

ATTACHED
AT
THE HIP

CHRISTINE RICCIO



WEDNESDAY BOOKS
NEW YORK

1

Hi, I'm Orië, And

DAY 1

I am on a beach in Fiji about to be voluntarily marooned on an island to prove a point.

I'm here alone. I don't do things alone. I don't take pictures alone. I don't eat alone. I don't go to the movies alone. I barely shower alone—my dog insists on being in the room with me.

The producer examines the orange clipboard she's holding. Wild red hair billows around her face, tangling in her headset. A cameraman looms over her shoulder, his giant professional-grade lens aimed straight at my face. I shift over the rock I've been positioned on. I'm so anxious, I can't feel my hands. I keep looking down to make sure they're still there. (They are.)

Yes, I auditioned for this. But did I think it would actually pan out? No. Not in a million years. Why would it? Nothing else in my life has. I thought I would fall madly in love with my best friend and get married straight out of high school. I thought I would be excited to graduate college. I thought AcroYoga would just be a fun activity I do to spend time with my sister. I thought by this point I'd be . . . living happily ever after.

I've always pictured Happily Ever After as a linear spectrum, and somehow, I'd deluded myself into thinking I was feet away from the finish line. If you stand at Happily Ever After, spin around, and squint really hard, I'm that moving dot in the distance you can't quite make out, waving frantically

from atop a rock in the middle of the ocean. Happily Ever After is a space station, and I'm Blake Lively in that random movie with the shark.

I'm supposed to introduce myself to the camera when I'm ready. I'm still debating what to say. *Hi, I'm Oriie, and I spent the last ten days alone in a hotel room, scream-singing pop punk songs from 2004.*

The films I grew up on make weaving a happy life look so much easier than it actually is. The random person the protagonist bumps into within the first twenty minutes is always their *perfect* match, and within two hours, all their problems are solved, and would you look at that, they're also getting married. I spent my childhood striving for that. I consciously placed myself in a romance trope. I followed the beats. It didn't work.

2

Lectures with Lark

DAY -90 | THREE MONTHS EARLIER

The screech is out of my control. It spews out of me like steam from a screaming teapot. I'm possessed by pure, unadulterated, body-function-freezing terror for twenty-three seconds before my mom comes tearing down the stairs and bursts into my bathroom.

"Jesus, Orie, where is it?" she bleats, exhausted.

I point to where the evil, possibly blood-sucking demon spider is hovering over the toilet, waiting to drop down and murder me when I least expect it.

My mom grabs two tissues and smashes it midair before the thing even registers the need to flee. I exhale, my hands falling from their en garde positions, smashing up against my cheeks à la *Home Alone*.

"Thank you," I squeak.

Mom sighs, drops the carcass in the toilet, and flushes it. "You have to stop doing that."

"You don't understand. They're out to get me, Mother." I watch as she instinctively starts picking up in here, refolding my towel, straightening out my various skin products. "They have an elaborate plan to steal my first-born child, turn her against me, and send her back to kill me in my sleep."

"The spiders want your specific child?" She's crouched next to the tub now, going through my shower products, shaking them to see what's empty that she can purge from the area.

I lean against the sink. “Yeah, they left a threatening note in the shower steam once. They’re very impressed with my AcroYoga. A child with my skills could be the new Spider-Man.”

Mom smiles, chucks an old bottle of conditioner into the trash, and stands up. “Well, you don’t have any children, so there’s nothing to fear.”

She walks out of the bathroom. I follow her into the den where she folds the blanket sprawled out on the couch.

“They’re on a quest to lay eggs in my makeup. It’s an elaborate plot to gain access to my insides and control me via my organs like kids do in the biology episodes of cartoons.”

“What if the makeup eggs turn *you* into Spider-Man?” She artfully drapes the blanket and heads into my room.

“Don’t be ridiculous, Mom. They would never give me that kind of advantage. They wish me compromised.”

Mom snorts, straightening out my comforter. “Orie, you’re gonna give me a heart attack. You have to stop screaming.”

“You say that like I’m doing it on purpose. I don’t want to do it, but I’m like a werewolf, and spiders are the moon. I’m overcome with guttural fear. Can we get a bug guy back down here?”

“Orie—”

“Please? It’s definitely been over three months. I’ll pay for it. Lark and I have a pretty steady flow of income now. I can pay for it.”

