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The

NIGHT
SHIFT

ALEX
FINLAY

A NOVEL FROM THE AUTHOR OF *EVERY LAST FEAR*

THE
NIGHT
SHIFT

ALEX FINLAY



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For Trace

The world breaks everyone and afterward
many are strong at the broken places.

—ERNEST HEMINGWAY, *A Farewell to Arms*

PROLOGUE

NEW YEAR'S EVE 1999

The night was expected to bring tragedy.

Planes falling from the sky. Elevators plunging to earth. World markets collapsing.

A digital apocalypse.

But Y2K was an otherwise typical Friday night at the Blockbuster Video in Linden, New Jersey. Steve had been store manager for six months now, and it was sure as shit a step up from his last job at the Taco Bell. Where his clothes always smelled of cooked meat and grease, and where cadres of drunken teens arrived loudly around eleven until he kicked them out at 2 a.m.

Here, they closed at ten, sharp. The customers were polite. Tonight, mostly couples looking for a rom-com or “something scary.”

They didn't call Steve “pizza face,” on account of his acne; didn't mock his uniform or leave smashed enchiritos all over the floor. His employees were better here too, more or less. The night shift included four sweet, albeit mischievous, teenage girls. All juniors or seniors, like the Taco Bell hooligans. Hell, like Steve himself only a few years ago, but somehow the girls treated him like he was their embarrassing dad. After only a few months on the job, he truly felt for their real fathers.

“Can I go on break?” Mandy said, shoving a VHS cartridge into the store's machine. It was the bane of the job, proof that nobody read the BE

KIND, PLEASE REWIND stickers on the tapes.

Steve studied the long checkout line, the new girl, Ella, fumbling at the register next to him. “We close in half an hour,” he said, exasperated. “Can’t you wait? I need you to take register three.”

“But *Steevie*,” Mandy said, lowering her voice to a whisper, “I have *girl* issues.”

Steve blew out a loud breath. Unless he’d missed something in Sex Ed, it was impossible to have *girl* issues every single weekend, but what could he do?

“I can cover for her,” Katie said, coming in from the cold, snowflakes in her hair, a pile of videos stacked in her arms from emptying the metal return receptacle stationed in the parking lot. She was the most responsible of the group, a Catholic school kid, a rule-follower. But even she was a pain in the neck. Just an hour ago, he’d had to remind all the girls not to venture out to the parking lot alone. The buddy system—was that so friggin’ hard to grasp?

“Make it fast,” Steve said to Mandy. “And where’s Candy?”

Candy O’Shaughnessy was Mandy’s partner in crime, the other perpetrator of what the Blockbuster, Inc. Employee Handbook called “Class A violations.” Though the store was four thousand square feet of open space, Candy always managed to disappear. She constantly gave him attitude, and once smuggled wine coolers into the break room. And Steve remained convinced that *she* was the one who put *Friday the 13th* inside the box for *101 Dalmatians*. Those parents had given him an earful. Said their kid would need therapy.

Join the club.

“I think she was in the kids’ section,” Mandy said with a smirk as she sauntered off to the break room.

Steve shook his head as he reached around the theft sensors at the door and handed the customer the small plastic bag full of movies.

★ ★ ★

By closing time, neither Candy nor Mandy had emerged. They'd be hearing about this. For sure. Not cool.

Steve instructed Ella to work the door, unlocking and locking the dead bolt to let customers out but ensuring no one got in. She could handle that much, he thought. He told Katie to close out the registers. He'd go deal with the other two. Always something. He just wanted to get out of there, stop by Dad's house for a Pabst to celebrate surviving another year before the old man fell asleep. Then maybe catch more beers at Corky's Tavern, watch the ball drop on the TV behind the bar, see if there'd been any real chaos from the computer bug the news wouldn't shut up about. Not exactly "party like it's 1999"—if he never heard that song again it would be too soon—but it beat being alone at his crap apartment.

He navigated through the shelves of tapes, past the newer section with DVDs, and to the break room. It was cold as hell in there.

"Dammit, girls," he said to nobody, as he noticed the back door was open, the wind howling. If they were smoking out there, he swore to God ... He'd told them a million times that for security they weren't supposed to open the back door. Steve could get in big trouble with Corporate if somebody—

He froze when he saw two sets of legs on the floor jutting out from behind the break room table.

