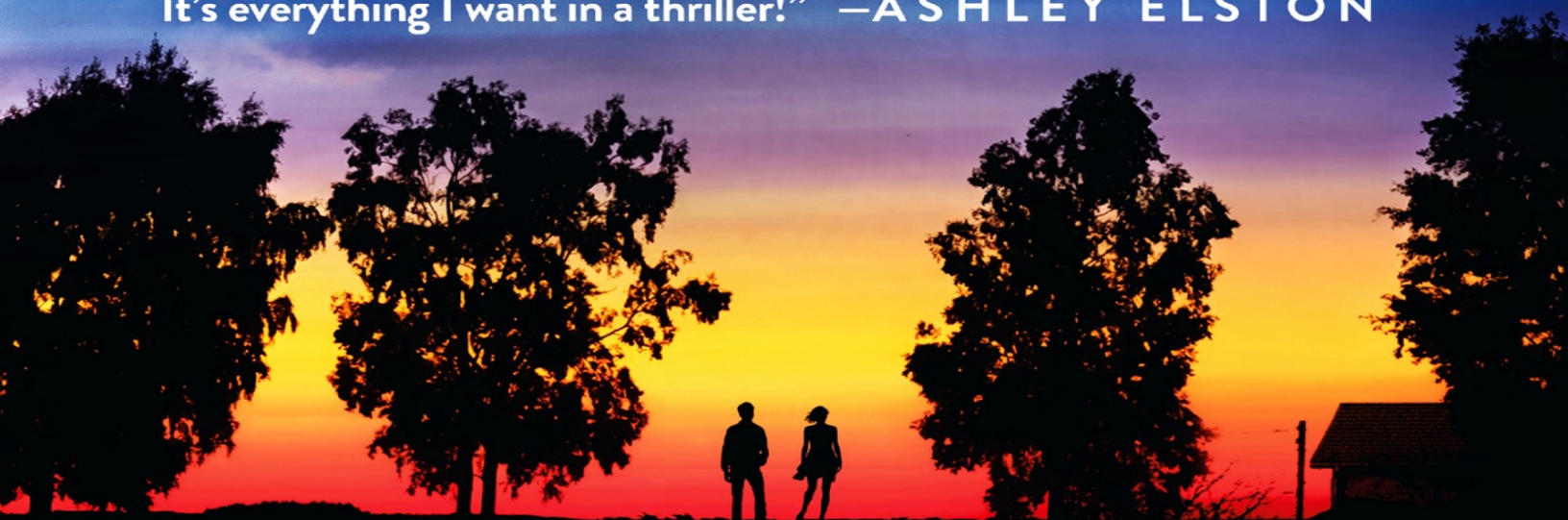


Every year he comes for them.

THE ANNIVERSARY

“Razor-sharp, smart, and emotionally charged...
It’s everything I want in a thriller!” —ASHLEY ELSTON



ALEX FINLAY

NATIONAL BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF
PARENTS WEEKEND

THE ANNIVERSARY

A THRILLER

ALEX FINLAY



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For Trace, of course

Whatever our souls are made of, his and mine are the same.

—EMILY BRONTË

Wuthering Heights

Two souls are sometimes created together and in love before they're born.

—F. SCOTT FITZGERALD

The Beautiful and Damned

You feel the last bit of breath leaving their body. You're looking into their eyes. A person in that situation is God.

—TED BUNDY

PROLOGUE

You trudge up the hill along the overgrown path that cuts through the graveyard. The sky is gray, the air thick. It's quiet, the kind of quiet that comes only before a storm. You find the headstone, wipe away the grime with your hand until the face is visible:

MEGAN TUCKER

BELOVED DAUGHTER AND SISTER

You unfold your lawn chair, position it facing the stone.

You notice a bundle of dead flowers, the skin of wilted balloons, and it angers you that the groundskeeper hasn't maintained this plot, or any of the others on this patch of gloom on the outskirts of this depressed Nebraska town.

You extract the small laminated rectangle from your special trinket box. Her driver's license. You stare at the pretty face, the infectious smile, the sparkle in her eyes.