Mom takes a seat on my bed, frowning as she catches sight of the chair in the corner of my room currently buried under a mountain of the colorful new yoga sets I tried on for a sponsorship today. She pulls back the front of her strawberry bob, yanks the band off her wrist, and secures her hair into a tiny bun. “Aren’t you supposed to be outside with Lark and Dad?”

“I am!” I start backing out the bedroom door. “I just have to pee. Now that you’ve slayed the Antichrist, I can do that in peace. Thank you for your service.”

“Go.”

“Okay, hold it!” Dad urges, kneeling with his camera in his Levi’s and light blue button-up. He’s concentrating on the shot, face pressed up against

his DSLR as he focuses through the viewfinder, the setting sun bouncing off his white hair.

Rob Lennox is an artsy guy. He's an uber-passionate creative, constantly raving about his latest ideas and inspirations, and as far as dads go, he's pretty great. He fully supports our obsessions. This man sat next to me on the couch and watched an infinite number of *Hannah Montana* episodes through my elementary school years. He took me to Miley Cyrus concerts. He played her CDs in his car. I was shocked when I learned that other kids' dads didn't also know all the words to "The Best of Both Worlds."

My mom's pretty great, too. I'm one of the rare modern-day young adult humans with still-married parents. Mom and Dad are soul mates—real-life proof that romance books are accurate. She's open and patient but disciplined when she needs to be, and she brings those traits out in all of us. Dad's eager, impulsive, buzzing with energy and innovations. He builds us up, and Mom calms us down. Dad works nights and weekends; she works normal hours during the week. They're the perfect team.

"Hold it!" Dad says again.

"We are holding it." I press out from my precarious base position supporting Lark as she arches over my extended legs. "My eyes are burning!" My back presses against a cold blanket of grass, and my arms quake with the strain of the pose. It's a warm day for October, but not quite warm enough for skintight athletic wear.

Lark shakes slightly. It's rough holding these for more than fifteen seconds.

"Why are your eyes burning?" Lark hisses.

"I don't know. I think some of my glitter must have shifted."

"One more second, just want to try one last angle," Dad shouts from farther down the driveway.

"How many times do I have to lecture you about wearing *glitter* during a shoot?" Lark huffs.

"I like when my eye makeup is shimmery in our pictures, and our followers like it. I did a poll."

"You're not going to see our eye makeup in this pose!"

"I'm not wearing my glasses, so you'll see it enough to think, *oob*, cool, she matched her eye makeup to her outfit."

“Got it!” Dad strolls back toward us.

We are blessed to have a former photographer father to shoot our sponsored content.

For years AcroYoga (acrobatic yoga) was a thing the two of us did for fun. I used the word “content” ironically, and Lark handled the @LennoxSisters AcroYoga Instagram on her own. But seemingly overnight five months ago, it became our job. We went from 70,000 followers to 670,000 within a matter of weeks.

We do these short sister-sister flow videos; imagine AcroYoga as a dance. Lark choreographs a two-minute yoga routine to a popular song, we do it, and she posts it. One of our more impressive flow videos, set to the new Taylor Swift song, went viral. Then all our other sister-sister AcroYoga flow reels started to gain traction. Before we knew it, we had half a million people watching. I’m still trying to wrap my head around it.

Before this summer, Lark would pick up a sponsorship for us here or there, but nothing like the companies and opportunities popping up in our emails now. She’s been lining things up for us, one after another, week after week, leading all the way up to Christmas. It’s been a strange combination of thrilling and terrifying. I never imagined I would be flying out to different cities to host yoga retreats as part of my job.

Lark gracefully dismounts off my feet and folds over her legs to open up her lower back. I shift onto my knees and into an arch to stretch out my pecs.

My sister’s five foot nine and willowy. Her chestnut pin-straight hair is always pulled into a perfect high ponytail. I got Mom’s strawberry-blond hair, which is fun, but it doesn’t tame easily like Lark’s. Mine needs product and tender blow-drying care so as not to become a nonsense nest of frizz.

