



You'll Die
if You Miss it...

“Like a
firecracker
on a hot
summer night.”

—ELIN
HILDERBRAND

THE

**BLOCK
PARTY**

A NOVEL

JAMIE DAY

THE
BLOCK PARTY

A Novel



JAMIE DAY



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For Kathleen and all she did to make this party happen

MEMORIAL DAY, PRESENT DAY

Chapter 1

Alexandra Fox meant to have only a couple of drinks at the block party. Three, tops.

Oh well. Woman plans, God laughs.

But God didn't have to put this party together. She did. The neighborhood slogan might as well have been: *Go ask Alex, I think she'll know*. Basically a lyric from a sixties drug song. Hence the drink in her hand. If Alice from Wonderland needed pills to function properly—well, Alex from Meadowbrook, Massachusetts, could imbibe some wine.

“What happened to the blue tablecloths?” one neighbor asked.

Alex startled at the sound of her voice.

“Those were so pretty.”

Alex eyed the red tablecloths as if she couldn't believe their horrible aesthetic. “Hundred percent agree,” she said with just the right touch of disgust. If she'd been able to find the blue ones in her basement, she'd have used those instead. But there was a good chance she'd thrown them out by mistake months ago.

“Such a good call,” Alex continued. “I'll remember them next year.” She almost made an air kiss to seal the deal, but she wasn't that drunk yet.

Instead of pointing out what's not working for you, she thought, perhaps you could have helped me send out the eighteen invites ... or put out the food or set up the badminton court. But no—shame on the red tablecloths.

“Oh, you must try Emily's potato salad,” Alex said in hopes of sending this person away. “Utterly to die for.”

She directed the neighbor's attention to the folding tables piled high with dessert trays and bowls of chips, which offered crumbs that daring birds would occasionally swoop down to snatch. Platters of meat sizzled in the sun.

Off went the neighbor, and *finally* Alex had a free moment to herself, nobody asking for anything, which meant she could drink from her red

Solo cup in peace.

Tomorrow she'd restart her sobriety. Worse things had happened. It wouldn't be a big problem as long as she could avoid her husband, Nick—at least until she sobered up.

Sounds of children at play filled the air, while their respective parents chatted in clusters or lounged on beach chairs dotting the island of the cul-de-sac. Alex resisted the urge to scoff.

If you all knew what I know, she thought, almost grinning at the idea, you'd be running from this party as fast as you could, not playing cornhole, that's for sure.

She felt a gentle tug on the back of her shirt. Turning, she set her blurry vision on a young girl who lived four doors down on Alton Road. She knew the face, but for the life of her couldn't remember this child's name.

“Are the hot dogs ready yet?” asked the little girl—or was it girls? Was she seeing double?

Damn.

Alex pointed at the distant row of grills manned by a line of sweaty dads. “How am I supposed to know if the hot dogs are done, sweetheart?” she said. “I'm not working the grill, am I?”

The little girl's eyes went wide. Alex feared the child might burst into tears. She hadn't meant to be unkind, just factual. The approach worked well with her divorce mediation clients, but was obviously less effective with a kid at a neighborhood barbecue.

“Come with me,” she said, her voice cheerier.

Molly. This girl's name is Molly Sanders. There. Not drunk.

She took the girl's hand. The child's flimsy grip made it easier to stay upright. “We'll go check on the hot dogs together.”

A blaze of sunshine coaxed beads of sweat onto Alex's skin. *Water. I need water.*

The hot dogs on the grill were in fact done. Alex was not. She reached into the kiddie pool and fished about the icy depths, eventually retrieving a pony-size plastic bottle of white wine. She filled her red cup almost to the brim. She also got herself a bottle of water, as if that might even things out.

