

NOVEL INSPIRATION

Alex Finlay, Author of *Every Last Fear*, on Writing One of the Most Anticipated Debut Thrillers of 2021

Been longing for a truly original thriller?

The wait is over.

"They found the bodies on a Tuesday."

So begins one of 2021's most anticipated thrillers that will both leave you on the edge of your seat and move you to tears.

In *Every Last Fear*, a family made infamous by a Netflix true crime documentary is found dead, leaving their surviving son, NYU student Matt Pine, to uncover the truth about their final days.

The novel has received rare advanced praise from diverse voices in crime fiction, from thriller legend Karin Slaughter to literary maestro Lou Berney. Foreign rights were scooped up. And bookseller, reviewer, and other NetGalley early readers have echoed a recurring theme about Alex Finlay's debut into psychological suspense:

- "Every Last Fear is going to be the best book of 2021"
- "Best book of the year by far!"
- "The best book I have read in years"
- "I usually don't go along with the pack when I see headlines that proclaim a book to be the 'thriller of the year,' but I think, in this case, that description is warranted."

First off, a question many writers hate: Where did you get the idea for the book?

During COVID, I've been watching a lot of MasterClass videos, and in Neil Gaiman's class he lamented about this very question, but also had an answer that resonated with me. He said writers often get ideas from "confluence"—from two different things they've thought about or experienced colliding. That's the case with *Every Last Fear*. On a trip to Mexico, I read a news story about how American tourists have increasingly been dying under mysterious circumstances. That night I watched a Netflix true crime drama, and wondered what became of the documentary subjects and their town in the aftermath. Then the two thoughts collided.

The protagonist, Matt Pine, is a carefree NYU student facing an unthinkable tragedy, but this isn't just his journey, is it?

That's right, this is an ensemble cast. A mystery where you learn in the opening line that nearly the entire Pine family has perished in what seems to be a freak accident while on vacation. But then you get to meet each deceased family member—Evan, Liv, Maggie, and Tommy—in the days leading up to the tragedy. From these alternating points of view, my hope is that readers not only uncover clues to their fate, but feel the heartbreak in what was lost.

Along the way, the novel traces the evolution of their surviving son, Matt, a young man forced to grow up too soon, and who turns out to be the only hope to uncover the truth about what really happened to his family—and whether their deaths are connected to his imprisoned brother's case that was profiled in a viral documentary.

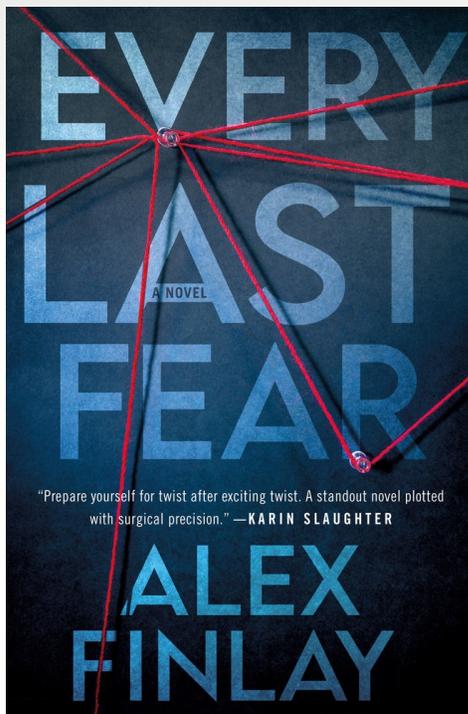
Let's talk about that documentary. The backdrop of the novel is a docu-series that was a national sensation, like Netflix's *Making a Murderer* or the *Serial* podcast. Did you base the story on any real true crime dramas?

No, the series in *Every Last Fear* isn't based on any real case or show, it's just an amalgamation of the types of documentaries that have become a mainstay. It's meant to be another ubiquitous story of a young man who appears to be in prison for a crime he didn't commit. But is Danny Pine really innocent? His brother Matt isn't quite so sure, and it's estranged him from his family, particularly his father who is obsessed with Danny's case. The story explores what happens to documentary subjects and their communities when the cameras stop rolling.

Did you find anything surprising in your research?

Absolutely. I was shocked at how often people, especially teenagers, confess to crimes they didn't commit. I had to dig





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TITLE: Every Last Fear
AUTHOR: Alex Finlay
PUBLISHER: Minotaur Books
ISBN: 978-1-250-26882-2
ON SALE DATE: 3/2/2021
FORMATS: Hardcover, Ebook, Audio



MINOTAUR BOOKS

deep into the studies on wrongful convictions because Matt's father is a crusader on the subject. I was heartened that in real life there are real crusaders out there helping right tragic wrongs. I gained a new respect for organizations like the Center on Wrongful Convictions and the National Registry of Exonerations. Otherwise, my research into the frequency and circumstances in which American travelers die suspiciously abroad was eye-opening. I interviewed a State Department official and, though I'll continue to travel whenever I can, I'll never take my safety for granted again.

Don't you also claim that your research uncovered the secret to happiness?

Yes, and I'm not even kidding. I discovered there's an actual course at NYU on happiness—that's right, a class on being happy. And I learned that studies show there is one thing you can really do to make you happier in your life. You'll of course have to read the book to learn the "secret"...

The novel has some diverse settings. How'd you choose the locales?

Every setting in the novel has personal significance to me. And I liked the dichotomy between the locales—from the hope-filled dorms of NYU to a small town in Nebraska stung by national criticism to the glitzy nightclubs of Tulum, Mexico. Each setting sets a tone and tells you something about the characters, I hope.

Matt's a film student and his character often equates things to movies. Are you a film buff?

If by "film," you mean popular movies, then, yes. Like Matt, I'm willing to take on film snobs who criticize Christopher Nolan or M. Night

Shyamalan or Christopher McQuarrie or other contemporary filmmakers who are among the best storytellers of our times. And also like Matt, when I was young, I found escape in movies, they helped me understand my emotions, got me through lonely periods when we moved frequently, and I think instilled a longing for justice.

Who is your favorite character in the novel?

Many writers will say that's like asking a parent to pick their favorite kid. But for me, the answer is easy: seventeen-year-old Maggie Pine. She's the glue that binds the Pine family—smart, tenacious, and tragic.

Early readers have also connected deeply with the only point-of-view character outside the Pine family, FBI Agent Sarah Keller. Why do you think she's resonated with so many?

Keller is balancing a demanding job with having young children and all the unwarranted guilt that goes along with that for too many, so perhaps it's that. But I think it's because she's no-nonsense, great at her job, and most of all, she's kind. Kindness is something that resonates in these strange times, I think.

And what about you? What's your story and why the pen name?

My story isn't all that interesting. And I want readers to go into this book with no expectations about the author or the book and experience what I hope is something different from other thrillers. As for the pseudonym, it was a way to write without fear—without concern about success or failure or expectations, and just throw myself into the fate of the Pines.