And Lark’s got these big green doe eyes that trip everyone up. People can’t help but fall in love with her. Through high school, there was always this disconnect when people learned I was her little sister. The compact athletic girl, full of hard angles, who enjoys constantly switching out her glasses and wearing over-the-top colorful glitter makeup to school every day is related to the popular, graceful, perfect president of the senior class? I was the tryhard. Lark was the innately cool smart girl who everyone wanted to date.

But these last few years, that imbalance has shifted. Since we embarked

on this AcroYoga journey and started to grow *together*—I’ve felt less “less than” and more like an equal member of a team. An integral part of a valuable duo. People like *both of us*. People follow my individual Instagram on top of our sister account. It’s been so incredibly validating to be considered just as crucial and viable a human specimen as she is after feeling subpar for so long.

“That was beautiful, girls. I’m going to get these onto the computer!” Dad crunches over dead leaves as he heads back in the house through the sliding glass door to the basement.

“Thanks, Dad!” Lark and I say in unison.

I’m fairly certain Lark is my parents’ favorite, and I can’t blame them. She’d probably be my favorite, too. She’s so on top of her shit. She decides things, and then before you know it, those things are happening. And she’s not just doing the things she decided on; she’s killing the things. *She’s a finisher*.

Lark turns to me. “Earlier, I sent over a Drive link of your new reel for the Nike campaign. Did you get it yet?”

I roll back onto my shoulders and lift my legs in the air, prepping for plow pose. “Oh thanks! I haven’t seen it yet. I was at Wes’s this morning, but I’ll download it as soon as we go back in.”

Wes should be here soon. He’s grabbing Lark, my dad, and me iced coffee from the Tea Shop on his way over to join us for dinner.

Lark stands and grabs my ankles. She lifts them until I’m in a full handstand. “Or . . .” She hesitates for a moment.

“Yeah,” I say, upside down.

Lark exhales. “Are you ever going to dig into an editing program so you can put these things together yourself?”

“The reels? I thought you liked editing?” I step out of the handstand and rise to full height so I can look Lark in the eye. I’m only three inches shorter than her, but I feel much smaller when she asks pointed passive-aggressive questions like this. Lark is a complete control freak. She’s never expressed any interest in sharing that particular workload.

“I do, but we’re getting busier, and it’s become . . . a lot to do all our individual account reels and TikToks and handle our shared one. You’re depending on me for everything.”

"I'm . . . depending on you?" I cross my arms. "You never asked me to do anything."

"Don't get upset."

I bark out a humorless laugh. "I'm not upset. I'm calm!" I focus on the clouds above her head and blow out a breath.

If I know Lark, and I do, she's about to lead me into a seemingly random argument about something she's been stewing about for weeks. We almost never argue, but when we do, it usually starts with Lark saying *don't get upset* and ends with me in tears.

Lark never gets outwardly emotional. She's cool, calm, and collected, even when she's mad. When she's angry, anxious, scared, or hurt, she can be cutting, witty, logical, and pensive. Meanwhile, cast me into any heightened emotion, and I'm incoherent, weepy, loud, and sweaty.

Lark serves me an exasperated look. "Do you think we can have an adult discussion about your role in our business?"

I shove my hands onto my hips. "I don't depend on you for everything."

"Okay, sorry, correction, you depend on me *and* everyone else for everything. You're a codependent person, Orie."

Hurt slices through my chest. *Wow*. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"You can't do anything yourself! You literally don't do anything without Wes, Mom, Dad, me, or our audience holding your hand."

I stare at her, speechless for a moment, before pivoting and power walking toward the house. I tug the sliding glass door open and shove it closed behind me. My toes curl into our fluffy basement rug as I try to calm my nervous system. *Must remain chill so I can speak like an intelligent member of the human race.*

Our sandy wheaten terrier, Stanley, comes barreling down the steps to greet me. I manage to give him a few pets before the glass door slides open again, and Lark comes in.

"I read by myself!" I spout defensively.

Lark sighs behind me. "Yeah, the books Mom brings you."

Damn, I didn't think she'd be able to swing that around.

I spin to face her. "Well, Mom gets free books. Why wouldn't I read those?"

“You never go get your own books!”

“How would I know which to buy? There are so many options, Lark! Why would I waste my money on one I might not like! Mom knows which ones are good.”

Lark smacks a hand to her face. “You could use that thing we work on—the internet.”

“I trust Mom.”

