



THE
LAST
WORD

A NOVEL

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WORD

wm

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A Novel

Dedication

For Nolan

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Prologue

The End.

Emma Carpenter drops her e-reader. Like surfacing from a deep dive with aching lungs, she has never been so grateful to see those two words on her paper-white screen.

“Thank God.” She rubs her eyes.

She downloaded this bizarre e-book for ninety-nine cents on her neighbor’s recommendation. The novel’s cover art was featureless black with a white Comic Sans title: *Murder Mountain*. Sinister but in a lo-fi way, like a VHS snuff tape. For less than the cost of a candy bar, how can you go wrong?

Post-purchase, she’d noticed the subtitle: *The Scariest Book You’ll Ever Read*.

Uh-oh.

The raving blurb was in quotation marks, to appear quoted from a review or notable person, but there was no attributed source. It was the author’s personal boast.

Uh-oh.

Emma persevered and read on anyway, as the horror novel followed two college coeds backpacking alone in the Appalachian foothills. One is a psych major and the other is a prelaw student studying for the LSAT. They’re more ornaments than people: vain, shrill, stupid, and perhaps the least-convincing lesbians ever written. It’s telling that the most authentic character in the entire book is the serial killer.

Beyond Emma’s usual gripes with the trapped-in-a-remote-place-with-a-

scary-person formula (*Why is there never a cell signal? Why does no one ever carry a gun? For the love of God, why do they keep splitting up?*), the only thing that kept her reading this hundred-thousand-word death march was an interesting artistic choice: from the first page, the novel is narrated entirely from the villain's first-person point of view. The two women—the characters readers are meant to sympathize with—are only ever described through the killer's eyes.

Written in the *past* tense.

One more time: uh-oh.

No surprise, then, that after hours of tedious stalking, the narrator/killer catches Psych alone in her tent and starts to strangle her. Prelaw intervenes to save her, but—instead of picking up the killer's night vision rifle, which he has carelessly set aside—she chooses to fight him hand to hand like a dumbass. She's promptly disemboweled and Psych is promoted to Final Girl. Psych also misses the memo to pick up the goddamn gun and instead flees screaming through the forest, stumbling across an abandoned cabin that's within walking distance but never mentioned until now. Of course the parked truck fails to start. Of course she traps herself in the only room without an exit. Of course he drives home with her head in a duffel bag.

The End.

Thank God for that, at least.

Amazon has the audacity to ask her to rate the book. Out of five stars? One. She makes sure zero isn't an option. Then she types a brief review—likely better written than all of *Murder Mountain*—but before clicking Submit, she hesitates.

Why?

She's unsure. Her finger hovers in a hair-trigger pause. She imagines her own future self desperately warning of something terrible on the horizon, that she's about to sign her own death warrant and this is her last chance to change course. The e-book is still unrated, so her one-star review will be its first and only. Will the author personally read it?

Something bangs against the window behind her. It's a strange and fleshy sound, sickening in its heaviness. Her heart jolts in her chest.

She turns but sees only watery sky outside. Acres of yellow beach grass, dewed with rain and rippling in low wind. The rolling whitecaps of the ocean beyond.

A bird.

She's alone.

A bird flew into the window.

Still, she stands, slips on a raincoat, and checks the backyard. Sure enough, she finds the bird motionless in the sandy flowerbed just below the floor-to-ceiling windows. A frail brown and reddish thing. Eyelids shut, as if asleep.

With cupped hands, Emma sets the bird in a lawn chair on a rumpled blue beach towel. Sometimes, she knows, they'll stir back to life. Their little brains just have to reboot.

She returns inside.

On her e-reader, she discovers her review of *Murder Mountain* has already posted. Her index finger must have twitched in surprise. There it is. Her words. One star. Too late now.

So she deletes the novel and tries to forget about the two fictional college students and their lovingly detailed murders. She has countless more e-books to read. The internet is a vast ocean of stories, and troublingly, she's realizing lately that the book's quality doesn't even matter. Superb, mediocre—whatever. It must only be a world sufficiently different from Emma's, here on this sandy gray coast.

