



THEY GROW UP SO FAST...AND THEN THEY'RE GONE.

PARENTS WEEKEND

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—MARY KUBICA

ALEX FINLAY

NATIONAL BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF
IF SOMETHING HAPPENS TO ME

PARENTS WEEKEND

A NOVEL

ALEX FINLAY



MINOTAUR
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[Begin Reading](#)

[Table of Contents](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Copyright Page](#)

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PROLOGUE

They run. Run with a primal fear knowing that if they slow down, all five of them will die.

It's hard to think in this fog of terror. Earlier this week their biggest fears were a mom finding his stash of edibles, a dad finding those condoms in her dorm room nightstand. A mom finding her fake ID. A dad finding his crumpled exam with the *D* circled in red.

But now, with sand in their shoes, waves crashing, the bonfire burning in the distance, they leave those trivialities behind.

And they run.

They reach the narrow path to the sea cave, link hands in a chain as they navigate the perilous waves and jagged rocks into the hollow.

Huddled in the gloom, they stay still as stone. Thoughts swirling, they wonder what clues the police will find. The group chat? The social-media posts? The video of the horror that brought them here?

Another wave breaks. Another flashlight beam gets closer. Another whimper escapes a hand clutching a mouth.

What clues will they find?

Or will they find nothing but their cold, lifeless bodies?

FRIDAY

Three Days Earlier

CHAPTER ONE

THE ROOSEVELTS

Blane basks in the morning sun, his skateboard *clack-clack-clacking* on the campus sidewalk. He marvels at the palm trees and pretty classmates stretched out on towels in the grass, wearing bikinis and pretending to study. He's attended Santa Clara University for only a few months and already decided that he's never leaving California. His hometown, Washington, D.C., with its swampy weather, its status and power infatuation, its boring old marble buildings, has nothing on Cali.

He juts his cruiser to a stop and kicks the back so it flies up and into his grip, a move he's been working on since drop-off day. There's a crowd outside Campisi Hall, a spectacle of some sort. He sees his buddy Mark Wong.

"What's up? Fire drill?"

Mark shakes his head. "I don't know. They cleared everyone out of the dorm. It's like a Secret Service sweep or something." Blane follows Mark's gaze to the four SUVs parked in the lot out front. At the men in dark suits standing erect.

Ugh. How could Blane have forgotten? Parents Weekend starts tonight.

"It's just my mom's advance team." Blane rolls his eyes.

Mark digests this, then his eyes flash. “That’s cool as shit, bro. What, is she, like, important or something?”

Blane shrugs. He watches as two stoic men with earpieces glower in their sunglasses. They love the attention.

Blane turns to his friend, offers a lopsided grin. “Watch this.” He takes out his lanyard, finds the small device attached to the key chain, then directs the laser pointer at one of the agents. A tiny red dot appears on the man’s chest. It takes only a moment before more agents fly out of an SUV.

The din of the crowd rises as the drama unfolds. Then comes the recognition from the detail that this isn’t a sniper’s laser sight. The lead Diplomatic Security Service agent’s glare snags on Blane from the distance, and the guy marches over.

“Oh shit,” Mark says, already stepping back as the massive agent stands before Blane, a scowl on his face.

The giant looks like he’d love to take a swing at an entitled college kid, but instead holds out his palm. “This isn’t a game,” is all he says.

When Blane doesn’t hand over the laser pointer, the agent rips the lanyard from his hand. Shaking his head, the agent says, “Your mother’s waiting in your dorm room.”

Might as well get this over with. “I’ll catch you at Benson for lunch,” Blane says to Mark.

On the walk into Campisi, one of the kids from the dorm gives Blane a high five like this was the most epic thing that’s ever happened.

Inside it’s a ghost town. The senior girl who normally works the front desk isn’t there doomscrolling, looking exasperated. The foosball table sits to the side, no crowd cheering on a game. The lounge chairs are empty. Blane shuttles down the hallway. Another member of his mom’s detail is stationed outside his room.

The agent gives a nearly indiscernible nod, allowing Blane entry. His mom is out of sight, down the narrow hall and in the tiny box Blane calls home. Blane can hear she’s on the phone with someone, like always.

He lingers in the corridor a moment, listening.