“Ugh, Ori! You’re missing the point. You have this job because I needed an AcroYoga partner, and I’m our manager, so you continue to have this job because I manage it for us. You still live with Mom and Dad, so you don’t have to pay rent—”

I throw my hand up. “I do pay rent!”

She crosses her arms. “How much?”

An annoyed sound escapes my throat. “An amount.”

A very reasonable \$400 a month because Mom wants me to save money for my own place and won’t let me pay a normal rent, even though *I’m fairly certain* they could use the money. The restaurant’s not doing well. It’s closed for the winter, and Dad is concentrating more on photography, which is not normal. I’ve been offering to start paying them a price-appropriate rent every month since graduation, and Mom continues to turn me down.

Lark rolls her eyes. “Mom still does your laundry and picks up after you. Dad cooks your meals. You’re still on the family cell phone plan. You use their internet. Wes brings you coffee every day and goes with you literally everywhere—”

“I don’t have a car!”

“And you don’t have your license!” she snaps.

I flail my arms about. “Where is this coming from, Lark? How is this relevant?”

“You can’t go anywhere without another person! And I edit your video content on top of fielding all our emails. What do you do for this business, Ori?”

I gape at her, feeling like she just punched me in the throat. “I’m sorry, what do I *do for this business*? What are you trying to say? I’m here! I’m always on time. I’m your base! I follow the exercise regime you set up! I go to

the gym to weight train twice a week with Wes, on top of all our practices, so we can do cooler poses! I . . . plan out the outfits for all our shoots!”

“You send me five options and make me choose. And when I don’t choose, you take a poll on Stories. You’re *incapable* of making your own decisions.”

I shrug angrily. “They like being involved in our decisions, Lark!”

Lark backs into the large gray sectional hugging the wall that’s been a staple in the house since we were kids. She collapses onto it, looking drained.

I walk over and blink at her maniacally. “Lark, I do everything you tell me to.”

“That’s the problem, Orie,” she mumbles.

“You want me to disagree with what you tell me to do?”

“No! Oh my god.” She drops her head into her hands.

I perch carefully on the couch a few feet away from her. “I don’t get it. Is this all because of my glitter?”

Lark abruptly straightens, pushing her palms into her thighs. “No! I’m not saying don’t do what I ask. I’m just saying it’d be nice if you took a less passive role in our work. You’re already passive in every other aspect of your life!”

I make an involuntary nasal, offended noise. Lark takes out her phone and starts tapping to avoid looking at me.

I don’t know what to say. I’ll think of the perfect response in an hour, once all this confusion stops raging through my limbs.

After a moment, I poke her in the arm. “Mom and Dad like having me here. I’m saving money for the future.”

She drops the phone from her face. “How long do you think they want you to stay here?”

Wow. “Forever, if I wanted! Mom’s been saying that since we were babies.”

“And what future?” Lark interrupts. “The one where you, what? Marry Wes despite not being in love with him?”

I gasp.

“Have his babies and grow old AcroYoga influencing? What about your English degree? Didn’t you plan on using that?” She gestures to the three

bookcases taking up the entire far wall. It's full of Mom's and my extensive collection of favorites. Lark cleared her books out when she got her own place two years ago. "Did you read all these to influence people about how to lead a healthy lifestyle? I'm the nutritionist, Orié. This is stuff I like to talk about. This AcroYoga health stuff is a thing *I wanted*. You graduated months ago now. What the hell did *you want* to do? What plan have you tabled?"

What plan have I what?

"I don't know! What is this, some weird random intervention? I'm planning to be happy! What's wrong with getting married and having babies? Mom and Dad were high school—"

"Sweethearts," she interjects. "Yeah, I'm aware, Orié."

"They got married and had babies, and they're disgustingly happy."

"You and Wes are not high school sweethearts! If you're not into it anymore, you have to break up with him. Things can't always just stay the same!"

"*You* think I should break up with Wes?" The words wheeze out of me. Lark and Wes have always gotten along so well.

"If you don't want to be with him, then obviously, yes, you should!"

My eyes fall to the braided silver band around my right ring finger. The promise ring Wes gave me before we went off to college. He was ready for a commitment. But I still didn't feel *it*.

You're familiar with *it*: the rom-com movie, romance novel, all-consuming *it*.

