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# GILLIAN McALLISTER

THE SUNDAY TIMES BESTSELLER

# WRONG PLACE WRONG TIME



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Gillian McAllister

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WRONG PLACE WRONG TIME



# Contents

Day Zero, just after midnight

Day Zero, just after 01:00

Day Minus One, 08:00

Day Minus One, 08:20

Day Minus One, 08:30

Day Minus Two, 08:30

Day Minus Two, 19:00

Day Minus Two, 19:20

Ryan

Day Minus Three, 08:00

Day Minus Four, 09:00

Day Minus Eight, 08:00

Day Minus Eight, 19:30

Ryan

Day Minus Nine, 15:00

Day Minus Twelve, 08:00

Ryan

Day Minus Thirteen, 19:00

Day Minus Thirteen, 20:40

Ryan

Day Minus Twenty-two, 18:30

Day Minus Forty-Seven, 08:30

Ryan

Day Minus Sixty, 08:00

Day Minus Sixty-Five, 17:05

Day Minus One Hundred and Five, 08:55

Day Minus One Hundred and Forty-Four, 18:30

Ryan

Day Minus Five Hundred and Thirty-One, 08:40

Day Minus Seven Hundred and Eighty-Three, 08:00

Day Minus One Thousand and Ninety-Five, 06:55

Ryan

Day Minus One Thousand Six Hundred and Seventy-Two, 21:25

Day Minus Five Thousand Four Hundred and Twenty-Six, 07:00

Ryan

Day Minus Six Thousand Nine Hundred and Ninety-Eight, 08:00

Day Minus Six Thousand Nine Hundred and Ninety-Eight, 11:00

Day Minus Six Thousand Nine Hundred and Ninety-Eight, 23:00

Ryan

Day Minus Seven Thousand One Hundred and Fifty-Seven, 11:00

Ryan

Day Minus Seven Thousand One Hundred and Fifty-Eight, 12:00

Day Minus Seven Thousand Two Hundred and Thirty, 08:00

Day Zero

Day Plus One

Epilogue: Day Minus One The Unintended Consequence

Acknowledgements

## About the Author

**Gillian McAllister** has been writing for as long as she can remember. She graduated with an English degree before working as a lawyer. She lives in Birmingham, where she now writes full-time. She is the *Sunday Times* bestselling author of *Everything But the Truth*, *Anything You Do Say*, *No Further Questions*, *The Evidence Against You*, *How To Disappear* and the Richard & Judy Book Club pick *That Night*. She is also the creator and co-host of the popular *Honest Authors* podcast.

*By the same author*

Everything but the Truth

Anything You Do Say

No Further Questions

The Evidence Against You

How to Disappear

That Night



*For Felicity and Lucy: in any multiverse, I'd want  
to be agented by you.*



## Day Zero, just after midnight

Jen is glad of the clocks going back tonight. A gained hour, extra time, to be spent pretending she isn't waiting up for her son.

Now that it is past midnight, it is officially the thirtieth of October. Almost Halloween. Jen tells herself that Todd is eighteen, her September baby now an adult. He can do *whatever he wants*.

She has spent much of the evening badly carving a pumpkin. She places it now on the sill of the picture window that overlooks their driveway, and lights it. She only carved it for the same reason she does most things – because she felt she should – but it's actually quite beautiful, in its own jagged way.

She hears her husband Kelly's feet on the landing above hers and turns to look. It's unusual for him to be up, he the lark and she the nightingale. He emerges from their bedroom on the top floor. His hair is messy, blue-black in the dimness. He has on not a single piece of clothing, only a small, amused smile, which he blows out of the side of his mouth.

He descends the stairs towards her. His wrist tattoo catches the light, an inscribed date, the day he says he knew he loved her: spring 2003. Jen looks at his body. Just a few of his dark chest hairs have turned white over the past year, his forty-third. 'Been busy?' He gestures to the pumpkin.