As fear shredded through him, Steve felt someone grab a fistful of his hair and yank his head back. Then a strange coldness at his throat.

He was on the floor now, an ugly gurgle emanating from his neck. He watched as the figure turned out the break room lights. It felt like a small eternity before the door flew open, a burst of light filling the room. The sound of teenage chatter abruptly dying.

Steve wanted to call out, to warn them. But he felt his body convulsing and the world turning dark.

The last thing he heard was the screams.

DAY 1

FIFTEEN YEARS LATER

CHAPTER 1

ELLA

APRIL 2015

Ella pops a Xanax as she waits for the valet to take her keys. Driving into Manhattan always stresses her out. The frenetic confluence of cabbies rage-driving, cops jetting by with sirens blaring, pedestrians all but challenging you to run them over as they step defiantly into the street.

What the fuck is she doing here?

Last time, she'd promised herself that it would be the *last time*.

A young guy in a bellhop uniform stands at her window now. She hums down the glass.

"Checking in?" he asks. He's in his twenties and gives her the once-over.

"No, just meeting a friend."

He nods as if enjoying the euphemism. Sure, in that outfit, *a friend*.

Ella slips out of the car and palms the kid a five. She catches him stealing a look at the bill, unimpressed.

Give her a break. She's a therapist making \$30K a year, for fuck's sake, not some businessman on an expense account.

Inside the marble lobby of the Carlyle hotel, she makes a beeline for the bar. Against all sound medical judgment—she'd taken a pharmacology class at Wellesley—she pops another tiny blue pill.

She feels eyes on her as she enters the mahogany room. Faux old-money decor and the din of Franz Liszt from the gray-haired pianist trying not to look defeated at the culmination of his music career.

Ella should talk. She's barely making her half of the rent, coming into the city so she won't bump into one of her fiancé's friends. Or a client from her fledgling practice. She thinks about sixteen-year-old Layla from their session that morning. She's cutting herself again. Layla didn't need to explain why. Ella understands.

Surveying the bar, Ella snags the look of a man in an expensive suit holding a tumbler of Scotch. They always drink Scotch. And love to talk about it. The special barrels this, the unique region that. Beyond the Scotch prattle, most tend to have a pale band of skin on their left ring finger. Ella doesn't bother to take off her engagement ring. The Scotch guys don't care.

The man smiles at her.

He'll do.

Ella is always surprised how easy it is. She doesn't need Tinder when she has this black dress.

So she goes to meet her new friend.

★ ★ ★

A few hours later, her phone chimes. She's in a hotel room now, the only light from under the door. On these frolics, she always sets the alarm for 5 a.m. It avoids awkward morning-after talk.

But it isn't the sound of the alarm. It's an incoming call. She extracts herself from under Rick's hairy arm. She wonders if that's his real name. He looks like a Rick. Though he probably thought she looks like a Candy. Something sweet but bad for you. Much like her old friend, whose name she borrowed. She always uses their names. Candy, Mandy, Katie. She has no idea why.

"Hello," she whispers into the phone. She scuttles quietly to the bathroom, scooping up the black dress off the floor. The marble is cool under her feet.

“Ella, I’m sorry to call this late. It’s Dale.”

“Mr. Steadman?” After all these years she can’t bring herself to call him by his first name. You’re always a kid to the teachers in your life. She hasn’t spoken to him in a year, not since her former teacher and now principal at her old high school had her meet with students in the wake of a school shooting in a neighboring township. “Is everything okay?” She feels drumbeats in her chest. *Why would he be calling at this hour? Could it be? Could they finally have caught him? No, good news rarely arrives in a wee-hours call.*

“Something awful has happened. I know it’s asking a lot. But can you come to RWJ?”

Come to the hospital? Now?

Before she can ask, Mr. Steadman says, “There’s been a—one of my students needs your help.”

She wants to protest. Wants to make an excuse. But she can’t. Not after everything Mr. Steadman has done for her.

“Sure, of course,” she says. “I’m visiting a friend in the city. I can get there in about an hour.”

“I wouldn’t drag you out here if I thought there was someone else who could...” He trails off.

Ella’s head is swirling. She’s exhausted. Still tipsy. Confused. She composes herself. “Can you tell me what this is about?”

Mr. Steadman’s voice catches. “Four girls were attacked at an ice cream shop in Linden. Only one survived. She needs someone who understands, who can—”

“I’m on my way,” Ella says killing the line, knowing she’s uniquely qualified to help this girl.

