


ONE MORNING HE'S YOUR HUSBAND.
BY NIGHTFALL HE'S A CRIMINAL.
AND THESE ARE HIS . . .

FAMOUS
LAST
WORDS



A NOVEL

GILLIAN
McALLISTER

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF
WRONG PLACE WRONG TIME

FAMOUS
LAST
WORDS

A Novel

GILLIAN
McALLISTER



WILLIAM MORROW

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Dedication

For Maxine Hitchcock, editor and friend

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About the Publisher

Act I
The Siege

1

Cam

It is one hour before Camilla's life changes, though she doesn't yet know it.

All she knows, right now, as she cleans the high chair while Polly sits on her play mat after breakfast, is that her husband isn't here. He's gone somewhere, left her to deal with Polly's first day of nursery and Camilla's return to work by herself. Has he got a deadline? Has she forgotten some urgent project?

But Cam doesn't forget things. *Luke*, actually, forgets things. So . . . ?

Sunlight enters stage left in her kitchen in three distinct shafts. It's a perfect June day, and Cam woke up a mixed bag of emotions: nervous but excited, sad, happy—her first day back at work after a long nine-month maternity leave. She sometimes longs for words in the English language that don't exist, and today is one such occasion. Trepidation, excitement . . . when she woke up, she thought: Nope, none of them cut it.

And Luke has chosen today to disappear.

He must have some work thing on. He's a ghostwriter, for MPs and celebrities, and has a co-working space he heads to when he needs to think. That'll be it. She won't think about it anymore. Won't ruminate on it—definitely not, absolutely no ruminating, Cam thinks, gripping the dishcloth too tightly.

She watches as Polly leans forward to grasp a toy that's sitting just out of reach. She's so like Luke. Lean, blond, a disposition as sunny as the weather outside. Cam watches as she picks up the toy and throws it, a wobbly, random baby throw that could be deliberate, could be an accident. Funny, Cam's always liked people-watching, but her baby is next-level.

Her phone beeps and she reaches for it immediately, hoping Luke has replied to her, but it's her sister. *Morning*, it says, a selfie of Libby sitting on her sofa, dark hair mussed up in a pile on the top of her head. This kind of message is not unusual: Cam and Libby are engaged in a near-constant text conversation. It doesn't have a beginning or an end, just a regular back-and-forth, a tennis match that never finishes. They've been doing it for as long as they've had phones.

Morning, Cam replies, taking a selfie of her in work clothes, anxious expression on her face that she didn't know she had until she took it.

OMG yes. The big day. Well—to bolster your confidence . . . look! Look who's 12 down in the Times crossword!? It's accompanied by a photograph of a clue, which reads *Author of bestselling recent novel about a hot air balloon ride romance (4, 5)*.

It's her client, Maya Jones. Cam is her literary agent.

Cam types back: *Wow! I wonder if this is good press exposure? Do they print the answers next week?*

Libby sends a second photo of a very, very small set of answers for last week with a laughing emoji.

CAM: How many people read this?!

LIBBY: . . . Four? What's your cut of four books? LOL.

CAM: £8 paperback x 0.1 royalty x 0.15 commission? What's that?

LIBBY: Drinks are on me, pal.

Cam forwards the crossword to Maya, then puts her phone away and yawns. Polly woke her and Luke last night at ten o'clock, one o'clock, and then some other time . . . three, four? Cam promised Luke she would stop looking at the time after he said it only upset her anyway. Polly—old enough now, in their opinion, to know much better—thought it was the middle of the day, and was absolutely, categorically, not interested in sleeping. Luke had looked at Cam, Ewan the bloody dream sheep backlit red behind him, Polly actually chuckling with mirth, and said, "Fancy a suicide pact?" And God, they had laughed, the way they always have. The second Cam met Luke, he made her laugh, and, just like that, she was utterly beguiled despite

everything: that he, a writer, was her client, and she his agent. As it turned out, nobody cared about that the way she thought they might.

But where is he? How could he just leave her by herself?

Cam reluctantly gets Polly ready in the sling to walk to the nursery down the road, trying to accept that Luke, wherever he is, isn't going to see Polly before they leave. The house sits quietly around them as she prepares to go, a loaded kind of silence that she tries to ignore: It's the day. The return to work.