'Everyone had done one,' Jen explains lamely. 'All the neighbours.'

'Who cares?' he says. Classic Kelly.

'Todd's not back.'

'It's the early evening, for him,' he says. Soft Welsh accent just barely detectable on the three-syllable *ev-en-ing*, like his breath is stumbling over a mountain range. 'Isn't it one o'clock? His curfew.'

It's a typical exchange for them. Jen cares very much, Kelly perhaps too little. Just as she thinks this, he turns, and there it is: his perfect, perfect arse that she's loved for almost twenty years. She gazes back down at the street, looking for Todd, then back at Kelly.

'The neighbours can now see your arse,' she says.

'They'll think it's another pumpkin,' he says, his wit as fast and sharp as the slice of a knife. Banter. It's always been their currency. 'Come to bed? Can't believe Merrilocks is done,' he adds with a stretch. He's been restoring a Victorian tiled floor at a house on Merrilocks Road all week. Working alone, exactly the way Kelly likes it. He listens to podcast after podcast, hardly ever sees anyone. Complicated, kind of unfulfilled, that's Kelly.

'Sure,' she says. 'In a bit. I just want to know he's home okay.'

'He'll be here any minute now, kebab in hand.' Kelly waves a hand. 'You waiting up for the chips?'

'Stop,' Jen says with a smile.

Kelly winks and retreats to bed.

Jen wanders aimlessly around the house. She thinks about a case she has on at work, a divorcing couple arguing primarily over a set of china plates but of course, really, over a betrayal. She shouldn't have taken it on, she has over three hundred cases already. But Mrs Vichare had looked at Jen in that first meeting and said, 'If I have to give him those plates, I will have lost every single thing I love,' and Jen hadn't been able to resist. She wishes she didn't care so much – about divorcing strangers, about neighbours, about bloody pumpkins – but she does.

She makes a tea and takes it back up to the picture window, continuing her vigil. She'll wait as long as it takes. Both phases of parenthood – the newborn years and the almost-adult ones – are bookended by sleep deprivation, though for different reasons.

They bought this house because of this window in the exact centre of their three-storey house. 'We'd look out of it like kings,' Jen had said, while Kelly laughed.

She stares out into the October mist, and there is Todd, outside on the street, at last. Jen sees him just as Daylight Saving Time kicks in and her phone switches from 01:59 to 01:00. She hides a smile: thanks to the clocks going back, he is deliberately no longer late. That's Todd for you; he finds the linguistic and semantic back-flipping of arguing a curfew more important than the reason for it.

He is loping up the street. He's skin and bones, doesn't ever seem to gain weight. His knees poke angles in his jeans as he walks. The mist

outside is colourless, the trees and pavement black, the air a translucent white. A world in greyscale.

Their street – the backend of Crosby, Merseyside – is unlit. Kelly installed a Narnia-style lamp outside their house. He surprised her with it, wrought iron, expensive; she has no idea how he afforded it. It clicks on as it detects movement.

But – wait. Todd’s seen something. He stops dead, squints. Jen follows his gaze, and then she sees it, too: a figure hurrying along the street from the other side. He is older than Todd, much older. She can tell by his body, his movements. Jen notices things like this. Always has. It is what makes her a good lawyer.

She places a hot palm on the cool glass of the window.

Something is wrong. Something is about to happen. Jen is sure of this, without being able to name what it is; some instinct for danger, the same way she feels around fireworks and level crossings and cliff edges. The thoughts rush through her mind like the clicking of a camera, one after the other after the other.

She sets the mug on the windowsill, calls Kelly, then rushes down the stairs two at a time, the striped runner rough on her bare feet. She throws on shoes, then pauses for a second with her hand on the metal front doorknob.

What – what’s that feeling? She can’t explain it.

Is it déjà vu? She hardly ever experiences it. She blinks, and the feeling is gone, as insubstantial as smoke. What was it? Her hand on the brass knob? The yellow lamp shining outside? No, she can’t recall. It’s gone now.