Knowing what it’s like to be the only one who made it out alive.

CHAPTER 2

The parking lot of the Robert Wood Johnson University Hospital is covered in a spring fog. The lot is nearly empty save for a gathering of police cars. A woman in scrubs paces outside the front doors, talking on a cell phone.

Ella grips the steering wheel even though she's parked, and looks down at her pale, bare legs. She debates going home to change into something more professional. But Mr. Steadman sounded uncharacteristically rattled. He's usually a rock.

She takes a look at herself in the visor mirror, thumbs her smeared eye makeup. Climbing out of the car, she decides the fuck-me heels are a bit much. She reaches back for her gym bag, pulls out her sneakers.

The woman in scrubs is still pacing out front. Ella sees her discreetly put a fist to her mouth, suck in a deep breath, followed by a plume of vape mist.

We all have our secrets.

The receptionist inside barely gives her a second look. The woman has probably seen it all working the ER night shift. Ella once dated a med student who'd done an ER residency rotation, and he regaled her with tales of the guy with a Barbie stuck up his ass, the PCP fiend who'd eaten two of his own fingers during a bad trip, the construction worker with a nail deep in his brain yet still conscious and talking. A therapist in nightclub attire probably didn't make the Top 10 for weird.

The receptionist says something into the phone, then waves Ella inside the treatment area. The door makes a jarring buzz and Ella walks into a large room bathed in fluorescent light, beeping and voices echoing from behind beds surrounded by blue curtains. At the far end, she sees Mr. Steadman talking to a group of white guys. Three uniformed police officers and a stern-looking man with a mustache whose polo shirt is tucked tight into his jeans. He and Mr. Steadman seem to be having a disagreement.

For a split second, Ella feels a flight instinct. A memory slithers into her head, the procession of cops, doctors, and social workers asking the same questions. *Did you get a look at him? What do you remember? Did he touch you?* She looks at the floor for a moment, trying to collect herself, then catches a glimpse of her bare thighs again and is transported back to the exam room, her legs in stirrups.

Ella had been nonresponsive after the attack. The hospital's psych team was unsuccessful, and Ella's parents were at a loss. The school sent over Mr. Steadman. He wasn't trained in trauma response, he was merely the fill-in for a guidance counselor out on maternity leave. The cool teacher. Young, good-looking. The one the moms fawned over. At the same time, he was capable, no-nonsense, the kind of person who you wanted in charge, which is probably why they later made him the school's principal.

Mr. Steadman sees her and gives a small wave. He doesn't react to the muffled screams coming from a curtained room near the huddle of men. A doctor emerges from the room, grimacing. He says something to the group gathered with Mr. Steadman, shaking his head. Mr. Steadman puts a reassuring hand on the doctor's shoulder, then walks over to Ella.

"Thanks for coming. I'm sorry to interrupt your night," Steadman says, the only acknowledgment of her getup.

He fills her in. After midnight, the teenage employees of the Dairy Creamery were found murdered in the back room of the ice cream shop. The mother of two of the girls, sisters, got worried when they didn't return

home from their shift and didn't respond to texts. The mother is sedated now.

"There was a survivor?" Ella knows the answer. It's why she's here.

Mr. Steadman nods. "A student at my school. She didn't work there. We think she was just a customer. Maybe interrupted him." Mr. Steadman takes a cleansing breath. "I was hoping you could talk to her. The doctors and detectives aren't getting anywhere. She's—well, you'll see. The Union County prosecutor called me, since..."

He doesn't need to complete the sentence, the reason clear: because it worked for Ella after Blockbuster.

"But she won't talk with me or anyone else or let the doctors examine her. I hoped you could try before they're forced to sedate her."

"I'm not sure I have the—"

"You're our best hope. And I won't be able to hold them off for much longer." Mr. Steadman directs his gaze to the man in the polo and jeans, a detective, she presumes, who undoubtedly is itching to interview the girl. A killer's on the loose.

"What's her name?"

"Jessica Duvall, but she goes by Jesse."

"Where are her parents? Won't she talk to them?"

"She's in foster care. I'm not sure why. She's new to my school, and they don't give us much information."

The murmuring from the huddle of cops grows louder. They're looking at Ella.

She takes a deep breath and steps into the room.