breathe, Ellie, just breathe. I’m on my way over.” Toni puts the phone down before I have the chance to answer. *Deep breaths, come on, El, you can do this, calm down.* It’s been a long time since I’ve had a panic attack. I don’t want to start now. I sit up and take in my surroundings. Focusing on the items I can see dotted around my living room helps me calm down. It’s the familiarity. It’s also the thing my therapist told me to do.

“El?” Toni shouts from downstairs. Harold, my housekeeper, must have let her in. Seconds later, she strides into the room in all her six-foot glory. There was a time when I had a major crush on Toni, back when I was a baby gay and was struggling with hormones. Toni was—and still is—one of the most beautiful women I have ever met. Think Nordic Viking goddess, and you’re close to figuring out how gorgeous she is. It’s no wonder she has half of Hollywood clamoring after her.

“T, I’m good, really. You didn’t need to rush over.”

“I live three houses down, honey.” She sits next to me and strokes my back. “Buy your way out of the contract, Ellie. Seriously, it’s not worth it.”

“I can’t.” Toni knows I can’t. Damn it, Gabe.

“Who’s the host this season?” As if that matters.

“I don’t know. Look, Gabe literally told me about this like twenty minutes ago.”

“All right, but you should have received the details through email. Maybe if you have Colin Berk or Richard Bell, you’ll be okay. They’re like ex-military or something. They wouldn’t let anything happen to you.”

“Do you watch it?” Her face grows red. I’ve caught her. She watches *Wild Celebrities*, Jesus.

“Fine, guilty. I, Toni Fresh, am addicted to *Wild Celebrities*. If you liked penis, you would be too.” Toni is bisexual, whereas I am only about the ladies.

“Right, so Richard and—”

“Colin.”

“Yeah, Richard and Colin are hot. That’s why you watch it?”

“Too fucking right. They spend half the time with no shirts on.” Toni fans herself with her hand.

“Fabulous,” I deadpan because now, not only do I have to deal with the jungle and killer bugs, I also have to be in close quarters with a sweaty, shirtless man. Toni has opened my laptop and my emails. As promised, Gabe has sent over the paperwork. Toni scans down the documents on the screen.

“Hmm.”

“Hmm? What does hmm mean?” I crane my neck to see what she’s reading.

“It’s not going to be Richard or Colin. The host is named Robin Stuart. Never heard of him.”

“Great, I’m getting a newbie.” This just gets better.

“Oh, damn, they’re sending you to South America. The Amazon, to be specific.”

“The Amazon?” My voice has reached the pitch where only dogs can hear me now.

“Yup, and they’ve listed the shots you have to get. Hep A, typhoid, and yellow fever. Oh, and they recommend you get a malaria one, too.” I think I might vomit. I hate needles. I hate all of this. I hate Gabe!

“T, this is too much.”

“All right, I know what you need. Come on.” Toni stands and drags me to my feet. I’m pulled along to my room and practically shoved in my walk-in closet. “Pick something hot and get dressed. We’re going out.”

Alcohol, yes! That’s what I need: copious amounts of booze so I can forget all about this horror show. “Where are we going?”

“Love P, obviously. Let’s get you a lady to dance with. Between that and a shit ton of alcohol, I think we can get you in a different headspace.”

“Temporary headspace, Toni. I still have to do this thing. Robin what’s-his-name better be the toughest man alive. He also better know how to build a cabin because I am not sleeping in a tent.” Toni laughs at me again, then starts rooting through my clothes. I’m not sure what she’s looking for.

“This, wear this.” It’s my blood-red party dress. It only just covers my ass. “With these,” she says, handing me my best pair of Jimmy Choo black patent heels.

“Is this a slutty night out?”

“Yes, Ellie, it is. Get your slut on, honey. I will. God, I could do with a good servicing. Brad just didn’t do it for me.” Brad Clarence aka Hollywood’s “it man” is—or should I say was if that statement is anything to go by—dating Toni for a few months.

“You guys split?” God, I hope so. Brad is a douche. I’ve never wanted to slap someone so much, and that was after only ten seconds of meeting him. Slimy cockroach. Thinks he’s God’s gift to women. You know the type.

“Hell, we split two months ago, honey. I was sick of having to finish myself off in the shower. He was a two-pump wonder and then fell asleep.” It’s my turn to laugh now.

“Life is too short for bad sex,” I state.

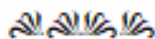
“Amen, honey.” Toni laughs and fist bumps me.