Alex kept an eye out for Nick. They hadn't spoken much since their big fight two days ago. As luck would have it, she'd picked the grill farthest from the rattan tiki bar. Behind that bar, Nick Fox mixed the more

elaborate cocktails, none of which he'd have permitted Alex to drink. Good thing she'd stocked the bar for him that morning. He had promised to do it but didn't, leaving her to do the job. She felt more than deserving of the drink she'd helped herself to in the process. Didn't matter that it was before noon. The freestanding structure, one Nick had bought at a flea market some years back, leaned to one side as if it were about to topple over.

Alex could relate.

This would be her last glass until the evening, she promised herself. *Water and coffee from now until then.* She was still fully functional. She could carry on a conversation. Nobody was looking at her funny, were they?

The street was quite active now and would stay that way late into the evening. If Alex paced herself—steering clear of Nick, of course—she could party with her neighbors to her heart's content.

The party was controlled pandemonium, with fifteen families (three no-shows) and thirty-something kids. Classic rock blasted from a pair of speakers purchased exclusively for this annual happening. Yard games abounded, with the lawn of Alex's sprawling home functioning as the badminton court.

She surveyed the houses along the cul-de-sac's perimeter. Nick, an architect by trade, had designed their beautiful home. But now she saw these dwellings for what they really were: empty husks, an illusion of normalcy and security. If those walls could talk—oh boy, the secrets and lies they'd share.

How did it all change so much in a single year?

Drink in hand, Alex retreated to the shade of a nearby canopy tent, safely out of the view of prying eyes.

A moment later, a man entered the tent, someone Alex did not wish to see.

She didn't know his given name, but everyone in town called him Bug Man. Bug Man was a pest control salesman and a neighborhood pest himself. He was tall and lanky, with stooped shoulders and protruding eyes like those of the flies he was hired to exterminate. His uniform, an all-green jumpsuit with a matching green cap adorned with some colorful bug motif logo, said he was here to work. Certainly he hadn't been invited.

Alex gave him a scowl. "What are you doing here?" she asked. "This is a private party."

Bug Man offered an awkward grin. “I’m advertising my new business.” He presented Alex with a flyer, which she did not accept. Not that she could have read it, anyway, with her vision going in and out of focus. “I’m working for myself these days,” he said.

“Is that so?” Alex’s tone was cool.

“Yeah, I lost my job after someone on this very street made some unfavorable calls about me,” Bug Man said. “Guess my sales tactics didn’t go over well with your neighbors.”

“I purchased your services once,” Alex said. “But only after you scared me into doing so. Perhaps there’s some truth to those complaints.”

Bug Man shrugged. “I was simply explaining that once I treated your neighbor’s home, the pests most likely would seek shelter in your residence. Pests don’t care who’s paying the mortgage. They go where there’s no poison. I was merely trying to be helpful.”

“In some places, they’d call that kind of help scare tactics,” Alex said. “Look, you weren’t invited, and I don’t want you hounding my neighbors—ringing doorbells like there’s a fire outside, scaring people half to death, papering cars with your flyers, or breaking windows when you don’t get your way.”

Bug Man looked indignant. “What are you talking about?” he asked. “I kill bugs. I don’t break windows.”

Alex’s expression only hardened. “We both know you’re the one who tossed that rock with the note attached through my brother-in-law’s window. If he sees you around here, you won’t be safe. You do remember that he owns a gun? I wouldn’t go knocking on his door if I were you.”

Alex didn’t wait for a reply. She marched out of the canopy tent—right into Nick. They collided with force, enough to spill the wine in Alex’s Solo cup all over her husband.

“Jesus, Alex,” Nick said. He looked down at the massive wet spot on his polo shirt with disgust. “Have you been drinking?” he asked.

“No,” said Alex, using some newly discovered muscles to keep from swaying.

Nick sniffed the air. “I can smell it on your breath,” he snapped. “God, Alex, we *talked* about this.”

“It’s one party, Nick,” Alex said. “Lighten up, will you? You’re not my *mother*.”

“Thank God for that,” Nick muttered under his breath.

Alex tried not to let the sting show. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

she asked.

