

"McAllister knocks it out of the park yet again. . . . Exquisitely plotted, with clever twist after clever twist, gasp-out-loud reveals and beautifully realized characters. Just tremendous." —LISA JEWELL

JUST ANOTHER

HIS WEAPON ISN'T A GUN, OR A KNIFE.
IT'S A SECRET. HER WORST ONE.

MISSING PERSON

A NOVEL

AUTHOR OF
THE REESE'S
BOOK CLUB PICK

WRONG
PLACE
WRONG
TIME

GILLIAN MCALLISTER

Just Another
Missing Person

GILLIAN McALLISTER



WILLIAM MORROW

An Imprint of HarperCollinsPublishers

Dedication

For Neil Greenough, because every author needs
a helpful and full-of-ideas (and noncorrupt)
former police officer to help them.

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Prologue

Julia knew from the way Genevieve rushed toward her that something was wrong. She burst through the door of the multistory car park, let it swing behind her, a hasty, chaotic slam that pounded the walls. Julia shouldn't have let her go alone: that was her first thought. She had taken a work call, and Genevieve went to pay for their ticket by herself. And now . . .

“Mum?” Genevieve shouted, crossing quickly toward her. She looked haunted, white under the strip lights, eyeliner smudged. Eyes panicked, her gaze darting back over her shoulder. Dread began to churn in Julia's stomach. She could feel her pulse everywhere: in her hands, her legs, her shoulders; her body's siren call. *Something's wrong. Something's wrong*, thudded her heartbeat.

And then Genevieve indicated with a blood-stained hand behind her. “You need to come.”

Part I

Olivia

First Day Missing

1

Julia

Julia is trying to work out if the man at the table next but one is somebody she has arrested before. He's ordering a caramel cheesecake, out with a wife and two children, and she's pretty sure she once charged him with murder. The lighting is low; she just can't tell.

She is trying not to let her husband and daughter know what she's seen, eyes down on the menu.

"Nando's is cringe these days, isn't it?" Genevieve says. Julia smiles at her arch only child.

"In what way?" Art says, bristling. Art, after Art Garfunkel, her husband. An English teacher, a pedant, a ditherer, the last man still using semicolons in text messages. And, until recently, the love of Julia's life.

The cheesecake arrives at the maybe-murderer's table. Julia watches him as he looks up. He has two phones, both facedown on the table in front of him. A dead giveaway of a criminal. She's pretty sure it's him. Something about the brow . . .

"Oh, just—you know. Cheeky Nando's and all that. Like, give it a rest," Genevieve says. She picks up a menu. She's in a black halter-neck tucked into high-waisted jeans. Large gold hoop earrings. She looks amazing, but she wouldn't care if she didn't. That's Genevieve all over: she does whatever the hell she likes. Sometimes, Julia is pleased to have raised a strong woman like this. Sometimes, less so.

It's seven o'clock in the evening, and Julia can't quite believe that she's here. That nothing came up, that she made it.

"They do nice chicken," Art says mildly, perhaps slightly wounded: it was his choice of restaurant.

The cheesecake is almost finished. John. Julia thinks he's called John. She glances at him again and slips her phone out. "John murder Portishead," she types into Google. She's sure he shouldn't be out yet. It was a stabbing in the town center, brutal. He got life, and not that long ago.

The Google search is too wide; too much comes up. Just as she's considering typing something else, the phone trills: it's the station.

"DCI Day," the force incident manager says into Julia's personal mobile—the one she always uses—and that's when Julia's heart begins its predictable descent down her chest. "High-risk missing person just in," he says, and it lands fully at her feet.

Julia sighs. No peri-peri chicken, no more banter with Genevieve. Just work. This is the job. This is the job, she repeats to herself. That has become her mantra after twenty years in the police.

After she's taken the details, she stares at the table. A twenty-two-year-old missing woman. No mental health history. Last seen on CCTV yesterday. Housemates phoned it in when she didn't come home. Those are the facts.

But sitting behind the facts is something else, she's sure of it. Something else. Something she can't yet name. A deep detective instinct tells her so. She shivers there in the dim restaurant.

"I've got to go in," she says, just as her food arrives. Steaming corn on the cob, mashed potato, chicken . . . she looks at it longingly.

As she stands, she glances at the maybe-murderer to their left. "If you happen to see him leave," she says in a low voice to Art and Genevieve, "can you get his reg?"