Cam has had barely any time to process this change, spent the settling-in sessions stress-walking the streets outside, maternal guilt morphing the inside of the nursery into some awful Dickensian orphanage staffed by ogres. She sometimes thinks she might've read too many novels.

But now it's here, the day mother and daughter splinter into different existences. She said this to Luke only last night, who joked, "Oh, bloody hell, are you not picking her up after?" She'd laughed at that. In every couple, Cam thinks, there is a calm one and an anxious wreck, and Cam is most definitely the latter to Luke's former.

Where is he?

She goes to grab her cardigan, and that's when she spots it. On the table in the hallway is a piece of paper with her husband's handwriting on it. As she looks at it, a half-memory of a coffee-scented goodbye kiss from him drifts across her mind, another of him in the shower, the sound of the water running in the distance, both in the veil just beyond deep sleep. So vague she isn't sure that they happened today at all.

Luke once said he would always kiss her goodbye. "I'm never going to be one of those people who just forgets," he once said. "Or, worse, a dry peck on the cheek!"

But did he?

She picks up the note.

If anything is written on one side. Huh? *If anything*? And crossed out? Cam holds the piece of paper up to the light. She turns it over. *It's been so lovely with you both. Lx.*

Maybe the *If anything* is old. The main note is this one, surely? An end-of-maternity-leave note. *It's been so lovely.* A kind of "good luck"?

There's nothing else on it.

How weird. Luke—a writer, after all—is usually clear.

She finds their text thread. She's asked once where he is, called twice, but she'll text again.

As she stands there, overthinking, Polly strapped to her chest, she finds she doesn't know where to start. Everything's so loaded these days. Before

the baby, time alone was just that. But now it's a currency. One person's me-time is the other's solo parenting. They're not used to it. They've argued about it . . .

All ok? Sorry to ask again. PS. It's about to happen! The big drop off!! I am to be a working woman once again.

She reads it over, used to proofreading for tone.

She touches the note, just once, sends the text, then leaves.

It is June 21, the longest day of the year, and the hottest so far, too, even at eight o'clock in the morning. The sun is as sharp and yellow as a lemon drop. Cam turns her face to it, apricating in it. Huge flowers have bloomed in the street, big and open happy faces nodding as Cam walks by. She points them out to show Polly (should Polly be understanding gestures yet?), thinking how much she takes the weather for granted lately. It's been balmy for six straight weeks. No breeze, no rain. The same high, blue skies every day, pale at the edges, a deep cyan way up above, as if they're living inside sea glass.

Cam and Luke's lawn has turned yellow and beachy-looking. Each night, once Polly is in bed, Cam takes a novel out there, sits in a deck chair, and just plunges deep into its pages, like diving into a pool containing other worlds. Luke deals with Polly if she wakes. And he knows better than to try to strike up a conversation with Cam, too, during what she calls her introvert hour.

They reach the nursery quickly. A three-story Victorian building sandwiched between a bank and a laundrette—very London. Cam feels a dart of dread as it looms into view, that distinctly parental mix of guilt and approaching liberty. The thing about motherhood, it seems to Cam, is that most forms of freedom come with a price. But today, she's just going to pay it, and try to relish it: The return to herself. To the job where she gets to read novels for a living.

Besides, Luke won't be fearing today, won't be imagining Polly not settling or sleeping or eating. Luke is happy-go-lucky, a man who never overthinks. If asked, he would say that the baby will be fine, he's got to work anyway, so what can you do? That's life. Sometimes, Luke tries to reassure Cam by telling her she cannot control situations, and there is nothing that Cam finds less reassuring than this.

And, nevertheless, he clearly is not fearing today, is he? He's not even here. Gone to work, or wherever, without a second thought. How could he?

"Aha, Polly Deschamps," one of the nursery workers says, greeting them at the door. Reflexively, Cam holds her daughter's warm body closer to her chest. "We've been telling everyone about your first day," the woman continues. "We're going to have so much fun."

“Hope so,” Cam says. She takes a breath, then lifts and passes Polly into the arms of the nursery worker—a woman whose name Cam doesn’t even know or has forgotten.

Polly swivels back and reaches for Cam, just once, their hands momentarily touching for the purest of seconds before she is pulled away from her, and Cam is free, but right now she doesn’t want to be.

She grabs for her phone to tell Luke all of this, to say don’t worry, I’ve done the nursery run, something perhaps slightly passive-aggressive, but that’s when she looks at his WhatsApp profile: *last seen today at 05:10*. Huh. She didn’t notice it earlier when she was busy with Polly and cleaning up. Ten past five is so early, and not online at all since? Unlike him. So strange.