“It means you say what you want, do what you want, and damn the consequences. You promised, Alex—you *promised*, no more drinking.”

“I have some fun for one day...” Alex slurred. In case Nick hadn’t understood, she held up a single finger.

Nick’s eyes, normally a sweet shade of brown, darkened to charcoal. He stepped back to appraise her.

Alex stepped back as well, barely catching herself from rolling an ankle in her wedge heels. She didn’t want to be near him. Nick latched his hands on his hips, with the same look on his face he used to lecture Lettie.

“I’m just having a good time, honey,” Alex said. “Leave it alone, will you? Setting up the party was a lot of work. And Lettie—she’s leaving soon for college, and I’m still pretty upset about our argument. Can’t I blow off some steam without you watching me like a hawk?”

“Not this way you can’t,” Nick answered, his tone clipped.

Alex waved him off. She didn’t need to be lectured. Didn’t want a talking-to. She was a grown-ass woman who could make her own life decisions. “I really don’t appreciate being treated like a child,” she said. “I think I deserve a little gratitude from my damn husband, not a lecture—or do you think the red tablecloths are shit as well?”

Nick looked utterly perplexed. “What on earth do tablecloths have to do with you being blotto at the block party?”

“Whatever,” said Alex angrily. She twisted the David Yurman bracelet Nick had bought for their twelfth anniversary, resisting the urge to rip it off and throw it at him. Too much nuance was in play for Nick to grasp. She’d rather be with her girlfriends, anyway. They’d understand her far better than her husband ever could.

She took one step backward, but it proved to be one step too many. Alex’s foot connected with the side of the kiddie pool full of water, ice, and beverages. One second, she was backing away, and the next she was on her ass, covered in water and ice, with drinks floating all around her.

Heads turned. People stopped talking. All eyes fell on Alex.

She leapt out of the pool as if it were electrified, raising her hands overhead triumphantly to signal that she’d meant to do that. “It was getting hot out here,” Alex shouted at the gawkers. “I’m good. All cool now. Literally and figuratively.”

That was a clever recovery, she thought.

A smattering of applause followed, but it couldn’t overpower the

whispered talk and sniggers of laughter.

Nick gripped Alex's arm. "What the hell, Alex? You are such a disgrace," he said between his teeth. "Get control over yourself, will you? Go home. Sleep it off before you embarrass yourself further. Lettie shouldn't have to see you like this. And, Alex, whatever you do—*don't* come back."

Well, that hurt.

Alex managed to keep her smile plastered on as she made her way home. It was hard to walk in sodden jeans. Her wet shirt offered a veiled preview of her midriff, but thankfully nothing more.

"I'm fine. I'm fine," she told anyone who asked. "Can't a girl fall into a pool these days?"

Once inside, Alex undressed in the bathroom. She placed her soaking clothes in the hamper. She was angry about Nick's remarks, but more upset that she hadn't thought to grab another bottle of wine from the pool. The house had been dry since March. *Probably for the best.* She'd sleep for a bit and go back to the party later. Nick didn't control her.

Alex settled on the couch. The air conditioner was on, chilling her skin. She pulled a fuzzy blanket up to her chin. Her mind replayed the incident, unleashing torrents of shame.

You're better than this, Alex told herself. Nick was right to be horrified. What an ass I made of myself. What's wrong with me? Thank God Lettie wasn't around to see that.

Alex's eyes eventually closed. Soon she sank into a dreamless slumber.

Sometime later she awoke with a start. Daylight still seeped from beneath the curtain, informing Alex that she hadn't slept through the party.

She bolted upright—too quickly—and the room began to spin. It took a moment for her ears to attune to the sound blasting outside the window. Something was wrong. Over the years she'd heard it all—fireworks, laughter, music—but police sirens at the Alton Road block party?

That was a first for sure.

Memorial Day (Present Day)

Meadowbrook Online Community Page

Post from Regina Arthur

Does anyone know what's going on? Just heard what sounded like a hundred sirens go by.