* * *

Julia has always been too soft to be a police officer. She is thinking this as she hurries into the station, ready to brief the team, but stopping to stare at an old informant of hers, Price, who Julia has always been too fond of. He is sitting on one of the benches, his features arranged in a surprised expression, paused as if someone's stopped the universe for just a second.

She is about to ask him what he's doing here. She can't help it; it's shot through her, no matter how many other tasks she has on. Cut Julia, and she bleeds curiosity for those she cares about, which is everyone.

Price has his legs crossed at the ankles, an arm slung across the backs of the metal chairs, ostensibly at home here, but Julia knows he will be afraid. Of course he is: he trades on information—the most dangerous of commodities.

He has auburn hair that he gels so thickly it darkens the red to inconspicuous brown. Freckles. Skin that burns and blushes easily. He's Scottish, originally from Glasgow, never lost the accent, despite moving down here twenty years ago, when he was seventeen.

“What’re you in for?” she asks him, standing opposite him in the empty foyer. It smells of industrial cleaning wax and the stale dinners they serve the accused; many contain meat that somehow doesn’t need to be refrigerated and has a use-by date of several years’ time.

Most of the lights have popped off. Julia finds the station during these down times impossibly romantic, like it’s an out-of-hours museum only she has access to, a still from a movie that she may wander around, just her.

“This and that,” he says. He’s smart, Price, strategic; he won’t be telling her for a reason.

“Meaning?” she asks. Price is hardly ever interviewed: he informs only to her. Quick, slippery, and funny, too, but never under arrest. Almost all of Julia’s dealings with him have been in the outside world.

The custody sergeant arrives with a single cup of station coffee. Julia flicks her gaze to it. “Just made one for you, then?” she says. The sergeant ignores her.

She looks back at Price, then sighs again as she walks toward the back office, stopping at the kitchen. She makes a tea, three sugars, loads of milk, partially to cool it down to make it less of a risk—steaming-hot tea is not allowed in custody, because it is a weapon. The cup warms her fingers. She’s tempted to down it, has had one drink all day, in Nando’s, but she doesn’t. She has too much to do. She has to find out what’s going on with Price. She wants to follow up on the murderer in the restaurant. And then, the main thing: it looks like she has to find a missing woman.

Price’s hand is already extended out to her as she arrives back with it. “Ohhh, miss,” he says to her, delighted. He sips it. “The sugars as well. I owe you a tip. What’s ten percent of nothing?” He barks a laugh out. He’s acerbic, but one thing is for sure: if their roles were reversed, he, too, would get her tea.

She smiles and avoids the gaze of the custody sergeant. Better to be judged by a colleague for over-familiarity than to lie awake tonight thinking about Price and whether he’s had a hot drink yet that day, that week. There is nothing Julia does better than obsess in the middle of the night. And, in fact, in the middle of the day, too.

“Good luck, okay?” she says to him. He raises the cup to her in a silent toast.

As she gets back to her office, before briefing the team, she checks on the murderer’s file. It was John, John Gibbons. She gets a security guard to verify that he’s still inside, HMP Bristol. It must have been somebody else. Julia cups her face in her hands, two jobs down, one to go, at pushing eight

o'clock at night, and thinks about working in a supermarket. But, the thing is, she wouldn't love anything else. Not like she loves this. And nobody can have a balanced relationship with something they love.

* * *

Julia sticks the Polaroid photograph of Olivia on to the whiteboard in the briefing room. It's a tired, old room: suspended ceilings, awful carpets. For some reason, their cleaners don't tidy it as often as the rest of the offices, and it houses preserved, old coffee cups, the smell of Portishead's ever-present damp, and the paperwork scraps of old investigations.

The 1970s vertical blinds have shut out the night sky and, as Julia looks at them, she wonders if she has seen more evenings here than anywhere else. It isn't a warm Nando's with her kid, but, funnily enough, it is something almost more potent: to Julia, it is home. She removes her shoes as if acknowledging this, and leans into the investigation, into who she has to become, at least for a while. A detective for whom everything else comes second.

The rest of the team files in, looking tired. Some won't have left yet. Some will have been recalled from dinners, date nights, parents' evenings. There isn't a designated Major Incident Team in Portishead. It was hastily assembled once the case was deemed high risk, detectives and analysts from other teams called in, and Julia hopes it contains some good people. She likes who she likes. She can't help it.