Cam walks into her agency’s offices and, immediately, the aroma gets her: books. They’re everywhere, and it smells like home.

In the kitchenette, having greeted a few colleagues, glad she used the Tube journey to apply too much makeup, she makes a coffee and thumbs through a historical fiction debut someone else represents. She can feel the pull of the words already.

The streets are so dark they look sooty, lit only by a single oil lamp at its end.

And just like that, she’s in: Cam really could stay here, on the Victorian street, standing up in the kitchen, and read this whole thing, the way she has done her whole life—the back of cereal boxes in the mornings; Sweet Valley High books on the school bus.

She closes the cover and breathes out, thinking.

Look. This is fine. It’s fine. Luke is doing something somewhere—she’s forgotten what, her mind taken up with Polly, that’s all. That’s *all*. And Cam’s here, with good coffee, books to delve into and to sell, *and* she’s being paid for it. She’s lucky. She’s so lucky. She doesn’t need to create problems.

But something is creeping up behind her. A kind of dread. That *last seen*. The note.

A beep.

Also.

A text from Libby. This is how she messages. Often one word at a time. This is how *they* message. Well, this or trading mutual insults, usually, anyway.

LIBBY: I’m baking a cake for this pissing client thing tonight. Is this unacceptable or OK?

A video of a spinning cake, one side collapsed but repaired with icing.

CAM: Definitely acceptable.

LIBBY: Thanks for lying to me.

CAM: Always.

“Cam!” her boss, Stuart, says, rounding the corner to the kitchen. “Welcome back.” Tanned, strawberry blond, mid-fifties. Ostensibly benign and somewhat dithery, he has a list full of bestselling writers that hints at his regular displays of brilliance. He is the sort of person you think isn’t listening in a meeting, who then makes the best suggestion of anyone there.

“Baby well? Life feeling on an even keel yet?” he asks.

“Oh yes, better,” Cam says, thinking that the house is full of piles of laundry, of unopened bills. The baby doesn’t sleep. This morning, Cam showered while shouting nursery rhymes to placate her. When Cam sits in the garden every night, she feels the tasks looming behind her, to-do-list specters that she doesn’t have the time to deal with in the way she used to. “All good here,” she adds brightly.

“Great stuff,” Stuart says. “It all falls into place eventually.”

“Hmm.”

“Anyway,” he says. He raises his arms above his head—he has been, for the past couple of years, that most toxic of things: a gym convert—and starts stretching. Cam finds the best tactic is to ignore him when he does this, and so she pulls the sash window open, overlooking Pimlico below. Gardens out the back, and here, in front, huge white Georgian buildings. She’s missed it. The simplicities of a nice view and a hot cup of coffee that she can drink in peace.

“Did you send Adam’s novel out?” he continues, two hands braced on the kitchen counter. Cam is worried he’s going to start doing squats, but he stops and switches on the kettle instead.

She helps herself to a biscuit, replacing hours unslept with sugar. She discovered Adam’s novel while on maternity leave. He’d sent her a query email. She had been checking her inbox, couldn’t resist the premise, and asked for the full manuscript. Adam said he preferred to physically post the novel: that he felt like it was no longer his, that way. He’d sent it to her house, since she was off, and she’d offered him representation within three

days. The thing is, this work—it doesn't feel like work to Cam. Nothing does that you'd do for free.

"I sent it out last night," she answers Stuart. "Couldn't help myself. I think it's going to go big." She hopes her radar is accurate. Cam knows a good book when she sees one. That feeling you get as a reader, 10 percent in, where you just kind of *sink* into the novel and its world. This one is contemporary fiction about the son of two YouTubers who sues his parents for breach of privacy. She still remembers the moment she opened that padded envelope, read the first line, and thought: *Yes*.

"I want to get a two-book deal, but he hasn't sent me a new idea yet," she says.

"Hmm. You only need a one-line pitch, and it can change. Right, got a crisis meeting," Stuart says, checking his watch. "Author going nuts."

Cam takes some biscuits to her desk and spies more texts from Libby, beginning with *The cake has betrayed me*.

She moves a coaster out of the way bearing the slogan "Main character energy," suddenly wary of her own drama playing out, and opens her laptop. She never shuts it down, and it currently has twenty-five tabs open, almost all of them Google searches.