You close your eyes and you think of her. And you remember. Every. Single. Moment.

Of course you do.

You never forget your first kill.

YEAR ONE

May 1, 1992

CHAPTER ONE

Jules and Quinn didn't know that today would be an anniversary they will never celebrate.

"You're going to the concert?" Quinn asks.

"Why do you say it like that?" Jules replies.

"I don't know. You just don't seem like you—"

"I'm into grunge music," Jules interrupts. "What, because I don't wear flannel when it's ass-hot outside and actually comb my hair and am not, like, 'intellectual,' I can't go see one of your precious bands?"

"*Shhhh.*" The study hall monitor hisses in their direction. The stern woman patrols the cafeteria like she's making rounds in the mess hall of a penitentiary, not a high school.

Jules narrows her eyes at Quinn. She's not sure why she cares what *he* thinks. If she's honest, she shouldn't be talking to Quinn Riley. Her friends would *not* approve. But somehow she's started looking forward to the one hour of forced confinement together in eleventh-grade study hall every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday.

"You don't have to be mean about it," Quinn says softly, like he's withholding a smile.

"Are you going?" she asks.

"To the concert?"

"No, to the circus."

For someone who seems surprisingly smart—always with his nose in a book, scribbling something in a journal—Quinn can be slow on the uptake.

“No. I need to watch my little brother tonight.”

“On a Friday night?”

He nods. Turns back to the paperback he’s creased and is holding in one hand.

Jules has seen him with his brother. At Godfather’s Pizza after the game that one time. Jules was with her group, the football players and pom-squadders and pastel-wearing popular kids. Her boyfriend Brad called Quinn’s family “The Fritos,” since his mom works at the potato chip factory. Called Quinn’s brother a freak. She remembers the encounter mostly because she noticed how kind Quinn was to his brother. The kid wore oversized headphones, like to block out noise, and tilted his head funny. She remembers Quinn’s mom looking tired. Old but pretty. One of Brad’s friends said, “With those tits she should be riding a pole not making potato chips,” and the guys all laughed.

“Whatcha reading?” she asks in a singsong voice, purposefully needling him.

Quinn raises his eyes to hers. If she didn’t spend three hours a week bantering with him she might be intimidated by the glower. The smoldering eyes under the wisps of his unruly dark hair. The lips that she sometimes imagines touching hers.

“It’s called *A Separate Peace*,” he whispers.

“What’s it about?”

“It’s about a guy who just wants some peace while he’s reading during study hall.”

Hmph.

He shakes his head, relents. “It’s about two friends at a boarding school during World War II. Rich-kid struggles. You might relate.”

“You don’t have to be a dick.”

He looks at her for a moment, like he sees right through her. “Sorry, you’re right.”

He's sincere. When's the last time Brad said *Sorry, you're right?*

"The book sounds..."

"Boring?"

"I just thought maybe you'd be interested in something with, like, serial killers or..." She lets the sentence die.

Serial killers who eat people are all the rage. The movie with Hannibal the Cannibal and that real-life monster, Dahmer. Plus, Nebraska's very own psychopath who they still haven't caught, though he's not a cannibal. The one local newscasters call the May Day Killer, with a glint in their eyes. He strikes on May 1st—five girls all around Nebraska over the past five years, all on May Day—so everybody is freaked out today.

Quinn exhales loudly like he's disappointed in her. Or maybe disappointed in what she thinks of him. And she likes the idea that he might care about her opinion.

"No serial killers. But the concert tonight ... The opening song on their album—'Once'—it's about a man who's losing it and goes on a killing spree." Quinn digs into his backpack, retrieves a beat-up Walkman, opens it, and hands her the cassette. "The third song. At least listen before you go tonight."

Jules examines the cassette, a Memorex with a blank label. "Ah, how sweet, you made me a mixtape," she says in an exaggerated sweet tone. "A love letter in song."

"I didn't make it for—" Quinn stops, shakes his head, annoyed.

Jules grins. Despite what she said, she isn't really into grunge, has no clue about tonight's band or any other gloomy plaid-wearing group. She liked music better when it was fun—in junior high with those guys with big hair who sang about having nothin' but a good time.

