

An excerpt from *Skin Game*

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CAMERA 0001

The final contestant arrives in the forest clearing—a slender, dark-haired, pale-skinned man in a tweed blazer and a straw fedora. Irises so blue they must have a patent pending from a chemical plant off the New Jersey turnpike. He takes a Sharpie from a khaki-clad crew member and scrawls *IAN* on a Hello-My-Name-Is sticker and slaps it on his lapel. The others mill uneasily, making small talk, but this man strides, duffel bag slung over one shoulder, a sideshow huckster scouting for rubes.

His eyes settle on the easiest mark in the group, and one of the youngest. A girl, early twenties, a blend of exotic ethnicities, kinky black hair pulled back in a sparkly clip. Her name badge reads *LEAH*. She's the picture of store-bought bohemia, but she's bundled tight in Midwestern naivety under the skinny jeans and tunic top and chunky plastic jewelry. Her strange amber eyes pan the site as if searching for an escape route. Everyone was allowed to bring what they could carry, but she seems to have arrived for the battle unarmed.

Not far from her stands a tall, wiry black man with graying dreadlocks. *GREG*. His arms wave emphatically as he speaks to a younger guy—fit body, overly enthusiastic smile, a camouflage shirt bearing a sticker with the name *BRAD*. He says something funny and earns a loud laugh and a high-five from the man next to him, a fellow twenty-something dressed all in black and called *JAVIER*. He's brimming with competitive energy, his hyper-curly black hair making him seem electrified, the polar opposite of the man seated to his left.

Camped out on a log, in the center of the group but unmistakably disengaged, is a kind-looking fellow, perhaps just shy of thirty. Dirty blond hair overdue for a trim, soft face, prominent nose, watchful, melancholy eyes. *RORY HOBBS*, he's labeled, in tidy capitals. The Sharpie-wielding crew member approaches. Nicknames or first names only,

he says, and our man Rory politely obliterates his surname. He swallows frequently, doing an imitation of calm patience that won't be winning him any acting awards. His eyes dart to the woman standing opposite him across the clearing's unlit fire pit.

*CHLOE*, her label says. Her posture tells us she'd prefer to be dressed in a tailored suit and ball-stomping heels, but the hiking pants and boots and vest say she's more interested in winning than in looking good for the viewers. Her honey-blond hair and salon-perfect highlights beg to differ, but she pulls her wavy mane into a ponytail and pushes her mirrored aviator shades to the top of her head. There's a hefty-lensed camera hung around her neck. She raises it to snap a shot of the huge man busy hitting on her.

A mercenary—that's what he looks like. Six-four, easily. Buzzed hair, three days' stubble, sharp hazel eyes like a raptor. The arms crossed over his chest are as thick as Chloe's thighs and his body language says he'd be happy to have the thighs in question wrapped around his hips. His sexual interest is about as subtle as the hunting knife sheathed at his belt or the writing across his neck. The tattoo reads *Mother*, though his attitude suggests the artist ran out of ink before he could add *fucker*. His name badge reads *DAISEY*.

The man standing behind him is dwarfed in comparison. Five-seven or -eight, compact, Asian, with a short, naturally spiky Mohawk overgrown by a few weeks. *PIKE*, he's called. His face is as hard to read as his age, the expression landing somewhere between cool apathy and fierce vigilance. There's a backpack at his feet and a sturdy plastic case in his hand. He turns as a girl nudges him, pointing at the case.

The young woman nods as he tells her it's supplies. She smiles brightly, dark eyes sparkling. She's small, just over five feet, but her tank top showcases the accomplished arms of a climber or rower. Her frame pack looks punishing though she doesn't show a single sign of strain. Of everyone in the initial group of twelve, she seems the most relaxed. Her creamy complexion is as luminous as the shining brown hair she's pulled back into pigtails. *MAC*, her name tag says.

