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Written by Alexandra Oliva

Published by Michael Joseph

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THE LAST ONE

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THE LAST ONE

A Novel

Alexandra Oliva

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THE LAST ONE

0.

The first one on the production team to die will be the editor. He doesn't yet feel ill, and he's no longer out in the field. He went out only once, before filming started, to see the woods and to shake the hands of the men whose footage he'd be shaping; asymptomatic transmission. He's been back for more than a week now and is sitting alone in the editing studio, feeling perfectly well. His T-shirt reads: COFFEE IN, GENIUS OUT. He taps a key and images flicker across the thirty-two-inch screen dominating his cluttered workstation.

The opening credits. A flash of leaves, oak and maple, followed immediately by an image of a woman who described her complexion as "mocha" on her application, and aptly so. She has dark eyes and large breasts barely contained in an orange sport top. Her hair is a mass of tight black spirals, each placed with perfection.

Next, panoramic mountains, one of the nation's northeastern glories, green and vibrant at the peak of summer. Then, a rabbit poised to bolt and, limping through a field, a young white man with buzzed-off hair that glints like mica in the sun. A close-up of this same man, looking stern and young with sharp blue eyes. Next, a petite woman of Korean descent wearing a blue plaid shirt and kneeling on one leg. She's holding a knife and looking at the ground. Behind her, a tall bald man with panther-dark skin and a week's worth of stubble. The camera zooms in. The woman is skinning a rabbit. This is followed by another still, the man with the dark skin, but this time without the stubble. His brown-black eyes meet the camera calmly and with confidence, a look that says *I mean to win.*

A river. A gray cliff face dotted with lichen—and another white man, this one with wild red hair. He clings to the cliff, the focus of the shot manipulated so that the rope holding him fades into the rock, like a salmon-colored slick.

The next still is of a light-skinned, light-haired woman, her green eyes shining through brown-rimmed square glasses. The editor pauses on this image. There's something about this woman's smile and the way she's looking off to the side of the camera that he likes. She seems more genuine than the others. Maybe she's just better at pretending, but still, he likes it, he likes her, because he can pretend too. The production team is ten days into filming, and this woman is the one he's pegged as Fan Favorite. The animal-loving blonde, the eager student. The quick study with the easy laugh. So many angles from which to choose—if only it were his choice alone.

The studio door opens and a tall white man strides in. The editor stiffens in his chair as the off-site producer comes to lean over his shoulder.

"Where do you have Zoo now?" asks the producer.

"After Tracker," says the editor. "Before Rancher."

The producer nods thoughtfully and takes a step away. He's wearing a crisp blue shirt, a dotted yellow tie, and jeans. The editor is as light-skinned as the producer but would darken in the sun. His ancestry is complicated. Growing up, he never knew which ethnicity box to check; in the last census he selected white.

"What about Air Force? Did you add the flag?" asks the producer.

The editor swivels in his chair. Backlit by the computer monitor, his dark hair shimmers like a jagged halo. "You were serious about that?" he asks.

"Absolutely," says the producer. "And who do you have last?"

"Still Carpenter Chick, but—"

"You can't end with her now."

But that's what I'm working on is what the editor had been about to say. He's been putting off rearranging the opening credits since yesterday, and he still has to finish the week's finale. He has a long day ahead.

A long night too. Annoyed, he turns back to his screen. "I was thinking either Banker or Black Doctor," he says.

"Banker," says the producer. "Trust me." He pauses, then asks, "Have you seen yesterday's clips?"

Three episodes a week, no lead time to speak of. They might as well be broadcasting live. It's unsustainable, thinks the editor. "Just the first half hour."

The producer laughs. In the glow of the monitor his straight teeth reflect yellow. "We struck gold," he says. "Waitress, Zoo, and, uh . . ." He snaps his fingers, trying to remember. "Rancher. They don't finish in time and Waitress flips her shit when they see the"—air quotes—" 'body.' She's crying and hyperventilating—and Zoo snaps."

The editor shifts nervously in his seat. "Did she quit?" he asks. Disappointment warms his face. He was looking forward to editing her victory, or, more likely, her graceful defeat in the endgame. Because he doesn't know how she could possibly overcome Tracker; Air Force has his tweaked ankle working against him, but Tracker is so steady, so knowledgeable, so strong, that he seems destined to win. It is the editor's job to make Tracker's victory seem a little less inevitable, and he was planning to use Zoo as his primary tool in this. He enjoys editing the two of them together, creating art from contrast.