Baby not finishing meals.

How to stop bickering with husband.

Should my pelvic floor be better by now?

She checks her email. No wild, seven-figure preemptive offers for Adam's book yet. Next, her phone. Nothing from Luke. Should she ring him again, or . . . ?

Cam doesn't know where to begin. Her brain feels so full. Meetings, submissions, novels about to be published. There's a word for this that she recently learned: *fisselig*. A German word meaning "flustered to the point of incompetence."

She was mainlining Jaffa Cakes last night with Luke—who somehow never gains an ounce—lying on top of their duvet. She had been moaning to him about, well, everything really. That Polly wasn't weaning or sleeping well. That she didn't know how she was going to work alongside it all. That she felt a failure most days. Things Cam would only admit in the middle of the night, and only to him, the person who never judges her. Luke had listened and offered her more Jaffa Cakes, not suggesting anything, but she didn't

need suggestions, just needed him. “Things feel—I don’t know,” she had said. “Just like they’re not getting any easier.”

“I’m chatting to you and eating Jaffa Cakes,” he had replied, running a hand through his hair, past the small scar on his forehead that he got from falling off a bicycle as a child. “Seems OK to me.”

“We’re so unhealthy.”

“Junk food is our only defense,” Luke had said. “Don’t rob me of my pleasure in life. Look—when you go back, why don’t you take an evening a week off mum duty? I’ll do bedtime. You go and do something. With Libby? Holly? A bar. The cinema.”

Cam had grimaced, though she’d appreciated the gesture. Going out would suit Luke, but not Cam. “I like to go to bed with a book,” she’d said, sounding meek, but it was true. A paperback novel, pages rough under her fingertips. A candle. Fresh pajamas and sheets. Motherhood, for introverts, is a special kind of difficult, the usual escape routes not available, a thought Cam regularly feels guilty about, but is nevertheless true.

“You do that every night,” Luke had said, leaning over to touch her shoulder affectionately.

“I know that. I know I am lame.”

“Everyone needs a break. You need . . . space.” His expression became more serious. “Cam—you’re ever drowning . . . you shout? And I’ll rescue you. OK?”

She’d nodded, so thankful she had married a man she could say anything to, but now, she thinks about that first statement.

Everyone needs a break. It contained a darkness within it, didn’t it? Is *this* Luke getting *his* break?

Has he actually been slightly huffy recently? Cam ponders it, trying not to spiral. Maybe. She heard him heave an irritated, lengthy sigh the other night when Polly woke; his footsteps as he got out of bed were heavy. When he’d returned, and she’d asked what Polly had wanted, he had ignored her, scrolling on his phone, his jaw tight. Uncharacteristic: Cam has remembered it for this reason.

No, but they went to a wedding last week, and he had been fine then, hadn’t he? They’d fallen into their old dynamic. He’d coaxed her onto the dance floor even though she categorically does not dance. “You protest,” he’d said, waistcoat unbuttoned, “but you dance so well with me.” She’d cajoled him back home at midnight; he had laughed when he saw she’d brought a pair of slippers in her handbag to wear in the taxi home.

God, she can’t concentrate. The book on submission, and Polly’s first full day away from her, and Luke’s absence. They make Cam have that strange

but familiar urge to check and check and check again. Emails, the nursery app, authors' Kindle ranks. Anything.

Something comes in from Adam.

Adam@amazingadam.com

21 June at 09:23

Re: Second idea

No, no idea for a second novel yet. How urgent would it be? I have a small-town whodunnit kind of thing on the back burner?

Cam hides a grimace and tells him to keep thinking, hoping he will read between the lines.

She grabs her phone and tries Luke again: "Welcome to the Vodafone messaging service."

She writes another message: *I've had loads of office biscuits as well as those Jaffas! x.*

And this time, she sends it on WhatsApp and watches for the delivered checkmarks.

Luke and Cam met when he walked into her office four years ago. He was a journalist who had ghostwritten a memoir by a football manager about a Premier League team's rise to success: he'd DMed the manager on social media (as a bet on a stag do, he'd later told her) who, to his surprise, had replied saying yes. Cam had enjoyed it a lot more than she expected to. Luke's prose was up-front, transparent, didn't purport to be anything other than what it was: pure entertainment.

