

# STUART TURTON

THE NATIONAL BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF  
*THE 7½ DEATHS OF EVELYN HARDCASTLE*

# THE LAST MURDER

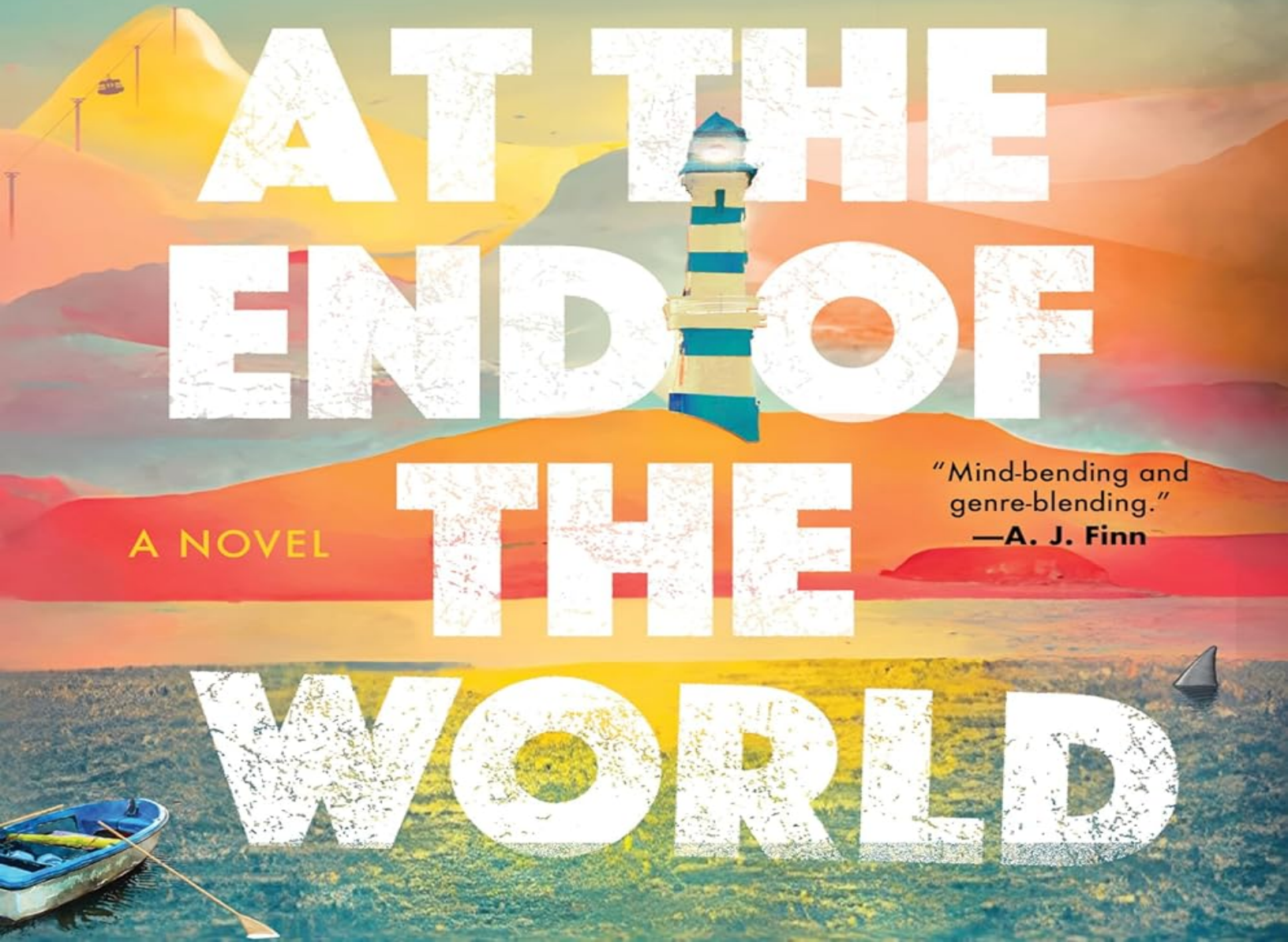
# AT THE END OF

A NOVEL

# THE

# WORLD

"Mind-bending and  
genre-blending."  
—A. J. Finn



# **THE LAST MURDER AT THE END OF THE WORLD**

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

*The Seven Deaths of Evelyn Hardcastle*

*The Devil and the Dark Water*

*To Resa,*

*For having a heart twice the size of anybody else's. For being funny, even when you're grumpy. For listening. And caring. And the cups of tea. For smiling when I walk into a room. For the life that radiates out of you like sunlight. For being with me, even when it's not easy. You're my best friend, and the person I love most in the world. Next time you catch me looking at you, and you ask me what I'm thinking, it's that. It's always that.*

**STUART TURTON**

**THE LAST  
MURDER  
AT THE  
END OF  
THE  
WORLD**

RAVEN  BOOKS  
LONDON • OXFORD • NEW YORK • NEW DELHI • SYDNEY

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Acknowledgements

A Note on the Author

*As requested, I have compiled a list of people whose lives, or deaths, will be necessary for your plan to succeed. Watch them carefully. They all have a part to play in what's coming.*