“Hey, sorry I didn’t know about you guys splitting.” Toni and I haven’t had the chance to hang in a while. Thankfully, we’ve both had projects, but being that busy does eat into close relationships. Honestly, Toni is about the only true friend I have. It’s difficult finding genuine people around here.

“No worries, I get it. You’re a boss bitch.” Toni continues to rummage through my closet. I’m not sure what she’s looking for. I’m a good few inches shorter than she is. Any dress of mine is going to show off her ass and...well, you get the picture.

“So are you, T.”

“Yeah, I am. Now shower, shave, and get ready. We are hitting it hard tonight.”



The club is thumping when we arrive. Pulling up in a limo means we don’t have to wait in line. Well, my name alone means that, too. Love P is one of my favorite lesbian clubs in L.A. In my late twenties, I went a little crazy and spent nearly every weekend there, savoring all the delicious sapphic delights on offer. Eventually, Toni told me to chill out. I was on the verge of making a name for myself that would have seriously damaged my reputation among the higher-ups in Hollywood. You know, the people who give me jobs.

Now I come here maybe every three months if I’m lucky. The good thing about Love P is the crowd is huge. Plenty of choice. Saying that, though, it’s not so easy for me to have a one-night stand. Every woman wants the Ellie Bishop experience, and some of them aren’t afraid to sell it to the first paper that offers them a bit of cash.

My dipshit brother did one thing right. He set up a non-disclosure agreement that women have to sign electronically on my phone before they get to sample my goods. Not the most romantic thing in the world to present to a woman, but nine times out of ten, romance isn’t on the agenda. I think the NDAs have saved me a few times from getting screwed and not in the way I like.

Toni is already dancing as we walk through the door. The room is a sea of bodies dancing and grinding. The music is deafening, and I love it. We head over to the VIP section. We get a little more privacy there. The section is guarded by security women who honestly scare the shit out of me but also turn me the hell on. I do love a strong woman, especially if she can throw me around a bedroom.

A bottle of champagne is already waiting in a bucket of ice. I waste no time pouring us both a glass and downing the entire thing. I want to be so drunk I don’t remember my name. Not the best way to deal with what’s going on, but I need it, and so does T. That woman needs to get laid. Hell, I need to get laid.

Three glasses of bubbly later, and we brave the main dance floor. The women here are gorgeous. Sun-kissed beauties as far as the eye can see. So far, no one has caught my attention. Toni has only been dancing for a minute, and already she's got a target. *Go get 'em, T.*

My plan to get wasted and dance with a lovely lady is failing. We've been here for two hours now, and my mind is too fixed on the Amazon-goddamn-jungle! I'm sweaty and gross, and I want to go home. Toni is playing tonsil hockey with a beautiful redhead, so I'll be going home alone. That's fine. The booze is working against me now. It's just upping my anxiety levels, which is fucking worse.

I send Toni a message and tell her I've left. The limo is waiting by the curb. I go to get in, but I'm distracted by a stunning woman waiting in line to get into the club. She's tall, maybe a few inches taller than me. She's toned, as in she has visible muscles. That tank top is great. Her black jeans are tight. I bet her ass is firm. She has long black hair and very blue eyes. Wowzer! I consider going back inside. I'm sure she could distract me for a few hours. No. As much as I would love to get to know that fine specimen of a woman, I need sleep.

Because you know I have to prepare to go to the Amazon-fucking-jungle!

Chapter Two

Robin

“No.”

“What do you mean, no? I haven’t asked you anything yet.”

“But you’re going to, and the answer is no.”

“Come on, Robin, don’t be like that.”

The cheek of this guy. He knows damn well why I’m being like this. Every time he asks me for something, I always end up with a shit deal. The last time he asked for a small favour, I ended up in the Arctic for six months. The Arctic is not a fun place to go. Ever!

“No.” He won’t wear me down, not this time.

“Just hear me out, please.” Ugh, he’s using his whining little boy voice. I hate it when he does that because nine times out of ten, it works.

“Fine, you have one minute to tell me what you want, and then I’ll tell you no for the last time.”

“Okay, so you know I signed on to do *Wild Celebrities*.”

“Yes.” I can see where this is going, and I don’t like it one bit.

“Well, I’ve had a tiny accident, and I can’t do it. The problem is we were due to start shooting next month. I need you to fill in for me.”

“Nope.” I really emphasised the “p” just for effect.

“Robin, please, I wouldn’t ask if I had any other choice.”

“What about Dick?”

“You mean Richard?”