Beside her stand two other twenty-something girls. The one labeled *AMANDA* is doing a fine impression of sunny optimism, her anxiety given away only by the aggressive snapping of her gum. She's dressed to hike in shorts and a tee, mouse-brown ponytail threaded through the back of her baseball cap. The girl beside her is fair-skinned

with a sunburned nose and flaming red hair piled into a messy bun. *MARISSA*, she's called. She's got her skinny arms locked over her chest, looking as fed up as a woman trapped in a lunch-hour line at the DMV.

A loud whistle cuts short the twelve-way orgy of scrutiny as a stunning black woman in a cropped khaki blazer and matching jodhpurs strides to the center of the clearing, glossy jackboots crunching across the dirt.

"Hello!" Her voice is magnified by a tiny headset, and she trains a smile as blinding-white as a stage light over the scattered competitors.

"Welcome to Alaska. More importantly, welcome to The Ant Farm, as we're calling this group for the next couple of weeks. A social experiment in reality-show format. Uglier than *Survivor* and the Stanford prison experiment put together, we hope, and the only audience will be a handful of the world's leading social psychologists. There are over eight thousand cameras hidden throughout the landscape, but we're going to ask you all to try to forget they're there."

The number earns scattered murmurs and an impressed whistle from Daisey.

"My name is Lenora, and I'll be serving as your emcee for the duration of this experiment. Your jobs will be to focus on the tasks we set you," Lenora goes on, speaking with the perfect diction of a QVC spokeswoman. "Seven challenges in all—for those who make it to the end, that is. As I'm sure you're all acutely aware, there is a five hundred thousand dollar prize for the final man or woman standing. To clarify, that's five hundred grand, *after* taxes. And just a note, we had a last-minute no-show for the original pool of twelve, so an extra welcome to our lucky alternate."

The blue-eyed devil in the fedora, Ian, smiles indulgently.

Leah, the H&M-ad-come-to-life, rakes her gaze around the site again, looking frantic. She opens her mouth to speak but Lenora beats her to it.

"I've been informed that we've received your waivers and you've all passed your physicals, so let's jump right in. You're now going to be broken into your initial teams. For the first Objective, as we're calling the challenges, you'll be in four teams of three, each team designated by a different color." She waves a fistful of bandannas. "Please wear your colors on your head or around your neck so the doctors can keep you straight on tape. You'll also each be wearing a wireless mike."

A staff member holds up a box filled with little black devices.

“We ask that you keep them clipped to your collars at all times, except when you’re bathing or otherwise undressed. Anyone who fails to keep their mike on for a minimum of twenty-two hours per day will be disqualified.

“Now by random selection, here are the teams. Red Team—Brad, Amanda and Javier.” The three lively twenty-somethings jog forward to collect red bandannas and microphones and clap one another on the back.

“White Team—Chloe, Rory and Greg.” Our resident man-eater and mild-mannered nice guy join the dreadlocked fellow in accepting their white bandannas.

“Blue Team—Marissa, Leah and Pike. Please come forward.” Hidden cameras catch stoical Pike’s expression darken as he approaches, taking in the two young women he’s been teamed with, neither looking especially athletic in build or dress.

“And the Black Team—Mac, Ian and Daisey.” Thank goodness for name tags, or we’d all assume the tiny, grinning woman is Daisey, and the hulking man-beast Mac.

“And there you have it,” Lenora says, clapping her hands with finality. “The first Objective will be a foot race, and the last person to finish will be eliminated—as will his or her teammates.” She pauses for the hushed whispers that ripple through the crowd. “So it may behoove you to watch your partners’ backs on this trip.”

Pike swallows deeply, eyes darting from waif to waif.

“That said, don’t get too attached. Between each Objective teams will be switched up, and, in some cases, it’ll be every player for him- or herself.

“Now, you’ve got a little while to get to know your new colleagues, so grab some lunch and some shade, and I’ll meet you back here at sixteen-hundred hours to kick it all off.” Lenora flashes her smile again and departs with squishing hips.

# Objective One

## The Race

MAC

Tying the black bandanna over her pigtails, Mac gave her teammates a good looking over. It might be too soon to tell, but she suspected she'd hit the jackpot. She'd already been confident in her own chances in the upcoming race challenge, and now any reservations she'd had about her would-be partners had flown out the window with a little luck of the draw.