THE INVESTIGATORS

Emory  
Clara, Emory's daughter

THEIR FAMILY

Matis, Emory's grandfather  
Seth, Emory's father  
Jack, Emory's husband, deceased  
Judith, Emory's mother, deceased

THE SCIENTISTS

Niema Mandripilias  
Hephaestus Mandripilias  
Thea Sinclair

VILLAGERS OF CONSEQUENCE

Hui, Clara's best friend  
Magdalene, Emory's best friend  
Ben, newest arrival to the village  
Adil, Magdalene's grandfather

## PROLOGUE

‘Is there no other way?’ asks a horrified Niema Mandripilias, speaking out loud in an empty room.

She has olive skin, and a smudge of ink on her small nose. Her grey hair is shoulder length, and her eyes are strikingly blue, with flecks of green. She looks to be around fifty, and has done for the last forty years. She’s hunched over her desk, lit by a solitary candle. There’s a pen in her trembling hand, and a confession beneath it that she’s been trying to finish for the last hour.

‘None that I can see,’ I reply, in her thoughts. ‘Somebody has to die for this plan to work.’

Suddenly short of air, Niema scrapes her chair back and darts across the room, swiping aside the tattered sheet that serves as a makeshift door before stepping into the muggy night air.

It’s pitch black outside, the moon mobbed by storm clouds. Rain is pummelling the shrouded village, filling her nostrils with the scent of wet earth and cypress trees. She can just about see the tops of the encircling walls, etched in silver moonlight. Somewhere in the darkness, she can hear the distant squeal of machinery and the synchronised drumbeat of footsteps.

She stands there, letting the warm rain soak her hair and dress. ‘I knew there’d be a cost,’ she says, her voice numb. ‘I didn’t realise it would be so high.’

‘There’s still time to put this plan aside,’ I say. ‘Leave your secrets buried, and let everybody go about their lives as they’ve always done. Nobody has to die.’

‘And nothing will change,’ she shoots back angrily. ‘I’ve spent ninety years trying to rid humanity of its selfishness, greed and its impulse towards violence. Finally, I have a way to do it.’

She touches the tarnished cross hanging around her neck for comfort. ‘If this plan works, we’ll create a world without suffering. For the first time in

our history, there'll be perfect equality. I can't turn my back on that because I don't have the strength to do what's necessary.'

Niema speaks as if her dreams were fish swimming willingly into her net, but these are murky waters, far more dangerous than she can see.

From my vantage in her mind – and the minds of everybody on the island – I can predict the future with a high degree of accuracy. It's a confluence of probability and psychology, which is easy to chart when you have access to everybody's thoughts.

Striking away from this moment are dozens of possible futures, each waiting to be conjured into existence by a random event, an idle phrase, a miscommunication or an overheard conversation.

Unless a violin performance goes flawlessly, a knife will be rammed into Niema's stomach. If the wrong person steps through a long-closed door, a huge, scarred man will be emptied of every memory, and a young woman who isn't young at all will run willingly to her own death. If these things don't happen, the last island on earth will end up covered in fog, everything dead in the gloom.

'We can avoid those pitfalls if we're cautious,' says Niema, watching lightning tear through the sky.

'You don't have time to be cautious,' I insist. 'Once you commit to this plan, secrets will surface, old grudges will come to light and people you love will realise the extent of your betrayal. If any of these things disrupts your plan, the human race will be rendered extinct in one hundred and seven hours.'

Niema's heart jolts, her pulse quickening. Her thoughts waver, only to harden again as her arrogance takes the reins.

'The greatest achievements have always brought the greatest risk,' she says stubbornly, watching a line of figures walking stiffly in the darkness. 'Start your countdown, Abi. In four days we're either going to change the world, or die trying.'

**107 HOURS UNTIL HUMANITY'S EXTINCTION**

## ONE

Two rowboats float at world's end, a rope pulled taut between them. There are three children in each with exercise books and pencils, listening to Niema deliver her lesson.

She's at the bow of the boat on the right, gesticulating towards a wall of black fog that rises a mile into the air from the ocean's surface. The setting sun is diffused through the sooty darkness, creating the illusion of flames burning on the water.

Thousands of insects are swirling inside, glowing gently.

'... they're held back by a barrier produced by twenty-three emitters located around the island's perimeter ...'

Niema's lesson wafts past Seth, who's the only person in either of the boats not paying attention. Unlike the children, who range in age from eight to twelve, Seth's forty-nine, with a creased face and sunken eyes. It's his job to row Niema and her students out here and back again when they're done.

He's peering over the edge, his fingers in the water. The ocean's warm and clear, but it won't stay that way. It's October, a month of uncertain temper. Glorious sunshine gives way to sudden storms, which burn themselves out quickly, then apologise as they hurry away, leaving bright blue skies in their wake.