“Yeah, but Dick suits his personality better.” Richard Bell is an idiot. I can’t stand the man. He’s one of those guys who thinks he can pull any woman regardless of her sexual orientation. After he came on to me for the millionth time, I introduced my knee to his balls. No one grabs my arse without permission, not even Richard Bell, beloved TV star.

“Okay, I’ll give you that. He’s a tool. But anyway, he’s in the Himalayas on another job. You’re my last hope. Please, please, please.”

“What accident did you have?”

“Oh, er, it’s nothing, really, but I’m out of action for a while.” Now my interest is piqued.

“Now, now, Colin. You want my help, don’t you? Come on, spill.”

“It’s just a fracture, nothing to worry about.”

“If it’s just a fracture, then why are you being weird about it?”

“Jesus, Robin, it’s my penis, okay? I fractured my penis.” Please hold on whilst I laugh for the next half an hour. “Will you stop laughing, you arsehole?” That makes me laugh harder.

“Okay, okay, sorry. Pray tell how you fractured your penis?” Who knew that was a thing?

“You’re the worst, do you know that?” He’s trying to sound pissy, but I can hear the chuckle in his voice.

“Yes, I do, but I also know you want me to do this stupid show, so get talking, mate.”

“Fine. You know Jill and I have been trying to get pregnant.”

“Yup.” Bless them. They’ve been trying for a while. I hate to see the look on Jill’s face every time she tells me that another test came back negative.

“Well, with no luck, Jill decided to do some internet research.”

“Because everything on the net is one hundred percent accurate.”

“Right?” He laughs. I can understand their desperation, though. All they’ve ever wanted was to become parents. Jill was born to be a mother. When they do have a kid, and I’m positive they will, even if that’s through adoption or surrogacy, that baby is going to be the luckiest human alive.

“So she found this article that said trying a few unique positions could help with conceiving. We tried a couple. I can’t see how they help, but whatever, Jill wanted to try. Anyway, the last one was complicated. I didn’t know my wife was so bendy, to be fair.”

“Colin!” Not an image I want in my mind. I certainly don’t want to think of Colin’s hairy arse in the throes of passion. Gross.

“Sorry. Anyway, we were in position, and Jill started moving. Well, she got a tad enthusiastic at one point, and she moved in the wrong direction. The next thing I know, I have searing pain in my knob. Jill called the ambulance because I thought I was dying. Turns out, I broke my penis. A little operation later, and it’s all good, but I can’t do anything strenuous for a few weeks.”

I’m trying my level best not to burst out in hysterics again. “Wow, that sounds bloody awful. I’m a little sorry I laughed now.” I’m not. “I mean, I don’t have a todger, and even I just crossed my legs.” I really did cross my legs. Ouch!

“Does that mean you’ll do the show for me? Please.”

“Colin—”

“Rob, you’re more qualified than me to do this gig. And what else have you got to do? I know the private security work is done with.”

Crap, he’s right, I haven’t got anything on right now. “Yeah, permanently, I think. The last client was just ridiculous.” Rich people suck! Why does money make some people believe they can treat others like dirt?

“Exactly. If you do this, it’s just one month with one person and some camera crew. You’ll get paid wads of money, giving you time to decide what you want to do next.”

The money would be nice. I got paid handsomely for my last security job. It wasn’t enough for me to take an extended period of time out, though. If I did the show, I could probably take a break from work for a few months. I have no idea what I want to do with myself. Hell, I don’t even know where I want to live. I’m old enough now that I should probably have a house or something. But here I am, still living out of a bag. Jumping from apartment to apartment.

Damn it, he’s convinced me. “Fine, I’ll help, but I’m not signing anything until I’ve spoken to the show runners and read through the contract.”

“Absolutely, no probs. Can you be in L.A. by tomorrow lunch?”

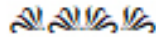
“Yeah, I’ll get packed and fly out. I’m staying with you, so get the spare room ready.”

“Jill would kill me if I let you stay anywhere else.”

“Okay, see you tomorrow.” *Well, that’s that then. Once again, Rob, you did a tremendous job sticking to your guns.* I roll my eyes at myself.

I look around my sparse apartment. I’ve never lived a life of materialism. All I need is my duffel bag and I’m ready. There’s a red eye out of Washington that has availability, so I book myself a seat.

L.A., here I come.



Colin meets me at the arrivals gate. I didn’t need to check in my luggage, so I’m one of the first out of the terminal. I last saw Colin Berk three years ago in the UK. He was doing a survival documentary close to where I was working. Colin was in the same regiment as me in the UK until he retired. Once he’d done his duty, he moved to America to be with Jill. They’d met when she was on holiday in Cornwall and Colin was on leave. It was love at first sight for them. Jesus, the amount of times I had to sit there listening to him pine over her was insane. Considering he was a big burly soldier, he didn’t half sound soft when he spoke of Jill.