“I don’t know why we’re having this conversation,” his mother says into the phone. Someone’s in deep shit with her, like always.

“Bullshit, Hank. That’s bullshit.”

Blane realizes it’s his father on the line.

“It’s spelled out in our agreement. *I* get Parents Weekend.”

A heavy silence follows. The temperature is rising, like always. The usual garbage between them.

“Really, Hank? Really? Well I hope they fucking kill me too so I never have to hear your goddamned voice again.”

Blane gives it a moment, backtracks, and rests his skateboard loudly against the wall so she’ll hear.

“Hi, Mom,” he says.

Her back is to him, like she’s collecting herself. Then she turns. She’s wearing one of her usual power suits, which somehow makes her look even taller than six feet. Her chin-length dark hair is immaculate, like always.

“Honey, how are you?” Her tone reveals none of the tension from seconds ago. “And all I get is ‘Hi, Mom’? Get over here and give me a hug.”

They exchange a stiff embrace.

Blane catches the faint scent of her jasmine perfume, which transports him briefly to when he was little. Back when Mom sang pop songs, inserting her own silly lyrics, as they drove home from Little League. When she would dance and gyrate as Blane pounded on his toy bongo drums. When she would even watch *SpongeBob* with him, declaring Squidward was her favorite character. Then came her new, powerful job. Then the bounty on her head because of that new, powerful job. Then Blane’s terrifying four-day disappearance. Then the divorce. It was as if every stress layered a coat of varnish over her, encasing her in a hard, humorless shell.

He wonders how long it will take for her to critique his hair, his clothes. The mustache the fraternity he’s pledging insisted he grow since they say he looks like Goose from *Top Gun*.

Surprisingly, she just says, “I’m excited.”

“About what?”

She gives him a hard look. "To spend time with you. To meet your friends. Meet the other parents."

Blane nods, says nothing.

"Is there an agenda for the parents?" She pauses. "Never mind, Paul will know."

Paul is her chief of staff. As smarmy a Washingtonian as you'll ever meet.

"There's a dinner thing tonight with my capstone group," Blane says.

Each freshman dorm breaks the residents into small groups of five to six students. They have to complete a project together by the end of the year, but spend most of the time partying.

"Have you gotten lunch?" his mom asks.

"I'm supposed to meet some friends at the dining hall," he says, hoping she won't gripe.

"That's great. I actually have a few calls this afternoon. So, I'll see you tonight?"

He nods.

"Maybe you can shave that peach fuzz over your lip before dinner."

There she is.

"Can't, it's a frat thing."

She frowns. "At least put on a clean shirt."

Another stiff hug, and he's off.

★ ★ ★

Alone in the room, Cynthia releases a cleansing breath. Blane's father is such a complete and utter *asshole*. The only reason Hank wanted to come to Parents Weekend in her place was to punish her.

Mitch, the lead on her detail, comes into the dorm room.

"Everything okay?" he says, examining her. He's a trained observer and little gets by him.

She's learned in this job, among these men—even her subordinates or those she trusts, like Mitch—to never show weakness. “Just Hank being Hank,” she says.

Her phone pings, she scans the screen. It's a text alert from the university. One thing she's noticed in Blane's few months at Santa Clara: The administration overuses its alert system.

Cynthia reads the text aloud. “It says, ‘Bronco Alert: An unhoused man is wielding a knife at the Seven-Eleven on Benton Street.’”

Mitch checks his own phone, presumably the tracker on Blane's device. “Beavis is still on campus, he's nowhere near there.” They made the mistake of letting Blane choose his own code name. Blane picked “Beavis” from some idiotic cartoon he and his father think is hilarious.

“Unhoused man?” Mitch says, repeating the alert's message as if he's unfamiliar with the term.

“I forgot, you aren't versed in liberal-speak.” She allows herself a smile. “Calling them ‘homeless’ apparently carries a negative connotation that they're criminals. And we wouldn't want anyone to think the *unhoused* man wielding a knife is a criminal.”

Mitch shakes his head.

Cynthia examines the room. For security reasons, Blane's is a single, one of the few in the dormitory. The bed is elevated. Next to it, a miniature fridge, which she decides not to open. On the small desk, there's a box of protein bars, a flyer with Greek letters advertising a “Parents Weekend Blowout.” The flyer has a photo of what must be a fraternity house with a giant sign—a sheet hanging from the second-floor window: OUR PARENTS CAN DRINK MORE THAN YOURS.