‘What?’ Kelly says, appearing behind her, tying a grey dressing gown around his waist.

‘Todd – he’s – he’s out there with ... someone.’

They hurry out. The autumn cold chills her skin immediately. Jen runs towards Todd and the stranger. But before she’s even realized what is happening, Kelly’s shouted out: ‘Stop!’

Todd is running, and within seconds has the front of this stranger’s hooded coat in his grasp. He is squaring up to him, his shoulders thrust forwards, their bodies together. The stranger reaches a hand into his pocket.

Kelly is running towards them, looking panicked, his eyes going left and right, up and down the street. ‘Todd, no!’ he says.

And that’s when Jen sees the knife.

Adrenalin sharpens her vision as she sees it happen. A quick, clean stab. And then everything slows way down: the movement of the arm pulling back, the clothing resisting then releasing the knife. Two white feathers emerge with the blade, drifting aimlessly in the frozen air like snowflakes.

Jen stares as blood begins to spurt, huge amounts of it. She must be kneeling down now, because she becomes aware of the little stones of the path cutting round divots into her knees. She's cradling him, parting his jacket, feeling the heat of the blood as it surges down her hands, between her fingers, along her wrists.

She undoes his shirt. His torso begins to flood; the three coin-slot wounds swim in and out of view – it's like trying to see the bottom of a red pond. She has gone completely cold.

'No.' Her voice is thick and wet as she screams.

'Jen,' Kelly says hoarsely.

There's so much blood. She lays him on her driveway and leans over, looking carefully. She hopes she's wrong, but she's sure, for just a moment, that he isn't here any more. The way the yellowed lamplight hits his eyes isn't quite right.

The night is completely silent, and after what must be several minutes she blinks in shock, then looks up at her son.

Kelly has moved Todd away from the victim and has his arms wrapped around him. Kelly's back is to her, Todd facing her, just gazing down at her over his father's shoulder, his expression neutral. He drops the knife. It rings out like a church bell as the metal hits the frozen pavement. He wipes a hand across his face, leaving a smear of blood.

Jen stares at his expression. Maybe he is regretful, maybe not. She can't tell. Jen can read almost everyone, but she never could read Todd.



## Day Zero, just after 01:00

Somebody must have called 999, because the street is suddenly lit up with bright blue orbs. ‘What ...’ Jen says to Todd. Jen’s ‘What ...’ conveys it all: Who, why, what the fuck?

Kelly releases his son, his face pale in shock, but he says nothing, as is often her husband’s way.

Todd doesn’t look at her or at his father. ‘Mum,’ he says eventually. Don’t children always seek out their mother first? She reaches for him, but she can’t leave the body. She can’t release the pressure on the wounds. That might make it worse for everyone. ‘Mum,’ he says again. His voice is fractured, like dry ground that divides clean in two. He bites his lip and looks away, down the street.

‘Todd,’ she says. The man’s blood is lapping over her hands like thick bathwater.

‘I had to,’ he says to her, finally looking her way.

Jen’s jaw slackens in shock. Kelly’s head drops to his chest. The sleeves of his dressing gown are covered in the blood from Todd’s hands. ‘Mate,’ Kelly says, so softly Jen isn’t sure he definitely spoke. ‘Todd.’

‘I had to,’ Todd says again, more emphatically. He breathes out a contrail of steam into the freezing air. ‘There was no choice,’ he says again, but this time with teenage finality. The blue of the police car pulses closer. Kelly is staring at Todd. His lips – white with lack of blood – mime something, a silent profanity, maybe.

She stares at him, her son, this violent perpetrator, who likes computers and statistics and – still – a pair of Christmas pyjamas each year, folded and placed at the end of his bed.

Kelly turns in a useless circle on the driveway, his hands in his hair. He hasn't looked at the man once. His eyes are only on Todd.

Jen tries to stem the wounds that pulsate underneath her hands. She can't leave the – the victim. The police are here, but no paramedics yet.