She studies her own words for a moment longer. Was she too harsh on this stranger? For all she knows, this author could be twelve. In fact, that would explain a lot.

Who cares?

Stop looking at it.

She decides she'll walk her golden retriever, Laika, on the beach before the next rainstorm blows in. On her way out, she passes the bird on the lawn chair, still motionless, and she hopes that when she returns, she'll find the towel empty, the stunned animal alive and free.

She'll never think about *Murder Mountain* ever again.

Until two hours later, when she returns inside with salt in her hair and sand in her sneakers, and a red icon in the corner of her web browser informs her that her user review has received a comment.

She feels a faint tug in her stomach. Opinions are like assholes, the saying goes, and the internet has millions of both. But somehow she already knows exactly who commented.

She clicks.

The satellite Wi-Fi chugs briefly before displaying:

Hello Emma86,

Nice to meet you! I'm the author of the acclaimed thriller MURDER MOUNTAIN. Thank you very much for reading my novel. It's readers like you who make it all possible!

However, I see you didn't like my book. And that's OK! But let me ask you: why review it, then? Readers should only post their positive reviews. And you may have nothing at stake here—but I do. Other potential readers will see your 1-star review, and that might discourage them from buying my books, which hurts me financially!

I work hard so someday I can quit my day job and write full time. It's been my lifelong dream ever since I was a kid. I'm sure you're a wonderful person in real life, and you wouldn't wish to attack my financial security, so I was wondering if you could please kindly remove your review?

Best wishes,
H. G. Kane

She reads it twice.

She's never seen an author comment on an online review of their own book, let alone ask for its removal. This breaks some unwritten rule, right? She reaches to shut her laptop—pulling the screen half down—but something here demands to be answered.

Don't do it.

Maybe it's the manufactured cheer, coming from a writer who described the tendons in a woman's neck "snapping like pale spaghetti strings." Or maybe it's the excessive exclamation points, like baby talk.

Don't respond.

Or maybe it's the victimhood, the cringy implication that this "author" is entitled to a full-time living from a job without actually being competent at it.

Don't-don't-don't—

She reopens her laptop. Quickly she types:

Hi. Thank you for taking the time to comment on my review. I'm sorry that your book wasn't for me. But I will respectfully choose to keep my review posted, because this is a forum for readers to share their honest views, positive and negative alike.

She almost adds her own initials but doesn't. She clicks Submit, this time without pause. Her comment blinks into existence below his.

Done.

The author's name snags in her mind. *H. G. Kane.*

It does ring vaguely familiar. Maybe this person engineered their pen persona to sound that way, like a sexy transmutation of H. G. Wells and

Stephen King? He or she can't actually be famous, if Emma herself just posted *Murder Mountain's* first and only—

She's received another comment. Already.

Seriously?

A chill runs down her spine as she reads:

Emma86, with all due respect, I spent 6 months writing MURDER MOUNTAIN. It took you just a few seconds to type that hateful review and tarnish all my hard work. Little sapsuckers like you don't understand what's really at stake for me.

I implore you, please take your review down.

Best,

HGK

This one, she can read only once.

I implore you. Does anyone in this century still say that? And *little sapsuckers like you*—is that an insult? It's all so brazenly weird.

Keys crunch under her fingers.

Sorry, but my answer is still no. Good luck with your future books.

She considers, before adding:

Also, FYI for your future books, no woman would EVER hike in high heels.

This is getting excruciating. She wonders if other users will read this chain and jump in. What will they think? Whose side will they take?

There are no sides, she reminds herself. Readers should have opinions. Authors shouldn't comment on them. And the more she rereads this stranger's words, the more her pulse spikes in her neck. Why should Emma care that this self-proclaimed "writer" spent six months of his or her life producing that literary bowel movement? She spent four hours of hers reading it. They both lost.

