

"ROB KAUFMAN'S CUTTING-EDGE TALE IS REMINISCENT OF SANDRA BROWN AT HER BEST, A SUBURBAN SHOCKER ON PAR WITH LISA GARDNER AND HARLAN COBEN."

Jon Land, USA Today Best Selling Author of *Black Scorpion*

ONE LAST LIE

ROB KAUFMAN

ONE LAST LIE

A Novel

Rob Kaufman

For Chris

*Without you, this book would not exist...
and neither would I.*

The old man was dying, and the worst part was, he knew it.

He could feel it in his brittle bones, popping and cracking with every move. He tasted it in his mouth – the bitter phlegm sitting on his tongue. He could even see it through the viscous film caught between his quivering eyelids.

But the telltale sign of approaching death was the feeling of surrender that had crept into his aching body – complete resignation to his current existence and to the life he'd led. The fight was just about gone.

He pursed his lips, pushing back against the spoon Katy pressed to his mouth. He couldn't take his eyes off the thick braid of auburn hair hanging over her shoulder, moving like a pendulum, each swing bringing the broom of split ends closer to the bowl from which she scooped his oatmeal.

He refused to eat, trying to prove there was at least one thing over which he had control. Nothing tasted right anyway. Over the past thirty years food had lost its flavor, and his passion for the fine wines and nouvelle cuisine he once sought was gone. He was now eating to live and wondered if it was worth the effort. As he approached his last days on earth, living had become secondary to discovering where his life had gone wrong and if, in fact, that day thirty years ago was the day he truly died.

“Jonathan!” Katy pulled the spoon from his mouth and tapped the uneaten oatmeal back into the yellow plastic bowl. “You can’t go on like this. I don’t want to have to threaten you with the feeding tube again.”

Gently, she pushed the few wisps of white hair off his damp forehead, patting the mist of sweat with her apron. “I can see you smiling inside, Jonathan, under that sour grimace of yours. You can’t fool me.”

But he *was* fooling her. He wasn’t smiling: not inside or out. Why *would* he smile? What inside this so-called “elite” retirement home could make him smile? The stench of urine wafting into his room from the littered hallway? The monotony of cries and moans from other residents, most strangers to him, some even younger than his 75 years, being hushed back into their rooms with gentle whispers? The crumpled white bed sheets, hardened and pilled by bleach and overuse? Were these the things Katy thought he was smiling about? *She must be crazier than I am.*

He looked at his pale, bony feet hanging off the side of the bed and longed for the security of his Westport, Connecticut home; a cozy, five-bedroom colonial where he’d lived in comfort until they wheeled him out on a stretcher almost five years ago. The sky was pure that day, an ocean of cerulean blue that seemed to go on forever. But mostly he remembered the leaves; the deepest of reds, painted by the heat of the sun and the frosty New England nights; bright yellows, sprayed with crisp and timeless autumn air. Others

were almost fire-orange, with narrow veins displayed through their transparent skin, backlit by the intense sun. Bouncing on the stretcher as the paramedics carried him down the front porch steps, he held his chest, feeling the hard thumps of his failing heart and watching the leaves quiver in the frigid breeze. They dangled from the branches above him, holding on for dear life, seemingly aware that one strong wind could easily toss them into obscurity until they withered and died. At that moment he clutched the flannel bathrobe lapel into his fist, realizing he was hanging from the very same branch.

He waited until Katy carried away the oatmeal before he fell backward onto the mattress, his bare Achilles heels banging against the cold, metal bed railing. “I want to go home. I just want to go home. Why can’t I go home? It’s only a few miles from here. We can take a taxi –”

He heard a “tsk tsk” as Katy dried both hands on her apron and walked toward the bed. She sat next to him, her corpulence creating a valley that threatened to suck him in. He tried pulling himself up, but she grabbed his hand.

“Oh, Jonathan.” She placed her other hand on top of the one she’d already swept up. He wondered how she could bear to touch his thin, age-spotted skin. “Oh, Jonathan,” she repeated, her soft voice spilling puddles of sweetness all around him, like his mother, who could so easily lull him to sleep after a day of fighting with the world, a tough battle for an oversensitive ten year old.

“We’ve been through this so many times. Remember? Your home pays for this place – pays for me.” He could barely feel the pad of her thumb wipe the tear from the side of his face. “Your house was sold years ago. This is your home now. It will be so much easier for you when you’re able to accept that.” She placed his hand back on his lap, stood straight up, and spread her arms to her sides, as though washing away the sadness.