“Remember the days when you could take a nap whenever you wanted? When you had no responsibilities? When you could bring someone back to your room in the middle of the afternoon...?” Cynthia puts a hand on the bed, pushes down on the thin mattress, testing it.

Mitch holds the hint of a smile. Oh, he remembers.

“Did you see that ridiculous mustache his fraternity’s making him grow?”

“It’s better than what they had pledges do in my day,” the agent says.

Mitch was a frat boy. That tracks.

“Are you the only one manning the hallway?” She holds his gaze.

He checks his phone again, nods.

“Well, if we’re going to fuck like coeds, we’d better be fast,” she says, turning her back to him, lifting her skirt, and yanking down her panties.

★ ★ ★

At the dining hall, Blane stabs a plastic fork into his burrito bowl. Mark sits across from him at the long table, a tiny mountain of food on his plate. Mark’s a big dude—the pledge master gave him the nickname Tommy Boy from the old movie. It fits, not only because Mark resembles the actor Chris Farley—albeit an Asian Chris Farley—but also because he’s a jokester. It’s why he and Blane became fast friends. To survive pledging, you need a friend.

Mark takes a big bite of pizza and, with a mouthful, says, “So these dudes, like, have to go everywhere with your mom?”

“Yeah. They’ve basically lived with us since I was in fifth grade.”

“Why? What’s the—”

“My mom’s high up at the State Department. We dropped a bomb on some official from a hostile government and they put a bounty on her head.”

“Holy shit.”

“Yeah. She wanted *me* to have a team here and I said, ‘No way.’ My dad backed me up.”

“It’d be kinda cool, though. Girls would think you’re, like, mysterious, dangerous.”

“It sucks, bro, trust me. DS rotates agents and you have strangers up in your shit constantly. And my mom is always pressed with what we say or do

around them. The agents gossip. They tell my mom all kind of stories about the other assholes they protect.”

Mark doesn’t seem convinced.

Blane doesn’t reveal what precipitated the around-the-clock security detail—his abduction when he was ten. The two men didn’t hurt him. They bought him Happy Meals and let him watch TV as their bumbling plan to lure his mom into peril came to an abrupt end when burly men in night vision goggles riddled them with bullets. Blane doesn’t think about it that much these days. Doesn’t feel traumatized or haunted by what happened. It seems more like a dream. But it was pure gold for his college essay.

“The *only* good thing I ever got out of a security detail,” Blane adds, “was at Disneyland when I was a kid: We got to cut to the front of the line on every ride.”

Mark is distracted. He’s looking over Blane’s shoulder at something.

Blane twists around and sees Stella walking toward them, her long auburn hair tangled, like she just woke up. She wears a shirt that reads, DON’T TELL ME TO SMILE.

She fast-walks over, takes a seat next to them.

“Sup?” Blane asks.

Stella’s expression is just short of panic. She leans in, says, “It’s Natasha. She still hasn’t come home. And Libby ... she’s freaking out.”

Blane looks at Mark, who puts down his slice of pizza.

Blane keeps his voice steady. “You just need to be cool.”

“But Libby, she says she’s gonna ... I think we need to—”

Blane puts his hands out, palms down: “Stick to the story like we agreed.”

His gut clenches, but he makes sure to smile reassuringly. He warned Stella—warned them all—that Natasha Belov was bad news. Bad, bad news.

CHAPTER TWO

THE MALDONADOS

The ascent is bumpy, but David doesn't mind. It's rare that he gets to fly private, so he can't complain. His wife Nina sits tight-jawed next to him in the luxurious cabin. He decides not to call her on the pouting, lest they get into a fight in front of their hosts, Brad and Jade, who sit across from them in buttery leather seats. Jade is stunning in an overdone way—plunging neckline, contoured makeup, short skirt with tall boots. Brad, with his meaty face and paunch, is much less so. But that's often how it goes, David has learned in his twenty years as a plastic surgeon.

“Thank you again for the lift,” he says to the couple.

Brad and Jade raise their champagne flutes in acknowledgment. A leggy flight attendant mistakes it as a signal that they need a refill and ambles over and tops off their glasses.