*Ian*, she read on the first man's name tag. He wound his team color around the band of his fedora without taking it off. He was just shy of six feet, she guessed. Slender, and dressed more for an evening at a Prohibition-era speakeasy than a wilderness excursion. Still, he looked youngish and sturdyish and his cool, watchful expression suggested he might just be the sharpest tack in the entire campsite. He was goddamned good-looking as well, and Mac bet he knew it. He caught her eye with one of his Listerine-blue ones and winked, pure evil. He wandered off toward the tables where the crew was setting up a buffet lunch.

Mac frowned at his back and took a seat on a log beside the other man, the one she'd wanted to throw onto the dirt and devour the second she'd seen him. Sweet Christ. She was mired in sex withdrawal and he was a syringe of something hard, ready to send her into one damn beautiful relapse.

"Daisey," she said, reading his name tag. She looked up at his drill-sergeant face, trying to square it with the moniker.

"Mac," he read, and gave her a curt nod of his just-about-shaved head.

"I think I won the teammate lottery," she said, appraising him. *Well* over six feet, and built like a man's idea of manliness. Hers too. "I bet you'll do very nicely."

"I come in handy." There was a slow, thoughtful Southern twang in the words, and Mac had to fend off an urge to hump his leg. Her journey had started a week ago when

she'd left New Mexico, and this was the farthest she'd ever traveled in her life. She was deep in adventure mode and Daisey looked like the personification of Alaska, rough and huge and uncivilized. Yet another new challenge she'd gladly tackle, no monetary motivation necessary.

Ian swaggered back to them, stripping the meat off a barbecued rib. With red sauce smearing his pale fingers he had the air of a gentleman axe-murderer, the kind a girl might happily follow down a dark alley. He took a seat on the ground as Mac turned back to Daisey.

“What did you do to earn those?” she asked, giving his nearest muscly arm a poke.

“Day job. Used to be a marine 'til I got kicked out.”

“For what?” Mac asked.

“I got a problem with authority,” he said, sounding pleased about this.

“So what do you do now?”

“Underwater welder,” Daisey said. “Most dangerous occupation on the planet.”

Ian swallowed and broke his silence. “Sounds like a job for a man with something tae prove.” He aimed his eyes pointedly at Daisey's crotch. “Or something tae compensate for.”

Daisey's brows shot up like a rifle being cocked, and Mac did a double-take at Ian's Scottish accent.

“Let's play nice, boys. Teammates, remember?” She stood before either of the men could, clapping her hands to her thighs. “Who wants a soda?”

“I fancy a beer.” Ian nodded languidly to the cans arranged in an ice-filled tub by the nearest buffet table.

Not to be out-testosteroned, Daisey nodded. “Make it two.”

“We need to be ready to race in a couple hours, kids,” Mac said, hoping the years of training her brothers had given her in man-corralling would prove sufficient this afternoon. “Let's stick with soda, how about that?”

Ian gave her a pitying look. He stood and skirted her to grab two beers from the cooler, tossing one to Daisey. Mac wasn't about to wreck the truce inherent in the gesture.

“I bet you just both failed some little behavioral psycho-whatever test,” she said,

deciding to be amused.

“And I bet you’re dying tae join us.” Ian sat and leaned back, sounding as if he meant more than just drinking with the two of them. He cracked the can and took a deep draught.

Mac squinted up at the midday sun. “You’re right, actually.” She went to the catering table and grabbed herself a beer, sitting to make a triangle with Ian and Daisey. “Fuck the cameras.” She enjoyed the cold prickle of the liquid as it slid down her throat. “If you two get sloshed and wreck this for me, I’ll be damned if I’m going to lose *and* be sober for it.”

“Atta girl.” Daisey leaned over to tap his can against hers and Mac took a long, thorough gander at his bare arm, wanting to sink her teeth in like an amorous pit bull and never let go.