The bell rings and Quinn shoves his book into his backpack and disappears into the crowd without saying a word.

"Bye," she calls after him, her tone chiding his rudeness. Serial killers have better manners.



Quinn pushes through the bodies in the narrow hallway. He holds his head up high, ready for a shoulder bump or someone snickering, calling him *Frito* or *Cheeto* or *Dorito*. None of those nicknames make sense since they're not even potato chips. But whatever.

Jules at least pretends she hasn't heard the names. He appreciates that. She's not a bad person, Jules Delaney. She's just a victim of circumstance. So pretty—no, *pretty* isn't an adequate word—so *beautiful* that she can't help but be a little full of herself. Who wouldn't be? People stop whatever they're doing and gawk when Jules Delaney struts by. And she's surrounded by followers feeding on the table scraps of her popularity. Quinn wonders sometimes what that's like, being popular. Homecoming royalty courts, parties, admirers. He pretends those things are stupid, that they're beneath him, but he knows the truth.

He just needs to get through the month, then the summer, then his senior year. Keep up his grades for a scholarship and go far, far away where people at college don't know him as *Frito*, don't know he has no real friends, don't know he lives in a shack on the shitty side of Monarch, Nebraska.

He feels a lump in his throat. Truth is, his brother needs him here, and Quinn knows he won't get much farther than that potato chip factory.

College, a new life ... it's a fairy tale. A story.

Once upon a time.

CHAPTER TWO

“Why aren’t you married?”

“I’m not doing this with you, Jules.” Mr. Vanderman gives her an exasperated look from behind the desk of his depressing school counselor office.

“Seriously, you went to, like, an Ivy League school, and the girls call you the Hot Counselor. I don’t get why you’re not married. Or why you’re working *here*, if I’m honest.” She doesn’t mention the rumors that he’s from an insanely wealthy family, that he’s one of *the* Vandermans who have a hospital and a museum named after them.

Mr. Vanderman shakes his head. He’s not smiling but he likes it. Jules has never met a boy—or a man—who doesn’t like it when she flirts.

“We’re not here to talk about me. We’re here to talk about college. Your plans.”

“What plans?” Jules reaches for the framed photograph perched on his desk. It faces him, so she can’t see who’s in it. She’s heard he has a hot girlfriend. That’s not a surprise. You don’t have that square jaw, those blue eyes and broad shoulders, without dating a ten. Though maybe *he’s* not a ten and the rating is skewed because he’s one of the few men working at Monarch High School and the others wear frayed sweaters and have pot bellies and coffee breath.

“Seriously, you’re graduating next year,” Mr. Vanderman says, pulling the framed photo out of reach. “This stuff sneaks up on you. You need to

start preparing.”

“I’m *here*, aren’t I?” she says.

He shakes his head again. “Have you thought about where you might want to go to college? We’re lucky to have some great local options in reach if you’re planning to stay nearby: UNO, UNL, Creighton. And if you do well on your ACTs, with your grades, you’ll have some solid options out of state, like —”

“Why college? Mr. Belcher said I don’t need to waste my money and with my looks I can marry rich.”

Mr. Vanderman frowns. “If he said that, it was inappropriate.”

“He says that kind of stuff to all the girls in history class.”

Mr. Vanderman lets out a puff of air. “You can pretend if you want, Jules. But we both know there’s more to you than your looks.”

“Like what?”

He stammers, so she decides to stop playing with him. “I’m going to UNL. My dad went there for college and law school and he insists.”

“That’s terrific. It’s a fine school. Have you thought about a major?”

She shrugs. “That’s the problem. It’s not like I know what I want to do when I grow up.”

“You don’t have to. That’s what college is all about. Getting exposed to things, learning what interests you.”

“There’s nothing.”

“I highly doubt that. Look, we can both waste our time at these college-prep meetings or you can take this seriously. I can’t make you. But I want you to think, really think: Is there something you’re interested in that people make money doing? Your dad’s a lawyer, how about that?”

She shakes her head. “I suppose I like fashion. My mom—she was Miss Nebraska when she was young—always wanted to be a writer for a fashion magazine. That would be cool.”