She needs air. Again.

She realizes she's forgotten about the stunned bird outside.

The first raindrops are falling when she returns to check the lawn chair. To her disappointment, the feathered body is still there in the towel. Exactly as she left it. Wiry legs stiffening. Eyes shut. And now, under a crackle of approaching thunder, Emma notices something she missed earlier.

A bead of dried blood between wincing avian eyelids, like a tiny red

teardrop.

She returns inside.

On her screen, another message from the author—now tinged with menace.

I won't ask you again.

Without sitting, she answers.

Good.

Then she shuts her laptop.

Part One

Never rewrite.

—H. G. Kane, “Writing Tips from a Professional Author,” 2015, hgkaneofficial.com

1

Sometime after three A.M., Emma awakens to see a man standing in the darkened corner of her bedroom. He's mostly obscured by the door's angular black shadow.

She blinks, expecting the figure to vanish like a fading dream.

He's still there.

She focuses her eyes and the room sharpens. A ray of moonlight catches a rumple of coat fabric on the apparition's shoulder. A fold of flabby neck flesh. And the rim of a hat. Like something a gangster might wear in an old-timey film.

Staring at her.

Watching her sleep.

She doesn't dare move. Not even a toe. If he sees that she's awake, the fragile moment will shatter. He'll spring forward and slice her throat or gouge out her eyes or worse. She blinks again, trying to find more detail in the darkness, trying not to open her eyes too noticeably wide.

The figure doesn't move, either.

She realizes she's holding her breath. Her lungs burn. She draws in a mouthful of air as quietly as she can, a gentle hiss between her teeth. She wonders if he can hear it.

How long has he been standing there, watching me?

The room teeters on a knife-edge.

Emma lives alone. This bedroom is on the second floor. Her phone is charging downstairs. There are no guns in the house. And no neighbors close enough to hear her scream. She considers hurling off the blankets now, jumping to her feet and bolting past the stranger and down the stairs. But it's

still too dark to be certain. He might still be just a hanging coat, she tells herself. An illusion.

To her left, there's a bedside lamp with a pull chain. She slides her hand toward it, inching her fingers under the bedsheets like a serpent underwater.

Silence.

The figure hasn't moved. And he hasn't seen her hand move—not yet, at least. Emma shuts her eyes and focuses on the ambient sounds. The low roar of the waves. The rattle of raindrops on roof shingle. She tries to locate the stranger's breathing or the flex of his coat, but he's eerily quiet. She braces for the creak of a floorboard announcing his first step toward her bed. It never comes.

One, she counts. Her hand slides free of the blanket now, her fingers spider-crawling up the cold porcelain. Feeling for the chain.

Two.

She finds it. A dry click between her fingers. Did he hear that? If so, he still hasn't attacked. No motion.

Three?

She's afraid to break the stillness. But she swallows her fear. She's fully awake now, her muscles tense under the sheets, and she must be ready. No excuses.

Three.

She tugs the chain. A nuclear flash. She winces in a blaze of light and throws the blankets left while heaving her body right, landing hard on bare feet. She spins—elbows up for defense—and kicks into a sprint for the bedroom door. As she hurtles toward it, she glimpses the spot where the hat-wearing stranger had been standing, now a bare wall.

He's gone.

She's alone in the bright bedroom.

Was he even there?

Emma tries to fall back asleep but can't.

She decides to clear the house room by room.

First, the upper floor—a master bedroom, a bathroom with dual vanities, and a walk-in closet. She checks every corner, every shadow, every gap where an intruder might lurk.

Upper floor: clear.

Then downstairs. The main floor is daunting—a cavernous family space

plus an open kitchen and dining area exposed to the outside by three walls of floor-to-ceiling glass. Part beach house, part aquarium. Then two bedrooms, a bathroom, and a laundry room with a chute to the upstairs. Long sight lines, yet honeycombed with dangerous hiding places. She opens every door and scans every square inch. She methodically flicks on lights as she goes, creating a growing safe zone of light. It's satisfying, like claiming territory.