"No, she didn't quit," says the producer. He claps the shoulder of the editor. "But she was *mean.*"

The editor looks at Zoo's soft image, the kindness in those green eyes. He doesn't like this turn of events. This doesn't fit at all.

"She yells at Waitress," the producer continues, "tells her she's the reason they lost. All this shit. It's fantastic. I mean, she apologizes like a minute later, but whatever. You'll see."

Even the best among us can break, thinks the editor. That's the whole idea behind the show, after all—to break the contestants. Though the twelve who entered the ring were told that it's about survival. That it's a race. All true, but. Even the title they were told was a deception. Subject to change, as the fine print read. The title in its textbox does not read *The Woods,* but *In the Dark.*

"Anyway, we need the updated credits by noon," says the producer.

"I know," says the editor.

"Cool. Just making sure." The producer purses his fingers into a pistol and pops a shot at the editor, then turns to leave. He pauses, nodding toward the monitor. The screen has dimmed into energy-saving mode, but Zoo's face is still visible, though faint. "Look at her, smiling," he says. "Poor thing had no idea what she was in for." He laughs, the soft sound somewhere between pity and glee, then exits to the hall.

The editor turns to his computer. He shakes his mouse, brightening Zoo's smiling face, then gets back to work. By the time he finishes the opening credits, lethargy will be settling into his bones. The first cough will come as he completes the week's finale early tomorrow morning. By the following evening he will become an early data point, a standout before the explosion. Specialists will strive to understand, but they won't have time. Whatever this is, it lingers before it strikes. Just along for the ride, then suddenly behind the wheel and gunning for a cliff. Many of the specialists are already infected.

The producer too will die, five days from today. He will be alone in his 4,100-square-foot home, weak and abandoned, when it happens. In his final moments of life he will unconsciously lap at the blood leaking from his nose, because his tongue will be just that dry. By then, all three episodes of the premiere week will have aired, the last a delightfully mindless break from breaking news. But they're still filming, mired in the region hit first and hardest. The production team tries to get everyone out, but they're on Solo Challenges and widespread. There were contingency plans in place, but not for this. It's a spiral like that child's toy: a pen on paper, guided by plastic. A pattern, then something slips and—madness. Incompetency and panic collide. Good intentions give way to self-preservation. No one knows for sure what happened, small scale or large. No one knows precisely what went wrong. But before he dies, the producer will know this much: *Something went wrong.*

I.

The door of the small market hangs cracked and crooked in the frame. I step through warily, knowing I'm not the first to seek sustenance here. Just inside the entrance, a carton of eggs is overturned. The sulfurous innards of a dozen Humpty Dumptys cake the floor, long since past possible reassembly. The rest of the shop has not fared much better than the eggs. The shelves are mostly empty and several displays have been toppled. I note the camera mounted in the corner of the ceiling without making eye contact with the lens, and when I step forward a ghastly stench rushes me. I smell the rotten produce, the spoiled dairy in the open, unpowered coolers. I notice another smell too, one I do my best to ignore as I begin my search.

Between two aisles, a bag of corn chips has spilled onto the floor. A footprint has reduced much of the pile to crumbs. A large footprint with a pronounced heel. A work boot, I think. It belongs to one of the men—not Cooper, who claims not to have worn boots in years. Julio, perhaps. I crouch and pick up one of the corn chips. If it's fresh, I'll know he was here recently. I crush the chip between my fingers. It's stale. It tells me nothing.

I consider eating the chip. I haven't eaten since the cabin, since before I was sick, and that was days ago, maybe a week, I don't know. I'm so hungry I can't feel it anymore. I'm so hungry I can't fully control my legs. I keep surprising myself by tripping over rocks and roots. I *see* them and I try to step over them, I think I am stepping over them, but then my toe catches and I stumble.

I think of the camera, of my husband watching me scavenge corn chips off a country market floor. It's not worth it. They must have left me something else. I drop the chip and heave myself upright. The motion makes my head swim. I pause, regaining equilibrium, then walk by the produce stand. Dozens of rotted bananas and deflated brown orbs—apples?—watch me pass. I know hunger now, and it angers me that they've allowed so much to go to waste for the sake of atmosphere.

Finally, a glint under a bottom shelf. I ease to my hands and knees; the compass hanging from a string around my neck falls down and taps the floor. I tuck the compass between my shirt and sports bra, noticing as I do that the dot of sky-blue paint at its bottom edge has been rubbed nearly to nonexistence. I'm so tired I have to remind myself that this isn't significant; all it means is that the intern assigned the job was given cheap paint. I lean down farther. Under the shelf is a jar of peanut butter. A small crack trickles from beneath the lid to disappear behind the label, just above the *O* in ORGANIC. I run my finger over the mark in the glass but can't feel the break. Of course they left me peanut butter; I hate peanut butter. I slip the jar into my pack.