'The emitters were designed to run for hundreds of years unless ...' Niema falters, losing her thread.

Seth looks towards the bow to find her staring into space. She's given this same lesson every year since he was a boy and he's never once heard her trip over the wording.

Something has to be wrong. She's been like this all day, seeing through people; only half listening. It's not like her.

A swell brings a dead fish floating by Seth's hand, its body torn to shreds, its eyes white. More follow, thudding into the hull one after another. There are dozens of them, equally torn apart, drifting out of the black fog. Their cold scales brush against his skin and he snatches his hand back inside the boat.

'As you can see, the fog kills anything it touches,' Niema tells her students, gesturing to the fish. 'Unfortunately, it covers the entire earth, except for our island and half a mile of ocean surrounding it.'

## TWO

Magdalene's sitting cross-legged at the end of a long concrete pier, which extends into the glittering bay. Her hair is a tangled red pile, clumsily tied up with a torn piece of yellow linen. She looks like some ancient figurehead fallen off her galleon.

It's early evening, and the bay is filled with swimmers doing laps, or else hurling themselves off the rocks to her left, their laughter chasing them into the water.

Magdalene's staring at the distant rowboats with the children in them, a few flicks of charcoal adding them to the sketchbook in her lap. They seem so small against the wall of black.

She shudders.

Her eleven-year-old son, Sherko, is in one of those boats. She's never understood why Niema insists on taking them all the way to world's end for this lesson. Surely, they could learn about their history without being in touching distance of it.

She remembers being out there when she was a girl, hearing this same lesson from the same teacher. She cried the entire way, and nearly jumped out to swim for home when they dropped anchor.

'The children are safe with Niema,' I say reassuringly.

Magdalene shivers. She thought sketching this moment would alleviate her worry, but she can't watch any longer. She was only given her son three years ago, and she still mistakes him for fragile.

'What's the time, Abi?'

'5:43 p.m.'

She notes it in the corner, alongside the date, jabbing a pin in history, which flutters and rustles on the page.



After blowing away the charcoal dust, she stands and turns for the village. It was formerly a naval base and from this vantage it appears much more inhospitable than it actually is. The buildings inside are protected by a high wall, which is covered in ancient graffiti, weeds sprouting from long cracks. Vaulted roofs peek over the top, their gutters hanging loose, the solar panels made into glinting mirrors by the bright sunlight.

Magdalene follows a paved road through a rusted iron gate, the sentry towers so overrun by vegetation they look like hedges.

The barracks looms up in front of her. It's N-shaped and four storeys high, made of crumbling concrete blocks, every inch painted with jungle, flowers and birds, animals stalking through the undergrowth. It's a fantasy land, the paradise of people who've grown up surrounded by dry earth and barren rock.

Rickety staircases and rusted balconies grant access to the dormitories inside, none of which have doors or windows in the frames. A few villagers are hanging their washing over the railings, or sitting on the steps, trying to catch whatever scraps of breeze dare to clamber over the wall. Friends call to her cheerfully, but she's too anxious to respond.

'Where's Emory?' she asks, her eyes moving fretfully across the faces in front of her.

'Near the kitchen, with her grandfather.'

Magdalene heads into the space between the two wings of the barracks, searching for her best friend. This used to be an exercise yard for the troops, but it's slowly been transformed into a park by three generations of villagers.

Flowers have been planted in long beds along the walls, and the old collapsed radar dish has been patched up, and turned into a bird bath. Four rusted jeeps serve as planters for herbs, while lemon and orange trees grow out of shell casings. There's a covered stage for musical performances and an outdoor kitchen with six long tables for communal meals. Everybody eats together every night.

One hundred and twenty-two people live in the village, and most of them are in this yard. Games are being played, instruments practised and poems written. Performances are being rehearsed on the stage. Food is being cooked, and new dishes attempted.

There's a lot of laughter.

For a second, this joy loosens Magdalene's worry. She scans the area, searching for Emory, who isn't hard to find. Most of the villagers are squat and broad-shouldered, but Emory's slighter and shorter than most, with oval eyes and a huge head of curly brown hair. She once described herself as looking like some strange species of dandelion.

'Stay still,' demands Matis, peering around the statue he's sculpting of Emory. 'I'm almost finished.'

Matis is nearly sixty, which makes him the oldest man in the village. He's thick-armed, with grey whiskers and bushy eyebrows.

'I'm itchy,' complains Emory, struggling to reach a spot on her upper back.

'I gave you a break half an hour ago.'

'For fifteen minutes!' she exclaims. 'I've been standing here with this stupid apple for six hours.'

'Art always has a price,' he says loftily.

Emory sticks her tongue out at him, then resumes her pose, lifting the gleaming apple into the air.

Muttering, Matis returns to his work, shaving a sliver from the sculpture's chin. He's so close to it, his nose is almost touching the stone. His eyesight has been fading for the last decade, but there's nothing we can do. Even if we could, there'd be little point. He'll be dead tomorrow.