First floor: clear.

One level left.

“Fuck this basement.”

A staircase leads down into a mouth of darkness. She stops in the doorway, inhaling the cave-like odor. A few steps down, the stairs take a ninety-degree turn under a low copper pipe, noticeably rust-eaten. Even at five-foot-three, Emma has to stoop. Then ten steps deeper, whiffing mildew and mouse scat, like entering the house's stomach. At the bottom her bare feet touch cement foundation, slick with moisture.

It's always damp down here. Basements are rare near beaches for this very reason. Even with a sump pump, as in this house, it's impossible to keep a coastal basement dry. The only light downstairs is controlled by a plastic outlet on the concrete wall to her left—too dark to see. She's feeling for it with outstretched fingertips when something moves behind her. A current of air touches her exposed lower back. She recognizes it immediately, the warmth of it. It's an exhaled breath.

She recoils with surprise and her elbow bumps a shelf. Some heavy object drops to the cement, a sound as earsplitting as a gunshot.

She's lost the light switch. Total darkness.

The next breath is just inches behind her. It's deeper, almost snotty. A cold nose presses wetly against her bare skin.

“Laika,” Emma whispers, “you are the worst guard dog on earth.”

She finds the switch. Let there be light.

Laika is a golden retriever, but she isn't quite golden. She's an English cream breed with a near-white coat, because of which onlookers often mistake her for a white Lab or a Great Pyrenees. Emma crouches now to ruffle the silky fur under Laika's ears. “You would have barked if Ted Bundy was inside the house. Right?”

Black eyes answer her. Flat, dumb, and eager.

“Right?”

Nothing.

“*Right?*”

Behold the void.

Maybe not a bark, Emma decides. But friendly-to-a-fault Laika would have followed an intruder upstairs, eagerly nudging his thigh for attention. She’s feeling better now. The figure in her bedroom was just a leftover fragment of a nightmare.

Basement: clear.

Emma is perfectly alone. The way she likes it. This solitary house—ten feet above sea level, three hundred from high tide—is her safe vessel, a tiny pinprick of light on a vast shore. Sometimes she looks out the windows and imagines she’s the last survivor on earth. Only voided sky, miles of dune grass, and the dull crash of the breakers beyond.

On the main floor, she verifies that the front and back doors are locked (they are) and that every window is untouched (they are, impeccably). After that, what can you do? An intruder couldn’t have escaped without tripping the perimeter of motion-sensor lights outside. Still, she keeps the interior lights on while the Pacific sky grays with dawn. Even with every room searched and her golden retriever’s keen senses on her side, she still has to remind herself that the stranger can’t possibly be locked *inside* the house with her.

Back upstairs, she’d hoped the bedroom lamp would reveal her own clothes draped carelessly over a chair where the figure had stood, or a raincoat hanging scarecrow-like. But there is just a bare wall. And she *knows* she saw the rim of a hat.

Right?

She brews ginger tea and studies the windows, trying to focus her eyes on both the foggy coast outside and the room’s interior reflection, half expecting to notice the figure standing behind her in a violin-screaming jolt. She’s seen that movie before.

She pours Laika a bowl of food. The retriever sniffs at it indifferently.

“I know,” Emma says. “I’m not hungry, either.”

By the afternoon, she has read two more e-books from start to finish. One decent, one quite good. They’re quick hits, four hours apiece, comfortable little dioramas with flawed detectives and quirky suspects and bloodless murders. Red herrings. Tragic backstories. She already has another downloaded for the evening. It’s nice to submerge yourself in someone else’s

world, to luxuriate in the handcrafted details and admire the false ceilings. In happier times Emma liked to read Tolstoy and Dostoevsky, and she knows she's slumming on Amazon's bargain and free listings. She's not reading for pleasure, exactly, or enrichment—but then again, there's nothing wrong with reading to escape, is there?