The shop's standing coolers are empty, save for a few cans of beer, which I don't take. I'd hoped for water. One of my Nalgenes is empty and the second sloshes at my side only a quarter full. Maybe some of the others got here before me; they remembered to boil *all* their water and didn't lose days vomiting alone in the woods. Whoever left that footprint—Julio or Elliot or the geeky Asian kid whose name I can't remember—got the quality goods, and this is what it means to be last: a cracked jar of peanut butter.

The only area of the shop I haven't searched is behind the register. I know what's waiting for me there. The smell I don't admit smelling: spoiled meat and animal excrement, a hint of formaldehyde. The smell they want me to think is human death.

I pull my shirt over my nose and approach the cash register. Their prop is where I expect it to be, faceup on the floor behind the counter. They've dressed this one in a flannel shirt and cargo pants. Breathing through my shirt, I step behind the counter and over the prop. The motion disturbs a collection of flies that buzz up toward me. I feel their

feet, their wings, their antennae twitching against my skin. My pulse quickens and my breath seeps upward, fogging the bottom edges of my glasses.

Just another Challenge. That's all this is.

I see a bag of trail mix on the floor. I grab it and retreat, through the flies, over the prop. Out the cracked and crooked door, which mocks my exit with applause.

"Fuck you," I whisper, hands on knees, eyes closed. They will have to censor this, but fuck them too. Cursing isn't against the rules.

I feel the wind but can't smell the woods. All I smell is the prop's stench. The first one didn't smell so bad, but it was fresh. This one and the one I found in the cabin, they're supposed to seem older, I think. I blow my nose roughly into the breeze, but I know it will be hours before the odor leaves me. I can't eat until it does, no matter how badly my body needs calories. I need to move on, to get some distance between me and here. Find water. I tell myself this, but it's a different thought that's sticking—the cabin and their second prop. The doll swathed in blue. This phase's first true Challenge has become a gelatinous memory that stains my awareness, always.

Don't think about it, I tell myself. The command is futile. For several more minutes I hear the doll's cries in the wind. And then—*enough*—I unfurl and add the bag of trail mix to my black backpack. I shoulder the pack and clean my glasses with the hem of the microfiber long-sleeved tee I wear under my jacket.

Then I do what I've done nearly every day since Wallaby left: I walk and I watch for Clues. *Wallaby,* because none of the cameramen would tell us their names and his early-morning appearances reminded me of a camping trip I took in Australia years ago. My second day out, I woke in a national park by Jervis Bay to find a gray-brown swamp wallaby sitting in the grass, staring at me. No more than five feet between us. I'd slept with my contact lenses in; my eyes itched, but I could see the light stripe of fur across the wallaby's cheek clearly. He was beautiful. The look I received in return for my awe felt appraising and imposing, but also entirely impersonal: a camera's lens.

The analogy is imperfect, of course. The human Wallaby isn't nearly

as handsome as the marsupial, and a nearby camper waking up and shouting "Kangaroo!" wouldn't send him hopping away. But Wallaby was always the first to arrive, the first to aim his camera at my face and not say good morning. And when they left us at the group camp it was he who reappeared just long enough to extract each desired confessional. Dependable as the sunrise until the third day of this Solo Challenge, when the sun rose without him, traversed the sky without him, set without him—and I thought, *It was bound to happen eventually.* The contract said we'd be on our own for long stretches, monitored remotely. I was prepared for this, looking forward to it, even—being watched and judged discreetly instead of overtly. Now I'd be thrilled to hear Wallaby come tromping through the woods.

I'm so tired of being alone.

The late-summer afternoon trickles by. The sounds around me are layers: the shuffle of my footsteps, the drumroll of a nearby woodpecker, the rustle of wind teasing leaves. Sporadically, another bird joins in, its call a sweet-sounding *chip chip chip chippy chip.* The woodpecker was easy, but I don't know this second bird. I distract myself from my thirst by imagining the kind of bird that would belong to that call. Tiny, I think. Brightly colored. I imagine a bird that doesn't exist: smaller than my fist, bright yellow wings, blue head and tail, a pattern of smoldering embers on its belly. This would be the male, of course. The female would be dull brown, as is so often the way of birds.