I've gone through many a spiral regarding my lack of *it* feelings for Wes. But maybe I'm just not a person who feels *it* feelings! Maybe what I have with Wes is the best a relationship will ever get for me. Am I gonna throw that away? Wes understands me. He supports me.

I clear my throat, struggling to remain tear free. "Wes is my best friend. We've been together for so long. If we break up, it would all be a waste."

"A waste?" Lark shakes her head. "That's not how relationships work. Staying together just for the sake of staying together is the waste, Orié."

And I'm crying.

My self-esteem is bleeding. I need to extricate myself from this conversation. Recover my ability to think. Formulate a well-thought-out

response. I stumble off the couch and back up in the general direction of my bedroom. “I’m not codependent.”

Lark rolls her eyes. “Keep telling yourself that, Orielle.”

Wow.

“Hey!” Dad calls down from the top of the steps. “Dinner’s ready! Timer for the lasagna just went off. Wes is here helping me set the table.”

Lark and I stare at each other. She’s completely maintained her composure: self-assured, leaning against the couch, legs crossed, arms crossed, in her purple corset-style yoga top with turquoise accents and matching leggings. As I suspected, she’s clearly been thinking about this for a while. I inhale a sharp breath.

“What?” she demands.

I clear my throat again. “Are *you* . . . breaking up with *me*?”

Lark rolls her eyes again. “I’m your sister. I can’t break up with you.”

“Do you not want me to be your yoga partner anymore?” I clarify sheepishly.

Lark exhales. “That’s not what I’m saying. But Mel *has* been doing AcroYoga with me on the side for a while now, and she’s gotten pretty good.”

She doesn’t want to work with me anymore. But I’ve been a perfect partner. We put so much time into this—I’ve gotten so good at it. We’re a team!

“I—wha—are you—?” I press my hands against my temples. “Lark. We’ve been building an audience for five years together . . . You want to replace me with your girlfriend?” I shake my head, incredulous. “Isn’t Mel busy teaching fifth grade? Doesn’t she like teaching? How long have you been planning this? I don’t understand what I did! Are you sure this isn’t because of the editing thing?” My voice cracks. “I can learn to edit. I’ll learn, I guess! Can you help me learn? Or, wait, maybe Wes can help me!”

Lark closes her eyes. “No, Or, that’s not it . . .”

I pinwheel my arms like a cartoon character about to fall off a ledge. “Then what is it?”

Lark shifts to better look me in the eyes as I pace a hole through the carpet. “I want you to have your own life, not just fall into the one I’ve set

up for you. You're done with college now; you don't have to keep doing this for me."

Tears slip down my face. Is Mel stronger than I am? Does she think a couple will be more marketable than a sister duo?

A smile has the nerve to slip up Lark's cheeks.

"Are you really smiling at me right now?" I yelp.

"I'm sorry. I was going to wait to announce this over dinner, not mid-random weird fight but . . . Mel's not just my girlfriend; she's actually my fiancée now."

I stop short, a blaze of happiness chasing away every other emotion as I gawk at Lark.

Mel and Lark are engaged!

I suck in a shaky breath and point at her accusingly. "I'm really hurt right now, but also, I'm so happy for you two, and I want to know the story of exactly how this happened, play by play. But right now, I need to go have a cry in my room. I'll be late for dinner. Please make sure Mom and Dad save me a plate because I'm starving, and I've been craving that lasagna all day." I take a step back. "Can you tell Wes to come downstairs—?"

I can practically see the *There she goes again, being codependent* thought take shape through Lark's shoulder tension.

"No," I course correct. "Tell Wes I'll be up in ten minutes. Tell him to stay upstairs." I sprint to my room six feet away. "Stanley!" I hiss. Stanley hops off the couch and trots into my room. I slam the door shut behind us.

"Orie." Lark sighs on the other side of the wood. "I'm not trying to be mean. I just want you to chase what you want for yourself."

I am an independent person! I will now cry without anyone around to watch it happen. Look at me go.

I chuck myself onto the bed with an irritated growl. Stanley hops up and lies down next to me, licking my hand. I flop onto my back, pull out my phone, and sob-scroll through Instagram. I stop on Wes's latest post and double tap. It's a reel about his new gaming chair.