I spent another two years as a Royal Marine Commando before retiring my beret. It was probably the best experience of my life, but it takes a toll. I’d done my bit.

“There she is.” His British accent has an American lilt to it now. I’ll make a mental note to take the piss out of that later.

“Ah, limp dick, how ya doing?” I couldn’t help making the joke. Come on, you would’ve, too. It’s not every day you get to see a man with a knob cast on.

“Low blow, Stuart, low blow.”

“Hey, it’s the only blow you’re going to be getting for a while.” I’m hilarious!

“You’re an asshole, Stuart.” When we regroup after not seeing each other for a while, it’s customary for us to call each other by our last names. Just like we did in the Marines.

“Where’s Jill?”

“Cooking. She’s bought enough food for half the bloody regiment.” I laugh because Jill is a feeder. She loves cooking for the masses, which winds Colin up to no end. Once she threw a block party without telling him beforehand. It was only when he got home to find half the street in his living room that he caught on to what his wife had done.

“Please tell me she’s made lasagne?” Her lasagne is to die for.

“Obviously. Come on, let’s go. It’s gonna take us an hour to get home.” Jill and Colin live in Manhattan Beach. I’ve only visited a handful of times, but it’s a beautiful area. Colin only had one stipulation when they were looking for a house, and that was it had to be near the water. We are born water babies, so I get why he needed to be close to the ocean. I can see life here is treating him well. Apart from the broken twig and berries, he looks in good shape.

We roll up to his house twenty minutes later. Colin just likes to make out that L.A. traffic affects him. It doesn’t—like at all. Friggin’ drama queen. Their home is a stunning

three-bedroom made of brick and glass. It's a modern delight, and yes, I'm jealous. Maybe that's why I've never committed to buying a place. I want what they have but can't afford it. One day maybe.

"I'll get your bag. You go in and see Jill." I have no problem with that. I've missed her. I walk in the door, and I'm instantly salivating. The smell of Jill's cooking is out of this world good.

"Jilly Bean, where are you, woman?" I hear her laugh as I walk into the kitchen. Jill stands there in all her five-foot glory. Colin and I are near six feet, so she's used to craning her neck to look at us. Jill has beautiful gold hair that hangs down her back. Being a native to the West Coast means she has a permanent tan. I'm pasty as fuck compared to her. Casper is a favourite nickname Jill likes to roll out now and then.

"Get your ass over here, Robin." We hug, and I pick her up as usual. She squeals and then bats me to put her down. I stand there looking her up and down for a second. There's something different about her, but I'm not sure what. Is she glowing?

"You look good, Jilly Bean." I gave her that nickname when I was sloshed. We'd been celebrating the Fourth of July, and I was two sheets to the wind. I called her Jilly Bean, and it's stuck ever since.

"How did Washington treat you, Rob?"

"Not my favourite place, if I'm honest. Way too many politicians for my liking."

"Wasn't your last client a politician?" She laughs.

"Daughter of a politician, and that was bad enough. I'm just glad it's done. I think a change is in order." It was a nightmare job. The girl I was protecting had a stick up her arse about me being there. I lost count of the number of times she tried to ditch me.

"Robin, move here, please. Colin and I want you close." Jill wanted me to move to California when I decided to live in the U.S. My dad is British, but my mum is American, so I have dual citizenship. After the military, I was ready for something new. My parents left the UK when I was sixteen. Mum missed her family, and my dad was happy to move overseas. They live in Florida now.

"The rent here is stupid. And I am not getting a roommate."

"The pool house is free. It's like a mini house in there. Imagine waking up to the beautiful sun every day. The smell of the ocean. You could surf. Jog along the boardwalk." Wow, she's really selling it. It sounds idyllic.

"I'd just do what she says if I were you, Stuart. We know she's the boss of us both." I laugh because he's not wrong. I would do anything for Jill and Colin.

"I tell you what, let's table it until I come back from...shit, where am I going?" It's just occurred to me that Colin left out the location where this stupid show is going to take place.

"The Amazon!"

"The Amazon?"

"Yup, you know the place with loads of trees." Real comedian, this guy.

"Yeah, you've got jokes. How's the baby maker feeling there, bud?" This time, Jill bursts out laughing. Colin huffs but grins. Our friendship is built on gibes.

"Did you set up a meeting with the studio? I'm not completely sold until I talk to them." Maybe I can still get out of doing it.