Todd is still trembling, with the cold or the shock, she's not sure. 'Who is he?' Jen asks him. She has so many more questions, but Todd shrugs, not answering. Jen wants to reach to him, to squeeze the answers out of him, but they don't come.

'They're going to arrest you,' Kelly says in a low voice. A policeman is running towards them. 'Look – don't say anything, all right? We'll –'

'Who is he?' Jen says. It comes out too loudly, a shout in the night. She wills the police to slow down, please slow down, just give us a bit of time.

Todd turns his gaze back to her. 'I ...' he says, and for once, he doesn't have a wordy explanation, no intellectual posturing. Just nothing, a trailed-off sentence, puffed into the damp air that hangs between them in their final moments before this becomes something bigger than their family.

The officer arrives next to them: tall, black stab vest, white shirt, radio held in his left hand. 'Echo from Tango two four five – at scene now. Ambo coming.' Todd looks over his shoulder at the officer, once, twice, then back at his mother. This is the moment. This is the moment he explains, before they encroach completely with their handcuffs and their power.

Jen's face is frozen, her hands hot with blood. She is just waiting, afraid to move, to lose eye contact. Todd is the one who breaks it. He bites his lip, then stares at his feet. And that's it.

Another policeman moves Jen away from the stranger's body, and she stands on her driveway in her trainers and pyjamas, hands wet and sticky, just looking at her son, and then at her husband, in his dressing gown, trying to negotiate with the justice system. She should be the one taking charge. She's the lawyer, after all. But she is speechless. Totally bewildered. As lost as if she has just been deposited at the North Pole.

'Can you confirm your name?' the first policeman says to Todd. Other officers get out of other cars, like ants from a nest.

Jen and Kelly step forward in one motion, but Todd does something, then, just a tiny gesture. He moves his hand out to the side to stop them.

'Todd Brotherhood,' he says dully.

'Can you tell me what happened?' the officer asks.

'Hang on,' Jen says, springing to life. 'You can't interview him by the side of the road.'

'Let us all come to the station,' Kelly says urgently. 'And –'

‘Well, I stabbed him,’ Todd interrupts, gesturing to the man on the ground. He puts his hands back in his pockets and steps towards the policeman. ‘So I’m guessing you’d better arrest me.’

‘Todd,’ Jen says. ‘Stop talking.’ Tears are clogging her throat. This cannot be happening. She needs a stiff drink, to go back in time, to be sick. Her whole body begins to tremble out here in the absurd, confusing cold.

‘Todd Brotherhood, you do not have to say anything,’ the policeman says, ‘but it may harm your defence if you do not mention when questioned ...’ Todd puts his wrists together willingly, like he is in a fucking movie, and he’s cuffed, just like that, with a metallic click. His shoulders are up. He’s cold. His expression is neutral, resigned, even. Jen cannot, cannot, cannot stop staring at him.

‘You can’t do that!’ Kelly says. ‘Is this a –’

‘Wait,’ Jen says, panicked, to the policeman. ‘We’ll come? He’s just a teen ...’

‘I’m eighteen,’ Todd says.

‘In there,’ the policeman says to Todd, pointing at the car, ignoring Jen. Into the radio, he says, ‘Echo from Tango two four five – dry cell prepped, please.’

‘We’ll follow you, then,’ she says desperately. ‘I’m a lawyer,’ she adds needlessly, though she hasn’t a clue about criminal law. Still, even now, in crisis, the maternal instinct burns as bright and as obvious as the pumpkin in the window. They just need to find out why he did it, get him off, then get him help. That is what they need to do. That is what they will do.

‘We’ll come,’ she says. ‘We’ll meet you at the station.’

The policeman finally meets her gaze. He looks like a model. Cut-outs beneath his cheekbones. God, it’s such a cliché, but don’t all coppers look so young these days? ‘Crosby station,’ he says to her, then gets back into the car without another word, taking her son with him. The other officer stays with the victim, over there. Jen can hardly bear to think about him. She glances, just once. The blood, the expression on the policeman’s face ... she is sure the man is dead.