Wes asked me out in eighth grade. It had felt inevitable at the time: We'd already been neighbors and best friends since kindergarten. Before

that, I was invisible at school. I was the girl who was bullied for the most boring reasons: red splotches on my face and reading during study hall. Then Wes asked me to be his girlfriend, and I became *Wes's girlfriend*. It's weird how being someone's girlfriend can reframe the world's perception of you. Wes's middle-school heartthrob status rescued me from oblivion. Back then people would wonder (aloud, mere feet away) why he would ask out *a girl like me*. I knew it was because he knew me, inside and out. Wes saw the obsessive book-reading, movie-worshiping person that I was and *wanted me*.

On our one-month anniversary, he tried to recreate that *Friends* episode with Ross and Rachel in the planetarium in his bedroom. That night, he straight-up told me he wanted to marry me after we graduated high school and start a family together after college. *A thirteen-year-old boy said these things to me*. Then he told me he had loved me since we were seven years old, and I'd smeared half a jar of peanut butter on his head to get the gum out of his hair. A second-grade asshole, Keith, had spit it on him in gym.

I remember that moment so vividly. My face went flush. My heart felt like the cheap pink ball attached via flimsy white string to a thin wooden paddle, soaring up into my throat only to be jerked back down into my chest.

A boy loved me, and I never in my wildest dreams thought that would happen so soon. In all the books I had read, the girls were fifteen or sixteen, at least, before they meet their love interests. All I could think in the moment was *Wow, this is such a great story. We met at five. We started dating at thirteen. We're going to have an epic romance. The kind they make movies about. The kind with quotes you remember for the rest of your life like When Harry Met Sally or Mean Girls*.

So, I told him I loved him, too, even though I wasn't sure what loving someone felt like. I wasn't sure what I felt qualified as romantic. He pulled out a jar of peanut butter and two spoons. We toasted our globs to Keith, his second-grade bully, and the rest is history. To this day, we eat peanut butter on our anniversary. He's always been so sure about me. So enthusiastic about our future family. *Such a romantic*.

I swipe at the tears falling down my cheeks and continue doomscrolling.

An announcement post catches my eye, and I pause, my thumb pressing into the screen. It's about the TV show *Survivor*. I follow a million *Survivor* accounts on Instagram, so the fact this is *Survivor*-related isn't what snags my attention. It's the word "casting."

When we were younger, Lark and I would always talk about auditioning for *Survivor* together, getting on a "Blood vs. Water" season, where you go on with a family member.

They're currently casting for the new *Survivor* season. They're accepting audition videos through the end of the month when the current season's finale will air.

The phrase "incapable of making decisions alone" rattles against my skull.

3

The Call

DAY -60 | TWO MONTHS AGO

I could be reading the climactic scene of *The Vanishing Half* right now, but Wes has his tongue down my throat. I shouldn't want to read over having my boyfriend's tongue down my throat. I shouldn't be thinking about this at all right now. *Right?* It's a really good book. I had to put it down when he got here twenty minutes ago. I wonder if there's a movie in the works. I'll have to google it later.

I've never stopped to think about how weird it was that I thought about things like this every time we kissed until Lark's passive-aggressive lecture last month.

Or maybe I've thought about it and brushed it aside.

I think maybe I've spent ten years pretending nothing between Wes and me was weird because the prospect of breaking up with him terrifies me.

Lark and I haven't had a *real* talk since last month. I don't know what the deal is with Mel replacing me, but we've been going along with our influencer stuff as usual. Nothing's changed with our @LennoxSisters account. Lark hasn't brought it up again.

But I can't stop thinking about the insults she flung at me. They carousel around my brain on a loop. I can't help that I like doing things with other people. Other people are better at things than I am! What's so wrong with that? Is enjoying company a crime?

I also can't stop thinking about how every time Wes and I make out now, his tongue feels like a probe, and I feel like an alien, completely foreign to the earthly act of kissing.

Wes slips his hands under my shirt and pulls it off. I'm hungry. When will it not be weird for me to suggest going upstairs for a snack? He drifts his hand down the quote collection tattooed over my left shoulder blade and upper waist. It's a smidge sensitive right now; I got a new one last week. I was flipping through my quote notebook, and one was so relevant, it leapt off the page and smacked me in the face. I showed Mom, and she liked it, too, so we got in the car, and she drove me to my tattoo place.