He nods enthusiastically. “Journalism. That’s good. I can speak to Mr. Heefter about seeing if there’s a spot on the school paper, if you’re interested?”

“Great. Hot Counselor recommends social suicide,” Jules replies. “Now I’m getting why you work here.”

He shakes his head again, like he might agree.

“Hey, you’re like a real counselor, right? So you can’t tell anyone what we talk about?”

He examines her for a long moment. “Are you a danger to yourself or others?”

“Um, no.”

“Then, yes, what we talk about remains confidential. Is there something you want to talk about?”

She’s gotten his attention. “Yes.” She looks him deep in the eyes, says, “Do you have a girlfriend?”

“We’re done here, Jules. Get back to class.”

CHAPTER THREE

After school, Quinn is midway through his peanut butter and jelly sandwich when the phone rings. His mom picks up the line. He can make out only fragments of the conversation, but he immediately understands: He's being called in to cover a shift at Burger Hut.

Before hanging up, his mom says, "Okay, Gloria, but he has to be home by seven. Seriously, I need him back by seven sharp to keep an eye on George."

A half hour later, Quinn snaps the hairnet over his head, puts on the Burger Hut paper cap, and grabs the drive-thru headset from Toby. It's just after the shift change at the factory and the line is already snaking through the parking lot.

"Sorry you got called in," Toby says. "It's my first time working drive-thru. Gloria panicked when I told her Pete didn't show." Gloria, the owner of the franchise, is always somehow surprised that Pete, a guy who smells like he just left a Grateful Dead show, is unreliable. She called Quinn in to save Toby from an angry mob.

Toby is looking at Quinn wide-eyed for instructions. He's a freshman and his face hasn't caught up to his nose. Quinn isn't certain he's even old enough to work legally, but Gloria knows the kid's mom. They need the money, she explained when she asked Quinn to train him last week.

"You do the fountain drinks, just keep filling them up and line them here." He points to the counter near the drive-thru window.

“Yes, sir,” Toby says, not an ounce of sarcasm to it.

Quinn quickly gets in the zone. He’s worked at Burger Hut for a year and has it down. The place’s genius is its limited menu. Hamburgers, cheeseburgers, and fries. That’s it. It is truly a hut with no seating area, just a small kitchen right at the drive-thru window. It survives only because it’s a block from the factory and cheaper than McDonald’s.

Quinn simultaneously mans the drive-thru and cooks: entering orders into the register, then rotating to the grill to flip the burgers, then emptying the deep-fry basket, and back again.

Once Toby has an assembly line of fountain drinks—one for Coke, one for Diet Coke, the only options—he directs the kid to fill the tickets.

“Yes, sir!”

Quinn handles the disgruntled customers from the backed-up line one by one. The anger in their faces dissipates when they see it’s Quinn working the window. It’s probably the reason Gloria hired him: Everybody at the plant loved Quinn’s dad. And Quinn’s a reminder that things can be worse than waiting too long for a burger and fries. A fatal car accident at thirty-two, leaving behind a wife and two kids, one with a disability.

When things are finally under control, Toby lets out a breath. “Nice job, boss.”

“I’m not your—” Quinn stops himself. “You did good. It takes practice, keeping up with shift change.”

“I don’t know how you do it. You’re like,” Toby thinks about it, “like a machine.”

If only there was a future in being a sad burger-making machine.

“Just remember,” Quinn says, “these people work hard, don’t have much money, or they wouldn’t be getting dinner for their families here. It’s important we do our best.” He says this because he doesn’t want Toby falling under the spell of their lazy co-worker, Pete. Quinn’s dad always said that there’s no job worth doing if you don’t do it well.

Toby nods earnestly.

“If you get backed up, just explain that you’re new, learning the job. They’re good people, most of them.”

“Except Brad Paxton and his friends, they’re *assholes*.” The curse word sounds funny coming from Toby, for some reason.

“There’s always an exception to every rule.” Another Dad-ism.

“An exception that deserves spit in his burger. That’s what Pete says.”