“So, Mac,” Ian said, catching her off guard again with his heavy brogue. “What’s that short for, eh? MacDonald? MacClure? MacKenzie?”

“You can guess for an hour and you’ll never get it.” She took another drink.

“MacCarthy? MacGrath?”

“Machiniak,” she said.

“Polack,” Daisey said, not quite an insult but not far off.

She rolled her eyes. “And what sort of a name’s *Daisey*, anyway?”

“Irish.”

“American,” Ian corrected, definitely an insult.

“Watch yourself, pretty boy.” Daisey’s eyes flicked to Ian’s hat, his tweed blazer, his black dress shoes.

“A Polack, a Scotsman and a Yank-Mick walk into a social experiment,” Mac said, hoping to diffuse the manly tensions—clearly her role in this team. “So what do *you* do, Ian?”

“I smoke a hell of a lot,” he said, pulling a metal case out of his breast pocket.

“You mind?”

“Kind of.”

He nodded, getting to his feet and wandering a few paces toward the woods to light up.

“Cute,” Daisey said, implying the opposite. He turned to Mac. “What about you? What do you do?”

“I run an outdoor adventure company with my three older brothers, in New Mexico,” she said with a smile. “Rafting, hiking, camping, climbing, all that stuff.”

“Hunting?”

“Nope. But it looks like you’ve got us covered on that count,” she said, taking a sip and pointing with her pinkie at Daisey’s knife.

He nodded back. “There’s more where that came from.”

“Where you from?”

“Outside Biloxi.”

Ah. Mac thought she ought to send the state of Mississippi a thank-you note for his accent. “And you live there now?”

“Between jobs, yeah. I do a lot of welding on rigs in the Gulf. Go home for a week every couple months.”

“Got a woman willing to put up with that schedule?” Mac asked, shameless.

“Even if I did, she’d never stick around for the rest of my bullshit.” He finished off his beer and crushed the can in his fist. “What about you? Your brothers let any guys within ten yards of you?”

“Not lately.” She gave him a conspiring look as Ian returned, fragrant as an ashtray. “Jesus, you smoke Marlboro Extra Tars or something?”

“I roll my own,” he said, distracted as he scanned the other teams. “We putting bets on the losers?” He glanced back at Daisey and Mac. “Got my dosh on Fu Manchu and the bulimia twins.” He nodded to the Asian guy named Pike whom Mac had spoken with earlier. His two female teammates combined probably weighed less than Daisey.

“Well, it won’t be us that goes down first.” Daisey pointed at Mac. “She runs an outdoorsy thing with her brothers,” he told Ian. “And I’m ex-military. You’re our weak link, cancer-boy, and I still think we’ve got all these yahoos beat. There’s our biggest threat.” He nodded toward the red-bandannaed group on the far side of the site, two guys and a girl, all college-aged, all fit and looking capable of giving Mac’s team a run for its money.

Ian nodded, eyes narrowing.

Mac looked around. “My ego’s not riding on this, but I can’t say I’ve got much faith in those three.” She pointed to the flawless thirty-something blonde woman with the camera slung around her neck. She was flanked by a fair-haired man who looked remarkably like an accountant, plus a more likely competitor—the wiry African guy named Greg. “I give that woman until the bugs start biting,” Mac said. “Who wears lipstick on a wilderness expedition?”

Daisey smiled widely and crossed his powerful arms. “Beats me, but I’ll tell you where she can leave it. And it ain’t the rim of a coffee cup.”

Mac rolled her eyes. Ian just smirked, seeming focused somewhere outside their trio, outside the entire group. Seeming like a viewer, not a participant.

Mac turned to him. “I caught you smiling like that when that Lenora chick said there was an alternate. Was that you?”

He nodded.

“How come you look so smug?”

“See that lass?” He pointed across the clearing to the funkily dressed girl with dark, curly hair and the weird pale eyes.

“Yeah. I think her name’s Leah.”

“Her bloke was meant tae be here too,” Ian said.

That explained her conspicuous lack of supplies and orphaned expression. “How do you know that?”