I think I do have to break up with Wes. Lark was right, and it makes all the other things she said bother me exponentially more than they did when she'd first said them. Cutting comments are supposed to fade, not gain traction over time.

Breaking up with Wes feels like the responsible thing to do.

Reasons to Break Up with Wes

1. I don't love him.
2. I don't feel anything when we're physical together. (I don't know that I ever have.)
3. I'd rather find a snack than make out.
4. He doesn't read.
5. These past six months, he's felt about 100,000 miles away. (Which doesn't make sense since we see each other every day, and right now, I'm literally in his lap. He's still doing all the good boyfriend things he's always done, but something feels off about his demeanor? I don't know. Maybe I'm projecting.)

Reasons Not to Break Up with Wes

1. He watches movies with me. (Lark doesn't like movies.)
2. He drives me places.
3. His friendship.
4. His helpfulness.

This is a sad list. The saddest reason being the one I couldn't garner the will to actually put down: I don't feel like his girlfriend. I've always kind of felt more like an actor hired to play his girlfriend.

I am messed up. That's a messed-up thought.

My stomach rumbles. We're still making out. There's a knock at the door. I jolt backward and hop off of him.

"Come in!" I yell eagerly.

"Whoa, Or," Wes counters, disappointed.

I've never liked the nickname Or. Orie is already a nickname. I'd really like to not be shaved down to a conjunction, and the most confused conjunction at that. "And" is inclusive. "But" is obnoxious. "Or" is just confused. It's indecisive. It hits too close to home.

Wes hastily pulls on his shirt. Wow, I didn't even realize he took it off.

Lark pokes her head into the room. "Oh god, did I interrupt something?"

"Kind of," Wes breathes quietly as I swipe an arm across my mouth.

"All good, what's up?" I exclaim. Lark glances from me in my bra to Wes now sitting awkwardly with his legs pulled up.

She lowers her brow. "Dad's ready to shoot. Put on the new blue outfit."

I smile. "Aye, aye, sis. I'll be out in five minutes." I salute her. Lark rolls her eyes and retreats, closing the door.

Wes sighs. "I thought we were going to have some time together, you know? It's been . . . a while since we had time alone. I miss you." I know by "time alone" he doesn't actually mean time alone. He means since we've been . . . intimate.

I take in Wes for a second, willing myself to feel *something*. He has great hazel eyes. Tanned olive skin. Dark floppy hair. Toothy smile. He's so cute, and he's a wonderful human.

I've always clung to the idea that our love story is legendary. Adorable! We're Orie and Wes, childhood friends to lovers! But after weeks of processing and reprocessing what Lark said, I've come to the gross realization that our story was never cute.

Our love story is that situation when you hear someone call you by the wrong name, and in the moment you think, *Whatever, no biggie, I'll let it slide*. And then the next time they say it wrong, you're mid-important

thought, and you don't want to break the flow of conversation, so you let it slide again. And then, before you know it, you've known them for five years and now it's too late. *You can't tell them you never actually loved them—because you're in too deep.* You've built an entire fake reality upon this tiny neglected correction. If you tell them now, you shake the foundation of your whole relationship in a way that will undoubtedly send fathomless unfixable cracks into the trust you've forged over the years.

I turn away from his face, seemingly random tears welling up as I spiral down the breakup rabbit hole. I plop myself in front of my vanity to touch up my base makeup and add some fun eye art to match the blue yoga outfit.

"I'm sorry! I forgot Lark scheduled this shoot, but we can hang out after," I offer. "Do you want to have dinner here? Dad's making his short rib stew." My go-to move to compensate for lack of intimacy is a dinner invite. Dad makes a mean dinner. It's not nothing.

Wes appears in the mirror behind me, something like . . . sorrow settling into his sweet boyish features. It hurts my heart. "You okay?" I ask.

"Yeah, I'm fine. I'll be back for dinner." He pulls on a small smile. "I'm going to run to the Tea Shop for a coffee and a croissant. You want anything?"

My eyes meet his. "Yes, thank you so much! Can you grab me a croissant, too? And a tea with milk and sugar?"

He leans forward over my shoulder. "You got it."

I meet his lips with a quick peck. "Thanks, Wes!"

As he slips out of the room, my phone starts to ring. I snatch it up off my mattress.

"Hello?" I greet.