“I was headed to Frisco for business, so it's no problem,” Brad says.

David can't remember the last time he'd heard someone call San Francisco “Frisco”—probably in a movie from the seventies. With his shirt unbuttoned too low, laying bare his dark mat of chest hair, Brad has that vibe. A relic from another era.

Brad continues: “And after what you did for Jade—for *me*—how could I not?”

David is unsure what he means.

Jade cups her breasts with her hands. “They’re perfect, absolutely perfect. All my friends are asking about the *artist* who sculpted these masterpieces.”

David doesn’t need to look over at his wife to know the expression on her face. He simply smiles. His father taught him to always accept a compliment.

“The best part,” Brad says, “is that they’re so damn upright.” He removes something from his shirt pocket. It takes David a moment to realize that it’s a vial of white powder. Brad sprinkles a jagged line on his wife’s chest, leans over, and snorts the coke.

David can’t help but look at Nina. Her eyes are wide. David and his wife aren’t prudes, but they’re not drug people, either. When David looks back, there’s already another line on Jade’s chest. Brad gestures for David to take it.

“Oh, thank you,” David pauses, trying to formulate his excuse, “but Jade is a patient and it wouldn’t be appropriate as her physician to—”

Before he finishes the sentence, Nina has leaned forward and buried her face in Jade’s cleavage.

Jade arches her back, laughing as Nina does the line.

“*Now* we’ve got a party!” Brad says.

Nina peers at David as she wipes her nose with her index finger and thumb, then falls back into her seat.

“What’s your business in San Francisco?” David asks, if only to restrain his astonishment at what just happened. To contain the anger rising in his chest.

“The usual bullshit with one of my tech companies,” Brad answers. He swallows another glass of champagne. “Jade said you’re visiting your kid?”

“Yes, college Parents Weekend. Our daughter, Stella, is a freshman.”

“Where? Stanford?”

The question always irks David. Santa Clara is a small but elite school without the brand recognition.

“SCU, a private school about an hour from Frisco,” David says, using Brad’s lingo and hating himself for it.

Brad shrugs and holds up his flute to signal to the flight attendant. “Top you off? Or get you something else to drink? She makes a mean Old Fashioned.” Brad looks toward the flight attendant, his eyes fixing on her ass.

“You two don’t look old enough to have a college student,” Jade says, reclining back in the seat now. “The benefits of marrying a master surgeon,” she adds, like it’s an afterthought.

Nina smiles, but it doesn’t reach her eyes. “I guess,” she says. It’s true, Nina is a beauty, but not by the scalpel. She practices yoga, eats healthy, and seemingly drinks gallons of water every day. With her glowing skin and bohemian style, she has the air of an aging-gracefully, girl-next-door fashion model. She’s never said so, but she’s always disapproved of David’s chosen profession. These days, she disapproves of everything about David.

She still hasn’t forgiven him, and probably never will.

His mind flashes to that night. Naked in the back seat of his Range Rover. The anesthesiologist frantically tugging up her scrubs, tears streaming down her face, her husband standing outside the vehicle in the woodland near where she and David parked. The husband saying he called Nina and told her. Then—

Brad’s voice mercifully breaks the memory. “You guys in the club?”

“Club?” David asks.

“The mile-high one.” Brad cocks one of his thick brows.

David offers a polite smile. “Can’t say that I am.”

“There’s a small bedroom in the back. Feel free to...” He makes a clucking sound with his tongue.

David turns to Nina, who is downing another glass of champagne and seems out of it. Even after the coke, there’s no way she’d want David to touch her, much less join “the club.”

But then his wife surprises him. “Will you be joining us?” she says to Brad and Jade.

Brad’s Adam’s apple bobs up and down.

What in the fuck? David glares at his wife. “Nina’s a kidder,” he says.

“Damn,” Brad says, “this was just getting interesting.” He leans forward, slaps David on the ball of his shoulder.

“I’ll take that drink,” David calls out to the flight attendant.



Later, Nina doesn’t know whether to be annoyed or satisfied that David hasn’t spoken to her since they landed and escaped that awful couple. Not a word in the back of the town car waiting for them at the airstrip. Not at the rental car place. Not now, waiting for their daughter to meet them in front of the fountain at the center of campus. That’s David’s specialty. The silent treatment. A Maldonado inheritance passed down generation after generation, from father to son.