Cam had offered him representation. He had replied with a single word: *Shit!* It had made Cam smile. She likes language in all its forms, and a well-timed swearword is the best.

She had sold the memoir to Penguin Random House. His next gig was an autobiography for a singer-songwriter her agency represented and, after that, he was up and running, established and needing a little less agenting, which made it a lot easier for Cam to kiss him several months into their working relationship at a rainy London bus stop after too many glasses of wine. It was late summer, the mornings and evenings just beginning to smell as crisp and cold as apples. Luke had been in a T-shirt that got soaked in the downpour and, to this day, damp clothing reminds Cam of that night, that kiss, that illicit, shouldn't-be-doing-this kiss.

Anyway. Can't concentrate on a word, she continues to Luke. She waits eagerly for his response. *Just have an easy morning today!!* he will no doubt

say, but she needs to hear it, needs to see his words to her. Cam makes Luke more sensible and Luke makes Cam have fun. That's how they work. That's the way they have always worked.

The message doesn't deliver. She stares at it: a single gray checkmark. When . . . when do you begin to really worry?

No. He must actually be working hard. Phone off.

But the dread Cam felt in the kitchen rears its head again. She's kidding herself. Something is off.

She calls him again.

Nothing.

At what point is he . . . missing?

Another text from Libby comes through, then a photo. She is running her outfit by Cam, as she often does. She catches one part of it—*It's for a party!! That's where people get together and have fun? Are you aware? LOL*—but she stops reading, because that's when she hears it. Some sort of commotion outside. Is that sirens?

Fear runs its fingertip lightly up her spine, and Cam's imagination fires into action, fueled by fiction. Things that only happen to other people could happen to me, she finds herself thinking. Ambulances, fire engines, warning sirens. Dead bodies and bad news and police hats held in hands and *we tried everything we could* said by kind doctors in green scrubs.

She rises from her desk. She'll just check outside, beyond the foyer. See what's going on.

Their receptionist is sitting in silence, the only noise the television on the wall cycling through news stories. Cam can't hear anything else.

It must be her imagination. Nothing more.

But then everything happens all at once, the way it sometimes does.

"We pause for a moment, here," the news presenter on the television says, something unusual and grave in her tone, "to bring you breaking news from Central London."

As Cam watches, the screen goes black and BREAKING flashes across it in white text. The voiceover switches to a male broadcaster. "Police are trying to end a siege that began an hour ago in Central London." A grainy image appears on the screen. Cam stares at it, but she can't make it out. "A man has taken three hostages in a warehouse in London. We have exclusive CCTV footage from a security guard on duty. Authorities are present at the scene and believe it to be a hostile act."

Before Cam can digest this, she spots them outside: police.

Two officers, one wearing a white shirt and black stab vest, one in a suit, no caps in hands but otherwise just the way she imagined, striding into her

workplace. And Cam knows, somehow, in some deep, dark place inside her, that they're here for her. She tells herself she is being stupid, highly strung because of Luke's unread texts and absence, but that's the precise moment that she hears them say her name.

2

Cam's legs feel imaginary, too light. She walks across the foyer and could swear she's four inches from the ground, a ghost floating around a literary agency. It must be shock. Fear.

"That's me," she finds herself saying loudly in the foyer. "Camilla."

"Are you the wife of Luke Deschamps?" One of the coppers turns from talking to the receptionist and looks directly at Cam.

"Yes," she says quickly, thinking that at least it's not Polly. How strange it is the way the order of disasters inverts post-baby.

It's been so lovely with you both. What did he mean by that? Was that—a goodbye?

"DS Steven Lambert," one of the coppers says. Late thirties maybe. Pale, freckled. He's accompanied by a woman who introduces herself as PC Emma Smith. She has with her a notepad and pen, just holding them, standing there like a journalist from the '80s.

"Have you got time to have a quick chat?" Smith says, her tone gentle, but in the way somebody has when they've been told to do it.

"What's happened?"

"Is there somewhere we can . . ."

Cam indicates a meeting room off the foyer without thinking, wanting only information, and as quickly as possible.

"Is Luke OK?" she asks.

"Yes."

Cam's shoulders drop six feet. In her relief, she bursts into an occupied room, apologizes and heads to the one next door.

Steven Lambert meets her gaze and he looks tired. He is a cliché of a workaholic. Dark circles, coffee on his breath. "There is a hostage situation unfolding," he says plainly.