“I’m going to do an extra special cleaning of your room today.” She opened the pine closet door and rummaged inside. “And do you know why it’ll be extra special?”

No... he didn’t know, nor did he care. Just because he allowed her to wipe away an infrequent tear didn’t mean she could treat him like a five year old. He lifted himself onto his elbows and sniffed.

“A surprise visitor’s coming tomorrow.”

Jonathan felt his chest tighten; behind his ribs, a hard thump, then another. “I don’t know anyone. No one would visit me.” The air rising from his throat was so arid he almost choked on the words. He squinted his eyes, glaring at her as she held the rag out in front of her and sprayed it with a foul-smelling mist. If that crap is something that attracts dust, he thought, she should use it for the inside of her head.

She jerked her head back as if she’d heard his thought, opening her mouth like a toad trying to catch a fly. Jonathan wasn’t sure if she was laughing or asphyxiating from too much dust spray. She

chortled and then pretended to get serious, “Oh, Jonathan Beckett, that’s what *you* think. I’m sure plenty of people would visit if you weren’t so grumpy.”

He focused on her large bottom and the extra weight jiggling around her white scrub pants. They were tight, showing a lot more than he wanted to see.

“I do not want *anyone* coming into this room! Unless they’re coming to wheel my dead body down to the morgue, no one comes in here!”

Nothing. Katy wasn’t biting.

“Did you hear me?” Jonathan banged the mattress with the side of his fists.

Couldn’t she understand that everyone he cared about, anyone he’d ever want to see was already dead or had been taken from him long ago? And with his own impending death so close, all he wanted was privacy – to spend those last precious moments on earth alone, recalling only memories that would make him smile.

Katy wiped a rag along the top of the television, a plume of dust erupting like volcano ash. She let out a cough. “Yes, I hear you.” Another cough. “But this visit will be a happy one for you. I promise.” She wiped her nose with her sleeve, sprayed more mist onto the cloth until it was damp, and stroked it along the top of the chest of drawers.

“Life is to be lived, Jonathan, and sitting in this room like a hermit is not living. You don’t talk to your neighbors, you don’t accept visitors, you barely talk to me.” She waved her arm. “You don’t even have any photographs in here. This is not living, Mr. Beckett. Not living at all.” She unfolded and refolded the cloth, tucking it into the palm of her hand. Slowly turning toward him, she tried to force a smile. From the pained look on her face, Jonathan could sense she was uncertain whether or not to continue the diatribe. Her eyes focused on the wall behind him, avoiding his face. “This isn’t living, Jonathan... it’s dying.”

The room was dark except for a few strips of light pushing through the slats of the vertical blinds. Every now and then Jonathan heard footsteps scurry past the closed door: maybe that thick-headed nurse Flo bringing pills to a resident she forgot to medicate; maybe lunatic Frank from the fifth floor sneaking behind the nurses’ station, stealing cotton balls to put inside the imaginary spaceship he’d been building for years.

Or maybe it was all his imagination, just part of the barrage of sounds and visions that showed themselves nightly, invading his loneliness like a blast of arctic air and nearly taking his breath away. But it was always worth it, for when his breath returned, Philip came with it.

Tonight he ignored the chill and kept his eyes on the nearly invisible ceiling, focusing on imagined shapes: swirls and dots and

circles floating amidst the darkness, falling then rising, then falling again. As always, Philip appeared through the shadows, his doe-like eyes a darker brown than they'd ever been before. His blonde hair glinted with golden highlights, feathery strands of amber sweeping across his forehead. A hint of stubble covered the lower half of his face, accentuating the glowing, silky skin.

They never spoke during these nightly visits; no need to. They stared at one another until Jonathan felt safe enough to drift off to sleep and dream of the life he'd once lived. But tonight, with eternity at the edge of each breath, Jonathan pushed a whisper from deep within his throat. "I'm coming," he mouthed, frightened by the meaning of his words, yet at the same time mesmerized by the thought that after so many years, he'd be whole again. "I'm coming."

He didn't wipe the tears from his face, nor did he struggle to pull the ends of the quilt out from beneath the mattress. Jonathan let his eyes close, took a deep breath, and replayed the part of his life he could remember – all the while, in the back of his mind, praying he'd be dead before Katy arrived with his surprise visitor.