She stares up at Olivia's photograph. She is willowy and blond, but with a strength around the nose that elevates her to striking. Julia reaches out to straighten the Polaroid. The Blu Tack it's been stuck up with is useless, old and dry; that's police budgets for you. It's her passport photo: her Instagram was too arty, heart-shaped sunglasses and peeking out from behind ice creams. She has a huge smile, crooked teeth. Perfect imperfection, that luminous quality that the young have.

Julia looks into her eyes and thinks that nobody is truly missing, not to themselves. Only to those left behind.

She may not know what Olivia's fate is, but she already knows her own: insomnia. Discussing the confidential details too much at home. Genevieve—already far too much like Julia—will start to fixate. Art will feel pushed out, though will never say so.

Two analysts are discussing a man who was arrested last night. "It was ornamental Buddhas," David is saying to Brian.

"Buddhas—"

“When Forensics examined them, it became *very* clear that he was putting them up his—”

“All right,” Julia says, biting back a grin. She knows *all* about that case. “Enough Buddhas and—”

“Please say we’ve got a good, interesting one?” Jonathan, Julia’s favorite detective, asks her. They have worked together for fifteen years. He started life as her analyst, then qualified into the force. Even when he was far more junior to her, in charge of telecoms reporting, Julia would eat her sandwiches at lunchtimes with him on the wall outside, glad to have found someone like her: a details person, somebody who always, always, always took the work home with them, emotionally or physically. After he qualified, she managed to keep him in the Major Crime Unit by calling in a favor.

Julia makes an equivocal sort of face, not answering yet. “I’ll take that as a yes,” Jonathan says. He is as dogged as Julia herself, seems able to magic up information in seconds, no doubt from his history as an analyst. His strategy is only that he asks and asks: phone companies, airlines, anyone. He simply repeats his request, then calls up again and again. His catchphrase is “I don’t mind holding.” He does much of his typing with a phone held in the crook of his shoulder, call-center muzak softly detectable.

It’s freezing in the briefing room, carpet tiles cold against her feet in their tights. It’s late April, but still frigid, as bad as January. Nathan Best, her second-favorite Detective Sergeant, catches her looking out. “Going to snow tomorrow,” he says. “Fucking joke.”

“Snow is a great preservative,” Jonathan shoots at him.

“Let’s not talk preservatives,” Julia exclaims. “Let’s talk finding living people.”

“Is this one similar to last year’s? I can’t do that again, honestly,” Jonathan says. She appreciates his honesty: she feels the same. A woman called Sadie went missing last spring, walking home, also seen on CCTV. The only hopeful element was that she’d taken her passport with her—though it had never been used at an airport. The investigation went on for months, with a sighting halfway through that amounted to nothing but upset everybody. They redoubled their efforts, searching wider and wider areas, ordering vast back catalogs of telecoms intelligence, arresting and questioning several known sexual deviants in the area, following less and less likely leads. Only recently, they talked about a reenactment, but they knew so little, there seemed no point. Reconstructions only work when the general public can recall esoteric details about a disappearance.

Jonathan gestures with his hand so carelessly he slops tea on the carpet. That stain will probably be there forever. This is life in the police. No high-speed car chases, no undercover assignments. Only a vague and constant feeling of spinning-plates pressure, stale office surroundings and, somewhere beyond that, a place hard to see, but nevertheless magical: life and death. And—beyond *that*—the trauma of it. Sadie was never seen again, despite Julia's very best efforts, which resulted not only in the missing woman's family accusing the police of laziness but in Julia's husband accusing her of marital neglect.

She remembers the day after they withdrew on the case so vividly. None of them could accept it. By the end, they were going over things they'd already looked at twice before. Just desperate. The day they withdrew, Julia went straight home and lay on their bed in the middle of the day, looking up through the skylight above it. She'd missed Art's birthday. The car needed its MOT. She hadn't attended four monthly book clubs in a row. The other members aren't police, and so don't understand. And all she could think of was that woman, and her invisible, grisly, assumed ending, and how Julia had failed her.

DS Poole enters the room. "Sorry," he says. "I just bailed a dealer for this, so it had better be good."

Something in Julia relaxes as she thinks of Price, going on his way, free tea and all. That guy somehow always lands on his feet. He'll be recalled, but he'll get out of it.

She grabs a red marker pen and draws an arrow across the whiteboard. It squeaks as she does so, and the room falls as quiet as if she has clinked a glass.

She begins to speak. "Here's what we know. Olivia Johnson is twenty-two. Nickname Little O. She works in marketing. April twenty-seventh, she signs the lease for a house share. April twenty-eighth, the day before yesterday, she moves into that house in central Portishead." She glances at Best, who looks concerned, and then at Jonathan, who looks up for a challenge.