“No,” Quinn says. “Gloria could get written up from the health department or worse. Guys like Brad, they aren’t worth the trouble.”

Toby nods again, like he’s taking it to heart.

In truth, Quinn wouldn’t care if Brad ate a spit-burger. But he tries to live by a code: *What would Dad do?* It’s hard sometimes, but it makes him feel more connected to his father, something he clings to as he fears he’s slowly losing the memories of their twelve years together.

Gloria finally arrives, looking flustered, disheveled. She owns three Burger Hut locations, one an hour away in Plattsmouth, another in South Omaha. She hugs Quinn, thanks him, calls him a “lifesaver.” He tells her it’s no problem. That he needs to run—Mom said seven sharp or it would be his ass.

On the walk home, Quinn checks the old Timex, another reminder of Dad. He doesn’t need to rush, he decides, so he cracks the spine of his book and reads as he walks, transported to the Devon School in the summer of 1942, far, far away. A particular passage speaks to him today: “*I felt that I was not, never had been and never would be a living part of this overpowering solid and deeply meaningful world around me.*”

CHAPTER FOUR

Jules coughs in the fog of hairspray enveloping her. When the mist evaporates, she examines herself in the bedroom mirror. She wears a tight white tank under a plaid flannel shirt. She looks *good*. Her mind flits to Quinn and her crack about him wearing flannel. She hopes he doesn't see her in this getup at the concert. Then she remembers he's not going, so no risk of that. No risk of Quinn thinking she's a poser, even though she is. For a fleeting moment, though, she's disappointed Quinn Riley won't be there. He'd appreciate the show more than she ever will. And maybe she wouldn't mind running into him.

Her bedroom phone rings. She races for it, trying to beat her little sister from answering. Clare always sprints for the phone for the pure sport of annoying Jules. But Jules is too late. Clare is already on the line.

"I've got it," Jules bellows into the receiver. When she doesn't hear the click, she says, "Dang it, Clare, hang up!"

"It's me," Miranda says. "My brother couldn't get the stuff." By "stuff" she means the alcohol for the concert.

"Why not?"

"Todd says, 'I'm a police officer now.'" Miranda always uses an uptight robot voice to imitate her brother, and it fits.

Todd recently became a Barton County cop, which is comical, if not troubling, since he'd been the biggest partier and bully in high school. He was a senior when Jules and Miranda were freshmen, and they watched the

star football player terrorize the nerds, the skaters, the goths, the metalheads, and the endless other groups on the lower end of the social hierarchy. For her part, she's never liked the way Todd looks at her.

"I'll just run over to Hagers," Jules says. It's a dumpy liquor store that doesn't usually card. Or she can bat her eyes and one of the creeps who frequent the place will buy for her.

"Okay, pick me up and I'll go with you."

"We don't have time. I told Brad we'd meet at his place at seven thirty."

"But we're supposed to be using the buddy system."

Miranda's so damn dramatic. Jules gets it, though. The school had an assembly about the May Day Killer after some reporter found a connection between women abducted on May 1st. Three of the victims were found dead in roadside ditches, two actually survived. Ever since the story ran, all the grown-ups have been losing their minds.

"I'll meet you at Brad's," Jules says, and hangs up.

On her way out, Jules's sister steps in front of her, hand on hips.

"I'm telling," Clare says, as Jules plucks her car keys from the foyer table.

"What are you talking about?"

"You're buying booze."

"No, I'm not. What are you—" Jules stops. "You little shit. You didn't hang up the line, you listened to my call."

Clare offers a wicked smile. Jules fights a smile of her own. Clare drives her absolutely crazy, but she loves the little clown. "What do you want?" Jules says.

"Rides. For me and my friends. To the roller rink. The mall. Rides *all* month."

When Jules doesn't agree, Clare calls out, "Mooooom."

"All right, all right," Jules hushes her.

"And you'll get me some wine coolers at Hagers," Clare adds.

"Don't push your luck," Jules says as she heads out.

On the drive, Jules bobs her head to Kris Kross's "Jump" on the radio, then imagines Quinn Riley rolling his eyes at her. She remembers the