At the end of each, Amazon prompts her to write a review.

She declines.

She's forgotten the name of that weird author, but the experience still needles her. She rarely engages with strangers, even online. Since she arrived on this beach three months ago, she's taken great efforts to cut all social threads and cocoon herself from human contact. Her books teleport in from cyberspace. Her groceries coalesce magically at her door. Whenever she hears a delivery van coming down the quarter-mile driveway, she hides. Time slows to a strange and turgid crawl when you're a grown-ass adult hiding under a window.

She's lost twelve pounds since arriving here. Not on purpose. Maybe something is wrong with her body, but eating has become a dull and unrewarding process, as joyless as sitting on the toilet. Some days she forgets entirely. Others, she wishes only to sleep and must drag herself down the halls like a zombie. The house seems to be miles wide. Boiling a kettle of ginger tea is insurmountable. Nothing is worth the immense labor it will take.

She's not sure when she last heard a human voice. Four weeks ago?

Or five?

She's been told introverted personalities recharge with alone time, something like managing a social battery. And while that's accurate—because most people tend to exhaust the ever-loving shit out of Emma—she's always pictured herself more like clay, a shapeless form that reluctantly morphs to meet the daily needs of her surroundings. Smile at the neighbor's kids. Pay the car insurance. Make a dental appointment. And here on this desolate coast, she's discovered a worse truth—that without a job, tasks, friends, family, Emma Carpenter will happily float apart. Every molecule of herself will take the path of least resistance. Sometimes she glimpses herself in mirrors or reflective glass, a gray and unformed face she doesn't recognize. Eyeless, mouthless, nose flattened to soggy mush. Her own ghost.

Very little frightens her—the worst thing that can happen to any human already happened to her months ago—but she fears what she becomes when she's alone, where her mind will go if she lets it wander.

Her steady diet of digital fast food—ninety-nine-cent distractions good, bad, and everything in between—is enough to keep her occupied.

For now.

A storm is coming.

Emma first sees it from the laundry room while she climbs up onto the dryer, opens a tiny window, twists her spine into a scorpion-arch, and smokes a cigarette. She cranks a plastic Dollar Tree fan with each puff, making certain every ash grain flutters outside while she watches thunderheads loom over the ocean. Then she squishes her cigarette with licked fingertips and tucks it into a ziplock bag with the others.

Sure enough, raindrops tap the windows while she starts reading her third e-book on the sofa. The wind growls and she wonders if she's really hearing a forgotten closet door click open in the next room. Or stealthy footsteps downstairs? Gloved fingers gripping a machete?

Periodically she stops reading and listens.

This house is full of sounds. Even after living here three months, she still discovers new oddities. Doors refuse to shut. Gutters drip a steady heartbeat. The guest toilet sometimes flushes itself. The first time she heard this happen from across the house was bone-chilling, but now it's something of a charming quirk, like a ghost occasionally stopping by to take a shit. This is Emma's first time house-sitting, and it feels so much more invasive than merely renting. Maybe it comes down to whether it's your silverware in the kitchen drawer or theirs, but she feels like a burglar at nights, padding guiltily through a stranger's family room.

The house's owner? A nice lady from Portland named Jules Phelps.

At least Emma *thinks* it's a lady.

They've never physically met.

And part of why it feels so invasive is that Emma can't help but draw conclusions about Jules's private life. It's unavoidable. You can't *not* do it. There's blood pressure medication and stool softener in the bathroom closet—Jules must be middle-aged or older? There's an antique Polaroid camera on the shelf—Jules must dabble in photography? One bedroom has been recently cleaned, but a teenage musk still clings thickly—Jules must have raised a son? On a poster there, a stoic samurai warrior kneels under a thicket of moonlit bamboo and sharpens his sword. Maybe the boy went off to college. Maybe he moved. Maybe Jules murdered him and his hacked limbs

are rotting in the walls right now.