She turns to Kelly, and she will never forget the look her stoic husband gives her just then. She meets his navy eyes. The world seems to stop turning just for a second and, in the quiet and the stillness, Jen thinks: Kelly looks how it is to be heartbroken.

The police station has a white sign out the front advertising itself to the public. MERSEYSIDE POLICE – CROSBY. Behind it sits a squat sixties



building, surrounded by a low brick wall. Tides of October leaves have been washed up against it.

Jen pulls up outside, just on the double yellows, and stops the engine. Their son's stabbed somebody – what does a parking ticket matter? Kelly gets out before the car is even stationary. He reaches – unconsciously, she thinks – behind him for her hand. She grasps it like it's a raft at sea.

He pushes one of the double glass doors open and they hurry in across a tired grey linoleum foyer. It smells old-fashioned inside. Like schools, like hospitals, like care homes. Institutions that require uniforms and crap food, the kind of places Kelly hates. 'I will never,' he'd said early on in their relationship, 'join the rat race.'

'I'll talk to them,' Kelly says shortly to Jen. He is trembling. But it doesn't seem to be from fear, rather from anger. He is furious.

'It's fine – I can lawyer up and do the initial –'

'Where's the super?' Kelly barks to a bald officer manning reception who has a signet ring on his little finger. Kelly's body language is different. Legs spread widely, shoulders puffed up. Even Jen has only rarely seen him drop his guard like this.

In a bored tone, the officer tells them to wait to be seen.

'You've got five minutes,' Kelly says, pointing to the clock before throwing himself into a chair across the foyer.

Jen sits down next to him and takes his hand. His wedding ring is loose on his finger. He must be cold. They sit there, Kelly crossing and uncrossing his long legs, huffing, Jen saying nothing. An officer arrives in reception, speaking quietly into his phone. 'It's the same crime as two days ago – a section 18 wounding with intent. That victim was Nicola Williams, perpetrator AWOL.' His voice is so low, Jen has to strain to hear.

She sits, just listening. Section 18 wounding with intent is a stabbing. They must be talking about Todd. And a similar crime from two days ago.

Eventually, the arresting officer emerges, the tall one with the cheekbones.

Jen looks at the clock behind the desk. It's three thirty, or perhaps four thirty. She doesn't know whether it's British Summer Time in here still. It's disorientating.

'Your son is staying with us tonight – we'll interview him soon.'

'Where – back there?' Kelly says. 'Let me in.'

'You won't be able to see him,' the officer says. 'You are witnesses.'

Irritation flares within Jen. This sort of thing – exactly *this* – is why people hate the justice system.

‘It’s like that, is it?’ Kelly says acidly to the officer. He holds his hands up.

‘Sorry?’ the officer says mildly.

‘What, so we’re enemies?’

‘Kelly!’ Jen says.

‘Nobody is anybody’s enemy,’ the officer says. ‘You can speak to your son in the morning.’

‘Where is the superintendent?’ Kelly says.

‘You can speak to your son in the morning.’

Kelly leaves a loaded, dangerous silence. Jen has seen only a handful of people on the receiving end of these, but still, she doesn’t envy the policeman. Kelly’s fuse usually takes a long time to trip but, when it does, it’s explosive.

‘I’ll call someone,’ she says. ‘I know someone.’ She gets her phone out and begins shakily scrolling through her contacts. Criminal lawyers. She knows loads of them. The first rule of law is never to dabble in something you don’t specialize in. The second is never to represent your family.

‘He has said he doesn’t want one,’ the officer says.

‘He needs a solicitor – you shouldn’t ...’ she says.

The officer raises his palms to her. Next to her, Jen can feel Kelly’s temper brewing.

‘I’ll just call one, and then he can –’ she starts.