To be fair, she was acting out. But what does he expect?

Still jittery from the cocaine, she downs a bottle of water. Nina was a party girl in college, but usually just booze. She tried coke two times and never liked it. She’s remembering why. The brief euphoria is dwarfed by the anxiety. The need to chatter, an urge she’s had to fight, given David’s cold shoulder. And honestly, it’s his fault she acted that way.

She stops herself from the internal rant. This weekend isn’t about them. Isn’t about their marital problems. It’s about Stella.

“Are you going to give me the silent treatment all weekend?” she asks.

David ignores the question, stares out at the campus church, a sand-colored Spanish-style structure with a bell tower. David is a lapsed Catholic with all the guilt that carries.

“Can we at least try to get along for Stella?” she continues.

David turns to look at her. It’s a beautiful day, seventy degrees, warm for March. The sun is beating down on them, highlighting his thinning dark

hair, the lines etched in his face. He's still damned handsome, but this afternoon he's showing his age.

David looks like he's about to let loose on Nina for her behavior on the plane. But then his eyes jerk to something behind her. Maybe it's their daughter, arriving in the nick of time.

No, his face is drained of color. Something's wrong.

Nina whirls around. That's when she sees him. She rubs her eyes in an almost cartoon-like gesture to make sure it's not the coke playing tricks on her. But it's *him*.

How?

Why is he here?

David grabs her by the hand and yanks her away.

CHAPTER THREE

THE GOFFMANS

“Dean Pratt?” Alice pokes her head into her boss’s office. She doesn’t want to bother him. The dean has been in a mood all week. Parents Weekend always stresses him out. Alice understands. These aren’t just helicopter parents. They’re UH-60 Black Hawks who are spending a fortune on the private institution and expect their money’s worth. They want face time with the head of the school to discuss their “ideas” or to gripe about this or that. Dean Pratt has three associate deans assigned to handle such matters and who, frankly, are better at front-of-the-house. But on Parents Weekend, there’s no escaping the parents.

The dean looks up from his desk. Gives Alice one of those stares over his reading glasses that reminds Alice of her father. The dean is about the same age as Alice’s father was when he left the family and never looked back.

“Yes,” is all the dean says in that get-to-the-point tone of his. He’d once cut Alice off mid-sentence, barking, “I don’t need to know how the sausage is made.” He’d later shortened it to just “sausage” whenever Alice went on for too long. So Alice rehearses nearly every encounter with the man.

“Natasha Belov’s parents called again.”

The dean exhales loudly. “She still hasn’t turned up?”

Alice shakes her head. It's not the first time a student has gone AWOL. They always reappear, usually returning from an impromptu road trip or a bender, oblivious that anyone was looking for them.

"What does Chief McCray say?" The campus has its own police force, called CSS, that's accustomed to the shenanigans of college kids.

"He said she's missed all her classes this week. No one's seen her since Tuesday."

"Missing classes isn't all that unusual for Ms. Belov," the dean points out.

Natasha's on academic probation and has been called before the student disciplinary board for alcohol and weed offenses on more than one occasion.

"The chief said they're searching the Panther Beach area." The last place she was seen, drunk or high and out of it. No one reported the girl missing until yesterday.

The dean sighs again. "I think we should have Dean Schwartz meet with the Belovs. He'll walk them back from the ledge. Can you tell him to come to my office right away? And tell Professor Turlington I need to see him about another matter."

"Of course."

"And call Dean Morris, ask him where he's at on my speech. I have to give it tomorrow morning, for goodness' sake. He always waits until the last minute." Pratt shakes his head in disapproval.

Alice nods. "I look forward to your speech," she says timidly.

The dean's forehead wrinkles like he's confused. Like why would he give one lick about Alice's opinion on his opening remarks for Parents Weekend? She's his admin—his *secretary*, as he calls her, using the outdated term. Not someone who needs to worry about matters of substance.

"I'm a parent this weekend," Alice reminds him.

"Oh, that's right. How's your son's freshman year going?"

The dean always refers to him as "your son" because he doesn't remember Felix's name. They're well into the school year, and it's the first