"She spends that night in her room, unpacks a bit, then leaves the next morning for a job interview in Bristol City Centre at a marketing firm called Reflections. We don't know where she worked before yet, but according to her emails to her new landlord she moved from Walton Bay. She sends a text to her housemates, late that night, saying, please come. Signed with a kiss. No location sent along with it. Earlier that night, she was seen on CCTV on Portishead High Street. We've got the footage. This morning, the housemates reported her missing. It's taken a while to work

its way to us, and meantime the father, who's been interviewed on the phone, has been helpful."

The text to the housemates is what troubles Julia the most. *Please come x*. That text is a specifically female call to arms, sent with only one intention, Julia thinks: to be rescued. There are things you don't just know because you're police: you know them because you're a woman.

They go over what Julia knows. Olivia's friends, associates, regularly frequented locations according to her Instagram, and then Julia begins handing out tasks, thinking how interested Genevieve would be in this. "What I wouldn't give to attend a briefing," she'd said recently to her. Previously ambivalent, Genevieve is now positively obsessed with what she calls *true crime* and what Julia calls her job.

"Not on your life," Julia had replied. Genevieve's intensifying interest in the police concerns Julia, given everything, but that's a conversation for another day.

Poole interrupts her before she can really start. "Why is she high risk?" he asks. Julia isn't surprised: he's a contrary type, the sort of person who would argue against his own existence in the right circumstances. "Just to play devil's advocate," he adds, as if to demonstrate everything Julia is thinking. Christ. Is it not one of life's truisms that anybody who feels the need to play devil's advocate is seriously in need of a stiff gin and a shag? Get a life, she thinks caustically.

"No past mental health problems that we know of, an attractive woman presumably alone at night, a text sent to housemates asking them to come to her. Probably worth looking into, isn't it?" Julia says, instead of saying what she really thinks, her tone nevertheless sharp.

"All right," he says, holding his hands up, brushing one over his bald head. "No need to go all Julia on me."

She talks over him, giving orders for CCTV and phone-records collection, interviewing the parents formally, questioning the housemates, fingertip searches. Her strategy, always, is to throw as much time—and budget—at a missing person's case as she can, early on. Julia abides by the golden-hour principles: get the immediate response right, and the rest follows. She doesn't understand why anyone would work differently. Information, to Julia, is crucial, and they need it in abundance. Eventually, it will tell them if Olivia is hiding, abducted or dead: there is no other outcome.

Julia walks eagerly back to her office to begin her own set of tasks, shoeless, semi-content, but thinking guiltily of Genevieve and Art at Nando's. Genevieve is only a few years younger than Olivia. It could

easily have been her.

* * *

Julia likes her team to report to her one on one, and she likes to physically look at the things they show her, too. It creates much more work than a DCI should ever have, but she can't help it. You can't get a feel from an email, a dry CCTV report.

Jonathan is sitting in her office, looking implacably out of the blinds Julia paid to have fitted last year. She knows this is not normal behavior, but the authorities didn't stop her, and now she has white wooden slatted blinds that she can close and shut out the world, or open up fully and let the sunlight in. The entire right-hand wall is windows and beautiful blinds just like at home. The rest of her office is a neat square, a corner desk, full of items she bought with her own money: a lamp from Next, an Apple Mac because she prefers them. In other words, it's a room in her house, transplanted to the office.

It's a couple of hours later, just after ten at night. Julia has been coordinating an ever-growing team of searchers, analysts and Forensics. She's pleased to see Jonathan, who has taken his large, black-framed glasses off and is rubbing at his eyes. His wedding ring hits the desk as he reaches to put them back on.

His wife had a baby only a few months ago. Julia had to force him to take leave. He'd returned to work a week early regardless, his eyes bright, alive with the joys of his life having changed in an instant. He loves the baby, but he is addicted to the job. Julia was the same. The warm sugarloaf of a newborn not quite enough to kill her passion for this: solving things, piecing them together, helping people, and inching ever closer to that most elusive of things: the truth.

She sits cross-legged in her chair. "All right, tell me what you know," she says.

"Settle in," he says. "I'm afraid she is a quintessential member of the iGeneration."

"I-what?"

"Vast internet presence. She's a Gen Z-er, but I'm sure she would say: don't put a label on a whole generation, guys, that's so not cohesive."

"I suddenly feel very, very old," Julia says drily.