The ember bird's song sounds one final time, distantly, and then the ensemble is weaker for its absence. My thirst returns, so strong. I can feel the pinch of dehydration behind my temples. I grasp my nearly empty Nalgene, feel its lightness and the fabric of the crusty blue bandana tied around its lid loop. I know my body can last several days without water, but I can't bear the dryness of my mouth. I take a careful sip, then run my tongue over my lips to catch lingering moisture. I taste blood. I raise my hand; the base of my thumb comes back smeared with red. Seeing this, I feel the crack in my chapped upper lip. I don't know how long it's been there.

Water is my priority. I've been walking for hours, I think. My shadow

is much longer now than when I left the shop. I've passed a few houses, but no more stores and nothing marked with blue. I can still smell the prop.

As I walk I try to step on my shadow knees. It's impossible but also a distraction. Such a distraction that I don't notice the mailbox until I've nearly passed it. It's shaped like a trout, the house number fashioned with wooden scales of all colors. Beside the mailbox is the mouth of a long driveway, which twists away through white oaks and the occasional birch tree. I can't see the house that must exist at the driveway's end.

I don't want to go. I haven't entered a house since a handful of sky-blue balloons led me to a cabin that was blue inside, so much blue. Dusky light and a teddy bear, watching.

I can't do it.

You need water. They won't use the same trick twice.

I start up the driveway. Each step comes heavy and my foot keeps catching. My shadow is at my right, scaling and leaping from wooded trunks as I pass, as nimble as I am awkward.

Soon I see a monstrous Tudor in dire need of a new coat of its off-white paint. The house slumps into an overgrown lawn, the kind of building that as a child I would have play-believed was haunted. A red SUV is parked outside, blocking my view of the front door. After so long on my feet the SUV seems an otherworldly entity. They said no driving and it's not blue, but it's here and maybe that means something. I walk slowly toward the SUV, and by extension the house. Maybe they've placed a case of water in the back of the vehicle. Then I won't have to go inside. The SUV is splattered with dried mud, the splashed pattern insisting on the substance's former liquidity. Even dry, it's not dirt but mud. It looks like an inkblot test, but I can't see any images.

Chip chip chip, I hear. *Chippy chip.*

My ember bird is back. I cock my head to judge the bird's direction and in doing so notice another sound: the gentle burble of running water. Relief engulfs me; I don't have to go inside. The mailbox was

meant only to lead me to the stream. I should have heard it on my own, but I'm so tired, so thirsty. I needed the bird to bring my focus back from sight to sound. I turn around and follow the sound of flowing water. The bird calls again and I mouth *Thank you.* My split lip stings.

As I backtrack to find the brook, I think of my mother. She too would think I was meant to find the mailbox, but to her the guiding hand wouldn't be a producer's. I imagine her sitting in her living room, enfolded in a haze of cigarette smoke. I imagine her watching, interpreting my every success as affirmation and my every disappointment as a lesson. Co-opting my experiences as her own, as she has always done. Because I wouldn't exist without her, and for her that's always been enough.

I think too of my father, next door at the bakery, charming tourists with free samples and country wit while he tries to forget his tobacco-scented wife of thirty-one years. I wonder if he too watches me.

Then I see the brook, a measly, exquisite thing just east of the driveway. My attention snaps to and my insides rock with relief. I long to cup my hands and bring the cold wet to my lips. Instead, I finish the warm liquid in my Nalgene—half a cup, maybe. I probably should have drunk it earlier; people have died of dehydration while conserving water. But that's in hotter climates, the kinds of places where the sun strips a person's skin. Not here.

After drinking I follow the brook downstream, so I'll spot any troubling debris, dead animals or the like. I don't want to get sick again. I shuffle along for about ten minutes, putting more and more distance between myself and the house. Soon I find a clearing with a huge fallen tree at its edge, about twenty feet from the water, and I release myself to habit, clearing a circle of ground and collecting wood. What I gather, I sort into four piles. The leftmost contains anything thinner than a pencil, the rightmost anything thicker than my wrist. When I have enough to last a few hours, I pick up some dried curls of birch bark, shred them into tinder, and place them on a solid piece of bark.

I unclip a carabiner from a belt loop on my left hip. My fire starter slides along the silver metal and into my hand, which is sunburnt and

crusted with dirt. The fire starter looks a bit like a key and a USB drive threaded together onto an orange cord; that's what I thought when it fell into my possession through a combination of skill and chance after the first Challenge. This was back on Day One, when I could always spot the camera and it was all exciting, even the boring parts.