“Tomorrow at ten. I’ll take you there and introduce you to the relevant people. Tonight, though, I thought we could just chill. I think Della might stop by.” Ah, Della, Jill’s younger sister. We had a couple of fun nights together, but neither of us wanted it to go any further, but true to the lesbian code, we remained friends. She’s the wild child of the family.

“Cool, it’ll be good to catch up.”

“Don’t sleep with her,” Jill calls from inside the pantry.

“I don’t plan to.” The thought had crossed my mind. It’s still lingering, if I’m honest. Della is fire between the sheets, and it’s been a while for me.

We chat for a good couple of hours catching up. I notice Jill hasn’t touched her beer, which I find strange. Colin, being the unobservant neanderthal he is sometimes, sets another bottle on the table for his wife. I catch her eye and quirk my eyebrow. She smiles sweetly and winks. That’s all the confirmation I need.

Della turns up at nine; she’s dressed for a night out. “Robin, looking good, honey.” As smooth as ever. It’s no wonder I fell into bed with her. She’s the spitting image of Jill. The only difference is she’s much taller. Almost as tall as me.

“Della, good to see you, too. You’re looking nice. Going out?”

“Yes, and you should come. Love P is going to be wild tonight.” I’ve only been there once, and it was fun, although I’m thirty-five now and can’t party like I used to. I’ll never admit that to any of my regiment buddies.

“Not tonight, Del, I only just got in.”

“Fuck that. When was the last time you let off some steam?” My silence says it all. “Come on. Jill and Colin will be in bed soon because you know they’re old and married.”

“Hey,” Jill protests, laughing. Della grins.

“Please?” Della has the same ability as her sister to get me to do things I don’t want to. What is it with this family?

“Fine, but I can leave when I want. You party until the sun comes up if you want, but I’ve got a meeting tomorrow, so for once, I have to be sensible.”

“Deal.” She sticks out her hand, and I shake it, laughing.

I throw on a clean tank top with my black skinny jeans. Thankfully, I washed my hair before travelling, so all I need to do is let it down. Since being in the forces, I automatically put it up every day. A bit of makeup and I’m ready.

I kiss Jill good night and punch Colin in the arm because that’s what we do. The cab is waiting outside. Della hops in and asks the driver to put on something hip-hop. It only takes us fifteen minutes to get there, and I curse under my breath because the queue is stupid long.

“Can’t you go all commando on their asses and get us closer to the door?” Della jokes.

“What do you think the commandos do exactly?”

“No clue, really, but I presume you’re all tough and shit. I glaze over when Colin harps on about his commando days.” Colin *does* enjoy reminiscing.

Two women join us in the line. I’ve never met them before. Turns out they have both slept with Della but are just friends. The lesbian community guidelines need to be updated. Amendment One: You do not have to stay friends with all your exes.

In the distance, I see a limo pull up. No one gets out, so I presume they’re picking up. A few seconds later, a blonde in a sexy-as-hell dress steps out of the club and heads for the

car. It's a shame she's leaving. I wouldn't have minded tracking her down for a dance. Oh, well, plenty more lesbians in the sea.

The club is insane. I instantly feel old. Every person in here looks way too young and way too pretty. That's Cali for you, though. I grab us all a drink and settle against the bar. Della and her friends are on the dance floor immediately, but I can't get myself in the right frame of mind. I keep thinking about the meeting tomorrow.

I've been to the Amazon before, and I didn't like it that much. We were there training, so it wasn't exactly a holiday. I'm curious to find out who the celebrity is. I pray they have some outdoor bones in their body. The last thing I need is some prima donna in the friggin' rainforest. I down my beer and head to the dance floor. Tomorrow is going to suck, I can feel it. So tonight, I'll dance and drink.

Chapter Three

Ellie

My day got off to a pretty shitty start. Having a kajillion needles stabbed in my arm was just the beginning. I tried to reassure myself that it was unlikely I was going to get some hideous disease in the jungle, but still. The thoughts lingered. I am too young and pretty to die that way!

Those thoughts lead to the second reason today started out bad. After getting home from Love P, I tried to get some rest, but it was a futile effort. I was just so angry that I'd been railroaded into this project. It's not the first time Gabe has crossed the line. Those thoughts had then led to me spiraling about my brother and my mother, which is never a good thing.

The doctor, or Doctor Dan as I like to call him, prescribed me sleeping pills years ago, but they leave me feeling groggy in the morning. So instead of medicating myself last night, I tried to meditate my way to rest. It didn't work. I tossed and turned for hours until I eventually gave up and lounged in front of the TV until the wee hours. Maybe I should have hit my home gym to work off some of the stress. I laugh at the thought. I haven't used the gym once because I hate working out.