Maybe Emma has just been reading too many crime novels.

But something about that room has always disturbed her. She finds herself avoiding the teenager's bedroom and keeping the door shut, lest its ill energy seep out in a cloudy funk of Axe body spray, Mtn Dew, and socks. And something else—something sour. Stale. Yeasty.

Keep reading.

It's none of Emma's business. She's here to run the heaters, watch for roof leaks, and bring in Jules's mail. Everything else is like the waves: white noise.

The ropelike eleven-mile island of Strand Beach (known by locals as *the Strand*) joins the mainland with one single-lane causeway. It's a flat and grassy landmass dotted with remote houses like this one, all separated by acres of negative space and mostly served by one road called Wave Drive. There's spotty cell service, weak water pressure, and when the weather cooperates, just enough satellite internet bandwidth for Netflix in 480p. No surprise that ninety-nine percent of these homes are dark October through April—summer retreats owned by well-to-do urbanites like Jules, locked down and mothballed for the miserable rainy season. In annual precipitation, Strand Beach is second only to a certain Washington town a short drive north, famous for its sparkling vampires.

Out here, Emma doesn't have neighbors in the plural—she has *a* neighbor. This lone confirmed human occupies the next house up Wave Drive, a quarter mile north. From her reading spot on the sofa, the distant structure resembles a tombstone set against watery sky. She can see a faint interior glow. And in the living room window, a whiteboard.

With a handwritten message.

“Finally.”

She lowers her e-reader. She steps over Laika, snoring on the bearskin rug, and approaches the nautical telescope by the window. She leans into the eyepiece, adjusting focus until her neighbor's faraway message sharpens into clarity.

It's . . . a stick figure. Hanging from a hand-drawn gallows.

“Damn.”

Another loss. Her guess—*oxygen*—wasn't even close.

She doesn't know her elderly neighbor's full name, only how he spontaneously introduced himself via whiteboard one afternoon (HELLO. I'M

DEEK). For a week or two prior, his board had contained a friendly invitation (WANT TO PLAY HANGMAN?), which sounds like something Jigsaw might say if you've never heard of the popular whiteboard game Hangman. Emma hadn't.

In short: One player tries to guess the letters of a mystery word while the other draws a stick figure in a noose, adding a limb for each incorrect guess. A complete stick figure means the poor guy hangs. Deek, as it turns out, is an absolute beast at Hangman. His guesses are surgical, his words impenetrable. Emma hasn't won once.

It's impossible to know someone through a telescope, but as is true of house-sitting for a stranger, you find yourself logging observations anyway. Emma knows the old man lives alone amid heaps of junk—an entire Ikea sales floor of crowded furniture, bulging file cabinets, towers of stacked books, and a (presumably) uninstalled toilet on the back porch. She knows he keeps an antique revolver framed over his fireplace. She knows he drinks only coffee before three and only whiskey afterward—and that on his most shit-faced evenings, he sometimes lights off aerial fireworks directly from his balcony.

Usually Emma lets hours pass between Hangman guesses—the pleasantly glacial pace to life on the Strand—but she glimpses motion. The old hermit is in his kitchen. So she uncaps her dry-erase marker, draws a gallows on her own whiteboard, and picks a word.

He guesses it in four turns flat.

ZEPHYR?

“Asshole.”

She's not sure how he does it.

Sometimes she likes to study her neighbor's rainy windows for clues and speculate on the exotic past career of a man who lives alone with a cowboy gun and five tons of hoarded crap. She's been guessing for weeks. Antiques dealer? Archivist? Retired movie star? He does look a bit like George Clooney, if you stuck *Michael Clayton* in a dehydrator. Whatever his past, the man who calls himself Deek is a fascinating mystery.

Now her neighbor stands up from his telescope, as if startled by a sharp noise. He picks up his blue marker and writes on his board: WHO IS THAT?

Emma pauses mid-sip.

She sets her tea mug on the table—a bony click—and raises her hands in