After a few quick strikes, the tinder begins to smoke. Gently, I scoop it into my hand and blow, eliciting first more smoke and finally tiny flames. I quickly clip the fire starter back onto my belt loop, then, using both hands, place the tinder in the center of my clearing. As I add more tinder the flames grow and smoke saturates my nostrils. I feed the flames the smallest branches, then larger. Within minutes the fire is full, strong, though it probably doesn't look very impressive on camera. The flames are only about a foot high, but that is all I need—not a signal fire, just heat.

I pull my stainless-steel cup from my pack. It's dented and slightly charred, but still solid. After filling it with water, I place it close to the fire. While I wait for the water to heat I force myself to eat a fingerful of peanut butter. After not eating for so long, I'd have thought even my least favorite food would be ambrosial, but it's disgusting, thick and salty, and it sticks to the roof of my mouth. I prod the gummy mass with my dry tongue, thinking I must look as ridiculous as a dog. I should have pretended an allergy on the application; then they would have needed to leave me something else. Or maybe I wouldn't have been selected at all. My brain is too tight to consider the implications of not being chosen, where I would be right now.

Finally, the water boils. I give any microbes a few minutes to die, then use my ragged jacket sleeve as a potholder and pull the cup from the flame. Once the bubbles die down, I pour the boiled water into one of my Nalgenes, filling it about a third of the way.

The second batch heats more quickly. Into the Nalgene the water goes, and after a third round of boiling the bottle is full. I tighten its cap, then jam it into the muddy bottom of the stream, so that the cold water flows over the plastic almost to the rim. The blue bandana drifts with the current. By the time I've filled the second bottle, the first is

nearly cold. I fill the cup and place it to boil yet again, then drink four ounces from the cooled bottle, washing peanut-butter residue down my throat. I wait a few minutes, drink four more ounces. In these short, spaced bursts I finish the bottle. The cup is boiling again and I can feel the membranes of my brain rehydrating. My headache retreats. All this work is probably unnecessary; the stream is clear and quick. Odds are the water's safe, but I took that bet once before and lost.

As I pour the latest batch of water into my bottle, I realize that I haven't built my shelter yet, and the sky is clouded as though for rain. Fading light tells me I don't have long. I push myself to my feet, wincing against the tightness in my hips. I collect five heavy branches from the woods and brace these against the leeward side of the fallen tree, longest to shortest, creating a triangular frame just wide enough to slip into. I pull a black garbage bag from my pack—a parting gift from Tyler, unexpected but appreciated—and spread it over the frame. As I scoop up armfuls of dead leaves and pile them atop the plastic bag, I think of the priorities of survival.

The rules of three. A bad attitude can kill you in three seconds; asphyxiation can kill you in three minutes; exposure in three hours; dehydration in three days; and starvation in three weeks—or is it three months? Regardless, starvation is the least of my concerns. As weak as I feel, it hasn't been that long since I ate. Six or seven days at most, and that's generous. As for exposure, even if it rains tonight it won't be cold enough to kill me. Even without a shelter, I'd be wet and miserable but probably not in danger.

But I don't want to be wet and miserable, and no matter the extravagance of their budget they can't have placed cameras in a shelter that didn't exist before I built it. I keep scooping armfuls of leaves, and when a wolf spider the size of a quarter skitters up my sleeve I flinch. The sharp movement makes my head feel too light, partially detached. The spider clings to my biceps. I flick it away with my opposite hand and watch it bounce into the leaf litter beside the debris hut. It skitters inside and I find it hard to care; they're only mildly venomous. I keep

collecting duff and soon have a foot-deep layer atop my debris hut, and even more inside as padding.

I lay a few fallen branches with splayed fingers of leaves atop the structure to hold it all in place and then turn around to see the fire is barely more than coals. I'm all out of sync tonight. It's the house, I think. I'm still spooked. As I crack off small sticks and feed them to the coals, I glance back at my shelter. It's a low, rambleshack-looking mess with twigs sprouting up from all sides at every angle. I remember how carefully, how slowly, I used to construct my shelters. I wanted them to be as pretty as Cooper's and Amy's. Now all I care about is functionality, though, truth be told, the debris huts all look about the same—except for the big one we built together before Amy left. That was a beauty, topped with branches interwoven like thatch and large enough for all of us, though Randy slept off on his own.

I drink a few more ounces of water and sit beside my resuscitated fire. The sun has departed and the moon is shy. The flames flicker, a smudge on my right lens lending them a starburst sheen.

Time for another night alone.