Of course, it wasn't just the bullshit that is my family that stopped me from sleeping. Obviously, the fact I will be going to the goddamn Amazon was a major contributor. There isn't one person on this planet who would think sending me there is a good idea. No, scratch that, no one who didn't want to make money off me.

At the end of the day, that's what it comes down to. Gabe can spout off all he wants about "the world wanting to see the real Ellie Bishop," but it's garbage, and he knows it. My brother is a money-grubbing weasel. He has no problem selling me out if it lines his pockets. Toni despairs that I won't fire him. She's right, of course. That lowlife should have been cut off years ago, but I can't. I send a message to Caroline, my therapist. I need to vent soon. Preferably before I go to South America.

So here I am, exhausted and with a sore arm sitting in the window of my favorite restaurant, waiting for Gabe and the studio execs.

I might be powerless to stop this from happening, but that doesn't mean I have no power at all. If I'm going to do this, the least the studio can do is meet me on my terms. It's petty, but it's all I have. A minor victory getting them to come to me instead of me sitting in their offices. Plus, I can drink on their dime. Nothing like ordering top-shelf champagne to help take the sting out of my current predicament.

The meeting is supposed to highlight what's expected of me and give me the chance to ask questions. The problem is, I only have one question, and that's how can I get out of doing this without ruining my reputation?

Gabe saunters in like he owns the place. God, he's hateful. I don't know how we can be related. He takes after my mother entirely whereas I inherited all my father's genes. The

universe is a cruel mistress. She took away a good man and left that pair of snakes unscathed. It might sound heartless, but I swear, they are the worst.

Snapping his fingers at the waitress, he barks an order for a scotch. I hope she spits in it. "Ready?" he asks. Like he cares.

"I suppose." I don't want to look at him.

"Just let me do the talking, okay?" Not likely.

Two men approach the table. They're dressed in nice suits. I bet they cost a small fortune. "Gabe, hi," one man says before turning his attention to me. His face lights up. "And, Ms. Bishop." He takes my hand and kisses it. I want to sanitize my arm, but I have to play nice. Why do men think it's okay to do things like that? I don't know him from Adam. Gabe gets a handshake, but I have to put up with a stranger's lips on my hand.

"Hello." I don't know if this is Craig or Billy.

"Billy and I are so pleased to have you for this season of *Wild Celebrities*." Right, so he's Craig, the money man. That tracks, he looks oily.

"I'm excited to do it." Wow, I am an excellent actress if he's buying that crock of shit.

"So, gentlemen, let's talk details." Gabe has his scotch and is inhaling it.

"Hi, Ms. Bishop, I'm Billy, the director."

"Hi, Billy. And please, call me Ellie."

"Great, okay, Ellie. This season is going to differ slightly from the last." I don't like where this is going, and he just started talking.

"In what way?" Does my voice sound calm and collected? It should. I'm putting every bit of skill I have to make out like I'm as carefree as a fucking summer breeze.

"So, normally, the show is scripted." I'd read that last night. Before I'd binge watched Netflix, I did a bit of research on the show and shows like it. What I read was pleasing. Apparently, most of the shows are completely scripted. What the audience sees is fiction. The celebrities *seem* to stay in some remote location, but behind the camera is a four-star hotel. It's the same with the food. On camera, it's gross shit like bugs, but off camera, the celebs are eating chef-prepared meals.

"Okay, so what's going to change?"

"All of it," Billy says, and my heart sinks. "We want to be the first show to really give the audience a genuine survival show."

Of course they do. Of course!

"Meaning?" I wish this guy would spit it out already. I signal the waitress with a giant smile indicating that I need more expensive champagne. I'm going to take a bottle home with me. Screw these guys.

"You'll be sent into the Amazon with a survival expert as normal, but there will only be two crew members going with you. We'll give you GoPros and leave you to record the show yourselves essentially. The two crew members will be there to get the professional shots, but we really want to lean on you and Robin to do the rest."

"Right." I think my throat is closing up. I can feel my breakfast trying to reintroduce itself.

“You guys will be completely alone. Obviously, we’ll have an extraction plan and all relevant emergency services ready, should anything go wrong. Not that anything will, of course.”

This restaurant is one of my favorites because it has the best duck in L.A. I’ve been looking forward to ordering it all day, but now I have no appetite whatsoever. Surely, they can’t expect me to do this. It’s insane.