‘All right, let me back there,’ Kelly says, gesturing to the white door leading to the rest of the station.

‘That cannot be authorized,’ the officer says.

‘Fuck. You,’ Kelly says. Jen stares at him in shock.

The officer doesn’t even dignify this with a response, just looks at Kelly in stony silence.

‘So – what now then?’ Jen says. God, Kelly has told a copper to fuck himself. A public order offence is not the way to defuse this situation.

‘As I’ve already told you, he’ll remain with us overnight,’ the officer says to her plainly, ignoring Kelly. ‘I suggest you come back tomorrow.’ His eyes flick to Kelly. ‘You can’t force your son to take a solicitor. We have tried.’

‘But he’s a kid,’ Jen says, though she knows that, legally, he isn’t. ‘He’s just a kid,’ she says again softly, mostly to herself, thinking of his Christmas pyjamas and the way he wanted her to sit up with him recently when he had a vomiting bug. They spent all night in the en suite. Chatting about nothing, her wiping his mouth with a damp flannel.

‘They don’t care about that, or anything,’ Kelly says bitterly.

‘We’ll come back, in the morning – with a solicitor,’ Jen says, trying to ameliorate, to peacemake.

‘Feel free. We need to send a team back with you to the house now,’ he says. Jen nods wordlessly. Forensics. Their house being searched. The lot.

Jen and Kelly leave the police station. Jen rubs at her forehead as they go to the car and get in. She blasts the heat on as they sit there.

‘Are we really just going to go home?’ she says. ‘Sit there while they search?’

Kelly’s shoulders are tense. He stares at her, black hair everywhere, eyes sad like a poet’s.

‘I have no fucking idea.’

Jen gazes out of the windscreen at a bush glistening with middle-of-the-night autumnal dew. After a few seconds, she puts the car in reverse and drives, because she doesn’t know what else to do.

The pumpkin greets them on the windowsill as she parks up. She must have left the candle burning. Forensics have already arrived in their white suits, standing on their driveway like ghosts by the police tape that flutters in the October wind. The puddle of blood has begun to dry at the edges.

They’re let in, to their own fucking house, and they sit downstairs, watching the uniformed teams out front, some on their hands and knees doing fingertip searches of the crime scene. They say nothing at all, just hold hands in the silence. Kelly keeps his coat on.

Eventually, when the scene of crime officers have gone, and the police have searched and taken Todd’s things, Jen shifts on the sofa so that she’s lying down, and stares up at the ceiling. And that’s when the tears come. Hot and fast and wet. The tears for the future. And the tears for yesterday, and what she didn’t see coming.



## Day Minus One, 08:00

Jen opens her eyes.

She must have come up to bed. And she must have slept. She doesn't feel like she did either, but she's in her bedroom, not on the sofa, and it's now light outside beyond their slatted blinds.

She rolls on to her side. Say it isn't true.

She blinks, staring at the empty bed. She's alone. Kelly will already be up, making calls, she very much hopes.

Her clothes litter the bedroom floor as if she evaporated out of them. She steps over them, pulling on jeans and a plain rollneck jumper which makes her look truly enormous but that she loves anyway.

She ventures out on to the hallway, standing outside Todd's empty room.

Her son. Spent the night in a police cell. She can't think about how many more might await him.

Right. She can sort this. Jen is an excellent rescuer, has spent all of her life doing just that, and now it's time to help her son.

She can figure this out.

Why did he do it?

Why did he have a knife with him? Who was the victim, this grown man her son has probably killed? Suddenly Jen can see little clues in Todd in the recent weeks and months. Moodiness. Weight loss. Secrecy. Things she had put down to teenagehood. Just two days ago, he had taken a call, out in the garden. When Jen had asked who it was, he told her it was none of her business, then threw the phone on to the sofa. It had bounced, once, then fallen to the floor, where they'd both looked at it. He had passed it off as a joke, but it hadn't been, that small temper tantrum.