“I ran intae him at a petrol station, hour before the deadline. White as a sheet. Said he could’nae go through with it. Said his lassie flew in separate, she was counting on him, but he did’nae want tae go.”

“But why wouldn’t he at least show up and give her whatever stuff he brought for the trip?” Mac asked. Daisey echoed her with a “Yeah.” “Or at least *tell* her. Nobody’s here against their will.”

“Poor sod ran intae some car trouble,” Ian said, eyes glittering. “Guess he never made it. Cannae complain, personally. Pure dead brilliant, that luck.”

Mac’s skin crawled. “Yeah, what a fantastic stroke of good fortune.”

Daisey glanced between them, hard to read.

Mac gave Ian a final cold glare before standing up, and he met her venom with a

tight, lip-biting smile. She strode across the campsite to where Leah and Pike and the red-haired girl stood, making small talk.

“Hi,” she said, looking between them.

“Hey,” Pike offered, cautious.

“Don’t worry, I’m not trying to infiltrate you,” she said affably. “Could I borrow Leah for a second?” Mac gave them all her finest cheesy, disarming grin.

Leah followed her to a spot by the fire pit and Mac could *feel* Ian’s attention on them. Good. Let him sweat...if he was capable of such a human function.

“I don’t mean to be nosy, but you look like someone who didn’t plan on being here alone.”

Leah’s amber eyes widened. “Yeah. My boyfriend was supposed to be here. The crew said he called right after the deadline, that his car broke down, but I doubt it.” Her voice turned bitter. “He’s been acting weird since last week about the whole thing.”

“That sucks. Let me guess—he was bringing the gear?”

Leah nodded. “He drove up, I flew. He had our stuff and all my outdoor clothes. And nobody’s allowed in now that the experiment’s started. Awesome.” She held out her arms to showcase her woefully inappropriate wardrobe. “And all this was his idea in the first place.”

“Men can be real shits.” Mac’s gaze snapped reflexively to Ian. “Listen, I don’t have a ton to offer but I’m sure I could lend you a shirt or two, and I’ve got an extra canteen.”

Leah looked about ready to give her a kidney in return. “Seriously? Just a shirt would be amazing. I look like a moron.” She plucked miserably at her stylish top. “At least I wore flats.”

Mac glanced down at Leah’s espadrilles and winced with sympathy blisters. “Follow me. We’ll see what I can spare.”

She led Leah back to her team’s corner and Mac had to hand it to Ian—if he was worried that she’d said anything about him, she couldn’t read it on his face.

Daisey gave the two women a skeptical look. “No fraternizing with the enemy.”

Mac brushed past him. “Put it back in your pants, soldier.” She rooted through her frame pack and found a couple of shirts and a pair of wool socks and a spare jog-bra for

Leah, plus her extra water jug.

“You are a *lifesaver*,” Leah muttered, hugging the supplies to her chest. “I owe you so bad. Let me know if you need anything. Not that I’ve got much to offer.”

“Just be glad you’re not the ref in a dick-measuring contest,” Mac said loudly, casting a glare at her colleagues.

Leah laughed, the smile turning her pretty face from haunted to warm in an instant. She thanked Mac again and went back to her team.

Daisey rounded on Mac. “What the fuck was that?”

“It’s called human decency.”

“No, it’s called giving the competition a leg up,” he said, and as much as Mac wanted to smack him, she wanted to knock him down and molest him far worse.

She stared condemningly at Ian. “Well, my best guess is that our team already screwed her, big-time.”

“I have’nae screwed anyone yet,” he said innocently, then flashed his unreal eyes up and down Mac’s body. “But I’m taking reservations—”

“So the least we can do is help her,” Mac concluded, talking over him.

Daisey shook his head, baffled. “This ain’t a Girl Scout jamboree. This is *Lord of the Flies*.”

Ian nodded his agreement. “Sympathy’s as good tae you out here as sunstroke. Best you start thinking of everyone as the enemy.”

“Including you two?” she asked.

Ian cracked a grin. “You’re damn straight.”