“Gentlemen, I’m not sure this is something I can do. I understand you want to make this show unforgettable, but I think I’m the wrong person to do it with. I am *not* outdoorsy in the least.”

“But that’s why it’s going to be so good. People want to see you struggle and work hard. I guarantee you this is going to be huge. Hell, that’s why we agreed to Gabe’s outrageous demands.” What demands? I didn’t read the paperwork after I got back. All I know is this Robin dude is going to be my *survival expert*.

“I need to think about this.”

“Nothing to think about,” Craig says stiffly. “Gabe signed the paperwork. It’s a done deal. He’s already received the payout.” My insides are boiling with rage. I can’t look at my brother. I will get him back once this meal is done.

“What’s the next step?” There’s no point blathering on, the contract is done. I have to suck it up and figure out how to get through this.

“Right. We have a guy coming tomorrow that we’d like you to meet. He’s going to give you the rundown on the native wildlife. I’ve asked him to make up flashcards, as well, so you can take them with you.”

“Shouldn’t the survival person know all that?” They better have given me someone capable of actually keeping us both alive. If my survival hinges on a few flashcards, I’m fucked.

“Yes, of course, but we feel it’s necessary for you to be as prepared as possible. Can we say nine tomorrow morning at the studio offices?” I nod.

Sure, why not? I can’t wait to learn about everything that’s going to want to kill and eat me.

“Good, now let’s order,” Gabe says. He’s been about as useful as a fart in the wind.

I sit listening to Billy talk about the show and the different celebrities who have been on before me. Craig spends most of the time conversing with Gabe. I try not to vomit with anxiety. Overall, a pretty crappy lunch, really.

“When will I meet Robin?” I want to see for myself if this man is going to be able to keep me safe.

“Not until the day you fly out. It’s all part of the surprise.” Wonderful. It keeps getting better.

I get the hell out of there as fast as possible once the check has been paid. My first bit of business is to call my lawyer. Gabe needs bringing down a peg or two. “Sandra, darling, hey.”

“Ellie, you’re not in jail, are you?” I laugh because she asks me the same thing every time. I have never been in trouble. In fact, Sandra tells me I could do with a little trouble in my life. She thinks it would justify the amount I pay her. I’m an easy client.

“No, of course not. I need you to go over Gabe’s contract of employment—”

“Oh, fabulous, are you finally firing him?” See, even my lawyer knows I should get rid of him. I hate myself a little, knowing how easily I let my mother manipulate me. She is the master at it, though. God, I wish my dad was still here.

“Not firing, but I do want to cut his salary in half. I need to make sure I can do it without him having any recourse.” Let’s see how smug he is after I gut his paycheck.

“I don’t need to look. I know you can. I had it written in that you could adjust the amount at your pleasure. The greedy asshole was too quick to get your money. He didn’t read it properly.” See, this is why I love Sandra.

“Great, I’ll call Pam.” Pam is my manager. For once, I wasn’t bluffing when I told Gabe I would reduce his salary by fifty percent. “One more thing. Do I have life insurance?”

“Of course, why?” I fill her in on the show. She assures me I have life insurance but tells me to go home and read the contract carefully. If anything happens to me, Sandra will destroy them in court. To do that, she needs to know what insurance and safety measures they have in place.

We chat for a few minutes longer before we say our goodbyes, and I call Pam. She’s another person who is delighted that I’m giving Gabe a little hell. I feel a bit better after that, so I call in to Starbucks and get an iced latte. The cap and sunglasses do nothing to stop me from getting recognized, but that’s fine. I spend some time signing autographs and getting selfies with random fans.

The drive home is relatively quick. I pull into my driveway and sigh in relief. Yes, I’m one of those actors who bought an obnoxiously large house in the Hollywood Hills. At the time, I thought it was fabulous, but now I just feel lonely. Toni is the only one who really visits. The pool boy pops by every few days, but that’s it.

At thirty-seven, I thought I would be further along in life. You know, wife, kids, etc., but it never happened. I was being naïve to think I could have such normality. Women want the actress, not the real Ellie Bishop. They want the glitz and glamour. I know I portray that, and honestly, I love it, but I kind of thought I would find a partner who wanted me for...well, me.

My high heels echo through the house as I head to the kitchen. I finished my iced latte in the car. I’m ready to get on to the harder stuff. The bottle of white in my fridge will do. Hell, I’ll drink mouthwash if it helps me get buzzed.