"Hi, my name's Don; I'm from *Survivor* casting. We loved your audition tape. Do you have time for a chat?"

If you've never seen *Survivor*, you're probably wondering what the deal is with my obsession. You may have the wrong idea. *Survivor's* not a show for people who enjoy and/or are good at being survivalists. I would never watch that. The majority of people on the show are regular humans

looking to go on some sort of life journey and, hopefully, win \$1 million along the way.

Survivor's all about relationships. It's a chess game on an island. You have to forge strong bonds with as many people in the game as possible so every person likes you enough to keep you around. Every three days, someone gets voted off the island. The last two people standing plead their case for \$1 million, and then all the people who were eliminated get to vote *for* the million-dollar prizewinner. Voting people off in a manner that keeps them wanting to turn around and give you \$1 million is an art in itself. It's a constant social balancing act, and all the while you compete in awesome challenges for food rewards and other fun stuff. It's full of drama, strategy, twists, and intrigue. *I love it.*

I feel like a struck tuning fork as I wander robotically out into the yard where my dad and Lark are shooting. I think my soul is actually vibrating.

My father lowers the camera to smile at me as I approach. "Look who finally decided to join us!"

Lark seesaws out of a standing split to glare at me. "Orie! We've been waiting for thirty minutes. I switched outfits and did an entire solo shoot without you! Who the hell were you on the phone with?"

"*Survivor* casting," I say, dumbstruck.

"What do you mean *Survivor* casting?" Lark snaps as she crosses her arms.

Dad's scrolling through the pictures on his DSLR. His head pops up. "*Survivor* casting?"

"I applied for *Survivor* last month."

"You?! Applied for *Survivor*?" Lark says.

I nod. "I was upset about how you said I never did things independently and desperate to prove you wrong, so I applied all by myself for both of us. I submitted us as a sister team."

She blinks at me. "You applied for both of us?"

"I made an audition tape for the two of us, edited it, and sent it in . . . and they loved it."

Dad throws his arms in the air. "What! Honey! That's spectacular! All that prep from elementary school is finally going to pay off." He laughs in disbelief.

Lark's eyes bulge. "We're going on *Survivor*?" I can hear her barely contained excitement.

I shake my head. "I—I wanted us to do it together. I don't want to do it alone, but they only want me."

Lark stalks across the yard to where I'm standing. She grabs my elbow tightly. "Orie, you have to do it."

We haven't talked about applying together in years, but we still watch *Survivor* together every week. She comes over, and we sit on the couch with popcorn and scream things at the TV like the lifetime unofficial cohosts we've been since we were kids.

"But what about our socials? What about all our upcoming campaigns? What about the retreats we're booked to host in January? I need to be there with you. We're a team. If you can't go, I shouldn't go. I don't want to go by myself. I can't."

Lark groans. "What did you tell the casting guy?"

"I asked if I could call him back in ten minutes."

"Go call him back and tell him you'll do it, Orie!"

"You've always said I'd be terrible at *Survivor* alone!"

"Yeah, whatever. *That doesn't mean don't do it* if you're cast!" she scolds. "I'll figure out the campaigns, and Mel can sub for you at the retreat!"

"But I get really hungry!"

"I know! Whatever. You'll figure it out!" Lark presses.

I glance over at Dad. He nods his approval. "You should do it, sweetheart."

"I would have to leave in two months," I say nervously. "Right after New Year's."

"That gives us two months to prep." Lark drags me by the elbow toward the house. "Come on, you're calling the guy back."

I let her lead me back through the sliding door and into my room. She picks up my phone where I abandoned it on the bed, hands it to me, and stands there with her arms crossed.

I dial them back. Tell them yes. Before we hang up they relay a final caveat: contestants must enter this season single, which is strange. I can't help but think the universe has overheard my drama and is backing Lark's argument to break up with Wes. I accept the terms.

Casting emails over all the paperwork. I immediately fill everything out, answer a million questions about myself, take the contestant compatibility quiz, and sign all the contracts—

Before I have any more time to think this through.

Before I actually have the chance to panic.

Lark sits on the floor against my door working on her phone like a human roadblock while I race through it all, sweating like a fiend the entire way.

I'm . . . going to be on *Survivor: Alone*.

This is a work of fiction. All of the characters, organizations, and events portrayed in this novel are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

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