

FROM THE PECULIAR MIND OF
KENNETH JAMES ALLEN

THE
~~LIST~~

THE LIST

KENNETH JAMES ALLEN



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This is a work of fiction. Similarities to real people, places, or events are entirely coincidental.

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Written by Kenneth James Allen.

For those who are curious

THE LIST

Emma thought it was a very peculiar thing.

The item had no place in being there, yet as the Autumn winds blew the orange and red leaves around her feet, they revealed a small black notebook. She looked up and down the busy path with a furrowed brow. People bustled down the park thoroughfare, eager to go about their business, and doing their best to protect themselves from the elements. None of them looked concerned they had dropped what appeared to be an extremely precious item.

She dusted off the leaves and picked it up, as if cradling a new-born child. Wiped the remnants of the morning sun shower from the cover. She held it to her nose to breathe in the leather and paper aroma, creating a salubrious salutation. Cracked open the cover to determine what secrets it had to share. There, printed in incredibly perfect hand writing was a name and phone number.

Connor White was missing his notebook, and no doubt he wanted it back as soon as possible. She knew she would want it back as soon as possible. She contemplated turning the next page. It wasn't her book and therefore had no rights to rifle through someone else's private thoughts. However, she was a curious person, and no fun is ever found from sitting on the shoreline while the waves crash over the beach. And it was a good thing she did. For it was on the next page that her curiosities peaked ten-fold.

A list of names, each impeccably written in the same hand as Connor's placard, were five more names. But it was the fourth name on that list that stole her attention, for it was *her* name, Emma Hastings. At the bottom of the page, in large scrappy scrawl, was '\$20,000', that had been circled several times.

Someone had crossed out the three previous names above hers. A single wobbly line, devoid of precision, and exuding uncertainty, carried from the first letter of a name to the last. Maybe it wasn't uncertainty, perhaps it was adrenaline that caused the imperfections. Emma stared at the list, gently ran a finger over the paper. While the names sat proudly

on the surface, almost embossed upon it, the lines dug into the paper, drawn with a hasty hand.

Emma sat down on a park bench, extracted her cell phone, and opened a browser window. One by one, she entered the first three names on the list: Walter Jennings, Max Lewis, Vanessa Kruger. She read article after report, story after statement. All their names were crossed out. They all had an experience to reveal, an extraordinary account.

And then there was her name. Untouched. Next in line. Waiting. Wondering.

“Such an interesting list,” Emma mumbled, as she once again caressed the page. Looked at her name. Knew something was coming for her, but just didn’t know what it was or when it would strike.

Dialed Connor’s number, and he answered immediately with an abrupt bark.

“Hi!” Emma said. “This is going to sound strange, but I found this notebook and—.”

“Oh!” Connor interrupted, puffing. “Thank God! I’ve been looking for that everywhere. Where are you?”

“I’m in the park and—.”

“The park!” Connor shouted. “Of course! The park! How did I not remember the park?!”

“So, I saw my name—.”

“You opened it?!”

“Well, I had to open it to—.”

“Why did you open it?” Connor didn’t wait for an answer. “You know what? It doesn’t matter. Just keep it shut. Are you still there?”

“Yeah, still in the pa—.”

“Great! Awesome! Don’t go anywhere! I’ll be right there, just don’t move.”

“Got it,” Emma said. “I won’t move a muscle.”

“Unless someone tries to rob you. Or a meteorite falls out of the sky. Or a tree falls—.”

“I get it!” Emma announced. “I’ll wait for you.”

Emma suspiciously eyed her surroundings. Everyone was a potential threat. The mother pushing the stroller. The geriatrics ambling with their walkers. The puffing college student trying to keep up with fifteen dogs. But it was the man who appeared suddenly at the end of the path that posed the greatest risk of all. Shaggy brown hair framed a round face and black-rimmed glasses. He buried his hands deep in his coat pockets. Their eyes met, and Emma knew it was a matter of time before the inevitable happened. His steady footsteps turned into a vicious sprint as he maneuvered around park goers like a formula one driver, unrelenting in his pursuit to get the book back.

He came to a sudden stop in front of her, his body heaving with heavy breaths. “Where’s the book?” he puffed.

Emma held it out and Connor grabbed it, but she didn’t let go.

“What are you doing?” Connor asked.

“I want to know why my name is in your book.”

His eyes widened. “Oh! You’re Emma?”

She nodded. “What’s going to happen to me?”

He cocked his head to the side. “What do you mean?”

“I searched the other names on the list, the one’s that someone—I’m guessing you—have crossed out. Why am I there? Why am I on your list?”

Connor looked around himself nervously. “Fine,” he whispered. “Walk with me and I’ll tell you everything.”

Emma relinquished her grip on the book and stood, as Connor pushed the notebook into his pocket.

They exited the park through an arch cut into a six-foot-tall wrought-iron fence. He had spoken in hushed tones and Emma listened with overwhelming interest, as if every word held the weight of dark secrets. For Emma, the conversation had been wildly intriguing and almost bordered on the unbelievable.

They stood on the edge of the road.

“Incredible,” Emma breathed. “I had no idea.”

Connor shrugged. “No one does.”

“So, you mean, if—.”

“Yep.”

“And then—.”

“Uh-huh.”

“You get—.”

He nodded.

“Listen, you can’t tell anyone I told you, okay?” Connor said. He pulled his hands out of his pockets and pressed them together as if in prayer. “Please. They can’t know I told you.”

She cupped his hands. “Of course. Your secret is safe with me.”

They stared at each other for a moment, lost in their dreamy existence. So drawn to the moment, they failed to hear the honking horn and flashing lights of the bus as it skidded towards them.

Something clicked in both of them, and they each fell backwards, pulling the other down with them, as the bus rushed past them and barreled up the gutter. Pushing up the supine bodies on their elbows, they looked at each other and then to the bus that had come to a lurching halt. They helped each other up, and Emma thought back to the articles she read when she had entered the names into her browser.

Walter Jennings was training for a marathon, which was an amazing thing to do at seventy. He had been powering through the fifteen-kilometer mark along a deserted running track when his heart suddenly gave out. He had collapsed on the path and would certainly die alone. That is, of course, until someone had come across him, applied CPR and call an ambulance. Despite a thorough search of the area and calls on news networks and social media, the mysterious saint was never found.

Max Lewis was shifting stock in a warehouse when a colleague brushed their forklift against the shelves and they collapsed, sending tons of booze crashing to the ground. The last thing Max remembered was someone in a high viz vest yanking him clear of the accident. When the

union filed the report, no one came forward to admit their role in saving Max's life, and taking the *hero* moniker.

Vanessa Kruger was walking past a building site in the city when part of a wall from a derelict building unexpectedly broke away and fell fourteen stories. Vanessa, not hearing the noise or warnings from nearby works because of her headphones, has pulled out of the way at the last minute. As she lay on the ground amongst the dust, dirt and rubble, she looked up at the multitude of faces that had rushed to her aid seeking her rescuer, however, the mystery man captured on CCTV vanished into the crowds.

"Listen," Connor said. "I can't be here. I've got to go."

He turned, pulling the notebook out of his pocket. Emma watched him as he hurried off down the road. She smiled, turned, and headed off in the opposite direction.

Pulled out a black notebook from her pocket.

Opened it to the page.

Looked down the names on her list.

Pulled out a pencil and crossed out the last name: Connor White.

Then she turned to the very last page. Surreptitiously hidden, because everyone reads the last page first.

Rule #1: You can not reveal this book, its contents, or your task, to anyone. By doing so, you will forfeit all prize money.

She circled it, closed the book, and thought about what she would do with the winnings.