My phone vibrates. I know exactly who it is, and I can’t stop the grin. I swipe the screen and hold it away from my ear. Hearing Gabe’s screaming is all I needed to turn my shitty day around. I put the phone on the kitchen island and proceed to cut up some fruit. I think a nice dip in the pool, then a steak dinner is in order. Finally, the screaming stops.

“Ellie, are you there? Ellie!” I can almost see him pacing in his house. That makes me smile. I bet his face is red and his neck vein is popping out.

“I’m here.” Oh, I sound so calm and collected.

“Explain what the fuck is going on.” Ugh. I bet he just spit everywhere when he shouted. Nasty.

“Oh, you thought I was joking about the pay cut, huh?”

“How dare you—” My turn to get pissed!

“How dare I what? Hmm? Carry on, Gabe, and you’ll see another reduction. You may have Mother to stop me from firing you, but that’s all she can do. Without me, you are nothing. If you were, you’d have other clients. You’d make a name for yourself without riding my coattails. Shut your mouth and do your job. That means you do what I say. And before you argue. Every time you go behind my back, I will drop your pay by ten percent.” I press the red button before he can reply. Damn, that felt good.

My laptop is still in the living room with the contracts for the show on the screen. I look at the money that was agreed, and I almost choke. Shit, Gabe *did* squeeze them. I also notice he’s earmarked a very generous amount of that money for himself. That’s going to change. I find a list of items they expect me to take. I want to cry again. There’s only one person who can help.

“Paris, I need you.” Paris is my stylist. She’s been with me for over ten years, and I trust her implicitly. I haven’t done my own clothes shopping since the day I hired her.

“What for? You have no upcoming events.” She knows my schedule better than I do.

“I’m going to the jungle.” Silence. “Paris?” Still silence. I check the phone to make sure I haven’t hung up with my face. “Paris?”

“Who the hell is this? Do you know impersonating someone is a criminal offense!”

“Paris, it’s me, for god’s sake.”

“The Ellie Bishop I know would never step foot in a jungle. Nice try. I’m calling the police.”

“Paris, you have a tattoo of a man mowing your pubes.”

“Ellie, why the fuck are you going to the jungle?” I sigh and tell her the tragic story.

“I’ll be over in an hour. Email me the list of items, and we’ll discuss what we can do. You might have to be in a sweaty jungle, but that doesn’t mean you can’t be the most stylish woman ever to step foot in the place.” I love her with all my Versace-loving heart.

As I wait for Paris, I Google this Robin fella. Nothing. I find absolutely nothing, which does not bode well, right? Everyone has an online presence. Honestly, all I want is confirmation he’s a strapping six-foot beast who could kill a tiger if needed. Shit, are there tigers in the Amazon?

I am definitely going to die.

Paris saunters in with her arms laden with clothes. The list I was given is quite precise. None of the things Paris has brought are on that list. Will I need a dress in the jungle? Or wedged heels? No, but they are lovely.

“I’m thinking jean shorts, halter top, and wedged sandals for the journey,” she says, laying everything out.

“I love what you’ve brought.”

“Of course you do. I’m brilliant at my job, El.”

Toni’s voice echoes downstairs. I shout my location and wait for her. Toni loves to play dress-up. She’s also very jealous that I snagged Paris all those years ago and won’t share her. “Hello, lovely ladies. I come bearing gifts.” Toni stands in my doorway with a bottle of tequila in one hand and a DVD in the other. I didn’t know they still made DVDs.

“Hey, T, you planning a party?” Paris asks from inside my closet.

“We’re having a *Wild Celebrities* marathon, and I thought it would be better to do that with some good tequila.”

“I don’t know, Toni.” I sigh.

“Listen, it’s better to get an idea of what you’re going to be doing, right? Plus, you can see the survival experts in action. I brought the first three seasons.”

“None of those are my survival expert, though,” I protest.

“No, but they’ll have the same skills as Colin and Richard.”

“She has a point, El.” Paris walks back into the bedroom. “What do you think about sequins in the jungle?”

“I’m thinking I don’t want to attract anything, so maybe not.”

“Maybe pack something practical, too,” Toni suggests.

I look at all the clothes Paris has picked out for me. If I die, at least I’ll look good, I suppose.

About the Author

Alyson was born and raised in the heart of England. She moved to Paris in 2015 when she met her wife. Together they moved to the west of France where they now live with their two dogs and pet bird.

Alyson discovered her love of writing in her mid thirties. Her debut book, *A Dance Towards Forever* was inspired by her wife and their very own love story. Alyson wrote *Diving Into Her* and *Always Emilie*, which added with her first book created *The French Connection* series. All Amazon Best Sellers.

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