Ed Callahan

Might help if we knew where you lived! Think much?

Reply from Tom Beck

Ah, Ed's back. Who the heck unblocked you, Ed?

Laura Ballwell

I hear them, too. I think something is happening on Alton Road.

Reply from Susanne Horton

Something happening to The Flauntin' Altons? Surprised they haven't deployed the National Guard. LOL!

Reply from Joseani Wilkins

That's not funny. Something serious is going on.

Regina Arthur

I've never heard so many sirens.

Janet Pinkham

Is anyone else having problems with the town garbage bags splitting at the seams? It's happened four times now, so I have to double-bag them, not to mention the mess it's made.

Reply from Katherine Leavitt

Janet, please start a new post for that. There's a serious situation on Alton Road. Isn't today their annual Memorial Day block party?

Reply from Laura Ballwell

Yes!!! My husband is trying to get the police scanner to work. Stay tuned!

Christine Doddy

Sending thoughts and prayers.

Reply from Susanne Horton

While you're at it, send the local assessor, too. They should be paying higher taxes. Ha-ha.

Henry St. John

I think there may be a fire or something. I just saw three fire trucks go by my house.

Tom Beck

Anyone living near Alton Road see smoke?

Reply from Ross Weinbrenner

Only smoke I've seen is from their flotilla of BBQ grills. Who here's ever been invited to the Altonites' big Memorial Day block party??

Reply from Ross Weinbrenner

They don't even invite people on Tucker Street. That's TWO streets over. Isn't two

streets close enough to be part of the block?

Reply from Ed Callahan

Um, no.

Reply from Susanne Horton

Altonites!! Ha-ha

Laura Ballwell

Everyone please!! This is serious. Maybe there was a bad accident or something?

Regina Arthur

My husband just heard code 187 on the scanner.

Reply from Susanne Horton

Is that the code for being stuck up?

Reply from Tom Beck

No, you idiot. It's the code for a homicide.

MEMORIAL DAY, ONE YEAR AGO

Chapter 2

From her shady vantage point, Alex watched Nick arrange a pile of burlap sacks into a perfectly straight line on their neighbor's meticulously manicured lawn. She admired her husband's dad bod from afar, fully aware it wasn't the party atmosphere making her heart patter. Those cargo shorts aside, Nick was the love of her life.

But Alex couldn't sit idle, admiring her husband. She had work to do. She was the organizer of the block party, which came with a host of responsibilities.

She checked her phone. It wouldn't be long before those sacks were filled with children racing about like giant jumping beans. She smiled at a memory of Lettie doing just that. The days were long, but the years were short—a cliché, but that didn't make it untrue.

Even though the party was in full swing, with people everywhere drinking, eating, and playing games, Alex had no trouble spotting her daughter. True to form, Lettie was the only one at the block party clad in all black, her Doc Martens a stark contrast to the sneakers and sandals everyone else wore. She ambled past her father without so much as a glance, nonchalantly sipping from her red Solo cup.

Alex hoped it contained only soda.

"Lettie," Alex called, "why don't you share your playlist with Uncle Ken? We could use some newer music."

As if on cue, the Doobie Brothers came blasting through the speakers that Alex's brother-in-law, Ken Adair, had hauled up from his basement. Ken, who had once played guitar in a high school band, had promised to form some kind of musical group to perform at the block party. Luckily for all, he hadn't found the time or the neighborhood talent to make good on his threat.

Lettie dismissed her mother with a wave. "I was into helping with the music at this party, like, four years ago, back when I cared," she said. "And now I don't."

She raised her Solo cup in a salute before marching away. Lettie was under orders to attend the block party, but that didn't mean she had to socialize.

"She'll come back around. Give it time," said a voice behind Alex's back.

Alex turned to see Willow Thompson, a tall, thin woman in her thirties with dark blond hair full of annoyingly perfect ringlet curls. It was Willow's lawn that would host the sack races. Technically, it was Willow and Evan's lawn, at least until their divorce was finalized.