"Allow me to start with Instagram," Jonathan says. He's sitting on Julia's spare chair, which is designated for exactly this, nicknamed The Interrogation Chair. He brings up Olivia's Instagram grid on the computer

and they look at it together. Jonathan also likes to show rather than tell, though that is because—as he once told her—he doesn’t actually like talking to people very much.

The Instagram grid comprises selfies, flowers, stacks of books. Witty captions. “Can you print them all for me?” Julia asks. “Go through them anyway, but can I have them? And anything else, her emails, tweets, whatever.”

“Already done it in anticipation, my friend,” he says, lifting the file up to show a set of printouts underneath it. “Though we have got to get you digital.”

Julia smiles a half-smile. “No, no, no.” There is something authentic, to Julia, about leafing through the pages in bed. Something tangible, as though any secrets hiding between each sheet will be released into the night air.

“Sure. So. Right. This last photo—clearly taken in the Portishead Starbucks, yesterday, yeah? See the distinctive branded window? She used a VSCO filter.” Jonathan is a middle-aged detective who specializes in the detailed machinations of the way the youth live their lives online. He knows about everything: TikTok trends, incels, Tumblr suicide pacts. And he has the best instincts of any detective Julia knows.

“Right.”

He zooms in on it. The photograph is of a distinctive lemon-yellow coat folded on to a stool, a laptop open in the window and a coffee. Caption: Pretending it’s summer.

“We have CCTV of a woman in a coat like this,” he says, “just a few hundred meters from that Starbucks.”

Julia swallows some emotion or other that she refuses to name. Since last spring, CCTV will forever remind her of Genevieve. More specifically, of what Genevieve did.

“They’ve got this, from outside the hairdresser’s. Yellow coat, right? Woman walks up the street.”

It’s grainy footage from up above, but it is in color, and it is—to Julia, anyway—clearly Olivia. The same distinctively fair hair, a natural blond, no roots. And the same coat from the photograph. She pauses it, zooms in. Did she know, then, that these would be her final moments in the before?

“Agreed. That’s Olivia,” Julia says.

“Right. Eight thirty last night. Okay? Here’s the weird bit.” Jonathan presses play again. Olivia turns right off the high street, and up an alleyway. He leaves the tape running for five minutes, people coming and going, late-night shoppers, the dribs and drabs of commuters, a handful of

evening drinkers. As he often does, he allows his evidence to speak for itself.

“Okay?” Julia says.

He opens Google Maps on his phone. “Here is that alley,” he says. “Blindman’s Lane, it’s appropriately called.”

Jonathan angles Street View up to the alley. As Julia’s looking, a text from his wife comes up, a photograph icon, and the message: *Bedtime, AGAIN*, she presumes regarding their baby.

“It’s blocked up,” he says, flicking the notification away. “Dead end. Look.” Sure enough, the alley ends in a brick block of flats, covering the entire thing. No doors, no accessible windows. Nothing.

“She doesn’t come out. I have watched five hours of footage, sped up,” Jonathan continues.

“Is it still blocked up? Is Google Maps up to date?”

“Four uniformed officers have confirmed it. And I went myself—it’s only”—he jerks his thumb—“down there.”

“No ladder? No fire door? A shaft down to a basement?” Julia says, zooming in on Google.

“No, no, no,” Jonathan says. He closes Google Maps and opens the text from his wife. It is indeed a photograph of her and their baby, maybe four months old now.

“Seriously cute,” she remarks.

“He’s got us wrapped around his little finger. Bedtime means nothing to him.”

“Well,” Julia smiles, thinking of Genevieve. “He’ll be sleeping until noon in fifteen, sixteen years.”

Jonathan’s smiling eyes meet hers. “We’ve bought something called a SNOO; it says it’ll rock him instead of us.”

“Yeah, sure. Good luck with that,” Julia says. “I need to look at this alleyway, too,” she says to him. “Don’t I?” He gestures economically to the door, like, be my guest, but then comes with her: he’s nothing if not a gentleman.

It’s a quarter of a mile down the road to the alleyway. As they leave, the station fire alarm triggers, as it does near constantly, and never gets fixed. They ignore it and walk there quickly, Julia’s mind fizzing. “Never once does the inner monologue stop,” Art, her husband—is he still, technically?—once said to her, a sentence that for some reason she has remembered for all of these years since.

It’s freezing out, the air dry-ice cold, the streets quiet. Portishead’s nightlife hasn’t yet recovered from the pandemic, or perhaps nobody’s has.