"Come around when?" Alex said. "After she has a baby and needs me again?"

Willow offered only a shrug.

For someone who'd never had a career, who made money working part-time jobs here and there—the last one being at a day care—Willow always dressed to impress. Decker out in form-fitting capri pants, strappy sandals, and a loose-fitting silk blouse perfect for the warm weather, she looked ready to command a crowd, even at a barbecue.

"It'll get easier when this thing at school blows over," said Willow. "If it helps any, Riley feels bad about what happened. She doesn't support the vandalism, but she supports the *idea* behind it."

"Good to know," said Alex. She didn't sound all that appreciative.

Riley Thompson, Willow's only child, was president of the student body council and the equivalent of an A-list celebrity among Meadowbrook's youth. She was also Lettie's childhood best friend turned tormentor, but Alex didn't carry a grudge. Girl friendships held more drama than a Shakespeare festival. It was the more recent events that Alex found a little harder to overlook.

"I should go check on the burgers," said Alex, bounding off before Willow had a chance to change topics to her pending divorce, a favorite subject. "Let's catch up later, okay?" Alex offered a friendly wave. Off she went to the tent where Willow's soon-to-be ex-husband, a well-known but hotheaded fashion photographer named Evan Thompson, was grilling the meat.

Evan looked like Willow's counterpart in his snazzy button-down shirt, perfect shorts, and footwear that was likely straight out of the box. As a couple, they looked beautiful together, but their personalities clashed like plaids and stripes. Willow was something of a homebody, while Evan always wanted to be on the road. It didn't help that his frequent sojourns to

New York and various exotic locales to photograph hot models made it difficult for Willow to trust him. Add to that his excessive partying and general irresponsibility while Willow took care of everything, and the couple ended up with a combustible marriage.

Even though the decision to divorce was firm, the paperwork had yet to be filed. For Riley's sake, Willow and Evan had agreed to continue cohabitating until after graduation, when the house would be sold. But that couple made the "till death do us part" vow sound like a threat.

"So what did the biggest mistake of my life have to say?" Evan indicated Willow with a nod while his hands were busy plating burgers.

Alex plastered on a smile. "You mean the mother of your precious daughter?"

"She might look like her mom, but thank goodness Riley has more of my personality."

"We're all still friends, Evan." Alex suppressed a sigh. "We're trying to support you both. Let's keep it cordial." She stuck a meat thermometer into the thickest part of a burger Evan had plated. The digital readout displayed 110 degrees.

"This burger barely has the wind knocked out of it," Alex said. "Let's not serve *E. coli* to the children, okay? Thanks so much." She gave Evan a gentle pat on the cheek.

"You want anything to eat?" asked Evan. "I'll charbroil something just for you."

"No, I'm good," said Alex. "Maybe in a bit." She didn't want Lettie to see her devouring a former sentient being. She wasn't in the mood for a lecture.

"What's Lettie having for lunch?" Evan asked. "I'll make her something special."

"My heart," Alex called over her shoulder, walking away.

The party would mostly run itself from this point, but not without small fires for Alex to put out along the way. By four o'clock that afternoon, she had addressed a buns crisis (she found more packages in her basement freezer) and a shouting match between ten-year-olds (she located their respective mothers), and she'd made a run to the store for more chocolate bars after Nick left a package too close to the fire.

She was finally able to take a breather. Alex put her feet up on a chaise longue, ready to savor her wine. Moments later, she spied her younger sister, Emily, pulling into the driveway of 13 Alton Road with her Audi. A

gleaming silver Lexus drove in behind her.

Number thirteen was now unoccupied, as the Weaver family had downsized after their youngest had graduated from college. The stately brick manor had gone on the market only days ago, and already had an eager buyer.

Emily looked poised and confident in casual business attire. Her bright smile all but said, “This house is sold.” As one of Meadowbrook’s most sought-after real estate agents, Emily Adair—like her husband, star software salesman, Ken Adair—loved the thrill of the deal.

From the Lexus emerged Emily’s clients, a handsome Indian man and his striking blond companion, probably his wife. Accompanying the couple was a young man in his late teens, maybe early twenties, who had dark hair and dark eyes and was most likely their son.

Emily caught Alex’s eyes across the street and waved eagerly for her to join them. “Alex,” said Emily, still beaming, “this is the Kumar family—Samir, Mandy, and their son, Jay. Everyone, this is my sister and, lucky for me, my next-door neighbor, Alexandra Fox, Alex for short.”

One might not guess the relationship between Alex and Emily with even a lengthy appraisal. While the sisters shared the same shiny dark hair and light hazel eyes, Emily was petite, whereas Alex was taller by several inches, with a stronger build. Emily got their father’s small round nose, and Alex had inherited their mother’s more striking bone structure. Genetic differences aside, both women had their own classic beauty.

“So, good news,” said Emily. “The Kumars are very interested in making an offer, and I suggested we do the second viewing today so I could show them the neighborhood.”

That rising pitch Alex knew so well was a not-so-subtle cue that the deal was all but done.

“You picked a perfect day to come,” said Alex.

Samir made no motion to shake her hand. In contrast, Mandy offered a warm handshake—firm, too. Jay stood disengaged and off to the side.

“We’re all here for our annual block party,” Alex continued.

“Sweetheart,” Nick called to Alex from across the street, “we’re out of mustard!”

“Okay,” she called back, forcing cheer into her voice, “I’ll call the police. Not to worry.” She sent Mandy a tight smile. “That’s my husband, Nick,” she said. “He’s a great guy, very handy with a toolbox—less so with condiments.”

Mandy, who had glowing skin and a radiant smile, returned a polite laugh as she took in the scene with her piercing blue eyes. Her husband, Samir, directed his attention to the mammoth house that Alex thought was far more home than three people needed.

“The party seems like so much fun. What a great tradition,” said Mandy, who matched Willow when it came to style.

Samir was no shabby dresser himself. Alex could tell he was fastidious about his appearance, taking note of his wrinkle-free dress shirt and slacks, his well-manicured hands, the shine on his loafers, the gleam to his watchband, and his clean-shaven face.

“Remind me, what are the taxes here?” Samir asked Emily, his tone suggesting that whatever number she quoted, it was going to be too much.

“I have that on the listing sheet,” said Emily, without missing a beat.

“So many children,” observed Mandy, still taking in the sights. Alex heard something melancholic in Mandy’s voice, which she attributed to having a son who, like Lettie, was long past the days of backyard games.

“Ken,” Emily called to her husband, who was standing within earshot, “come here, honey. Let me introduce you.”

“So much house,” grumbled Samir. “Who needs this much house at our age?”

“It’s gorgeous,” said Mandy, who did a good job ignoring her husband’s complaint, if she even heard it.

Alex watched Ken cross the street like a conquering emperor—his chest stuck out, sporting his best damn-glad-to-meet-you smile. He had charm, and Alex loved him as family, but her bullshit radar always pinged loudly in Ken’s presence. He still looked fit in his blue polo, she had to give him that. Hitting the gym religiously five days a week had held age somewhat at bay, while offering a glimpse of the athlete he’d been. Handsome almost to a fault, Ken radiated a magnetism that drew people to his side, including Emily.

Ken came over carrying his treasured bottle of Johnnie Walker Blue Label. Now Alex knew this was staged. At over two hundred dollars a bottle, this was a prize Ken typically kept to himself. Shock of shocks, he carried three glasses in his hands.

“Mandy, Samir, this is my husband, Ken Adair,” said Emily.

In Ken’s usual fashion, he addressed the man first. In his mind it was still a man’s world, and Samir would be the one with the checkbook, who’d be making the final decision.