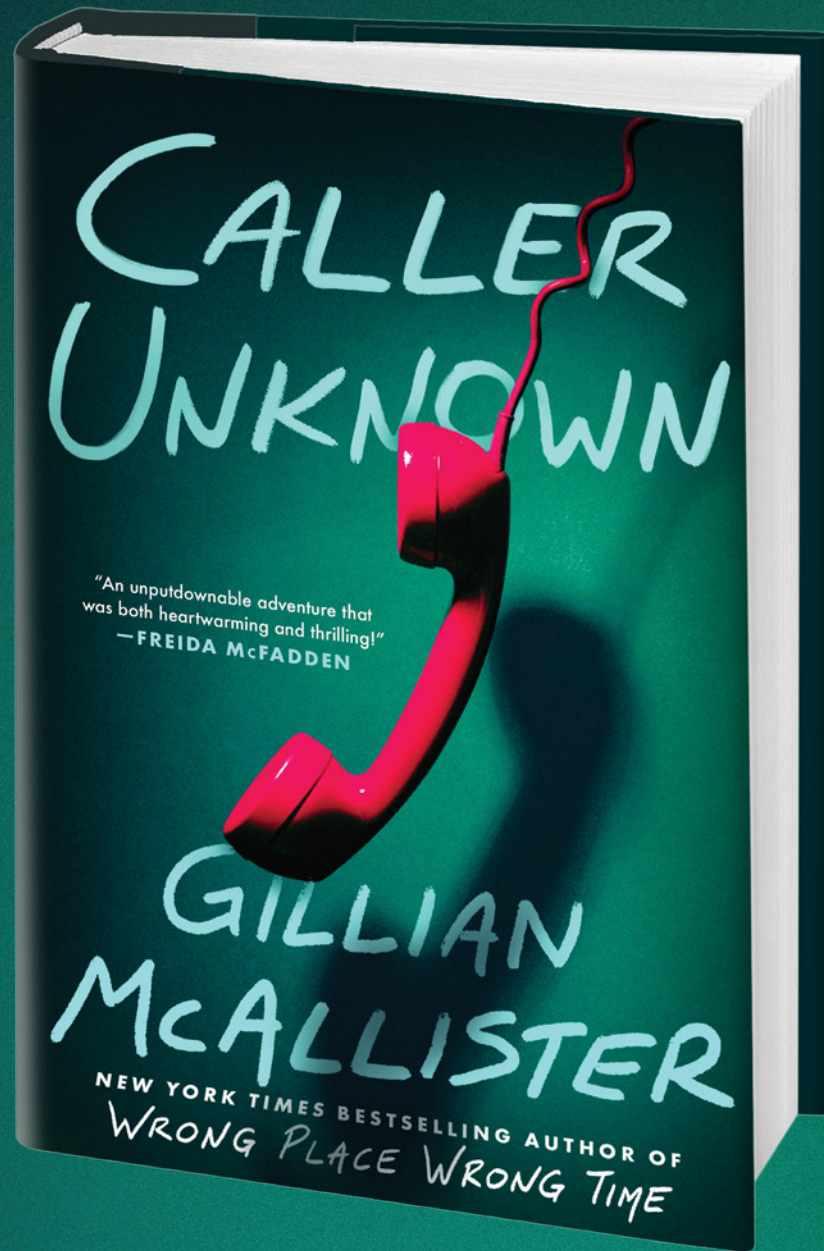


CALLER UNKNOWN BOOK CLUB GUIDE



**“An unputdownable adventure
that was both heartwarming
and thrilling!”**

—FREIDA MCFADDEN

CALLER UNKNOWN

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How does the book explore the theme of familial sacrifice? Do you think Simone's actions were justified, given the circumstances?
2. Who was your favorite character? Did you connect with one over the others? Which character's actions surprised you the most, and why?
3. How does the setting of the novel inform the story and its themes?
4. Which twist surprised you the most, and why?
5. How does the alternating perspectives affect your experience of the story? How did hearing the kidnapper's perspective influence your understanding of the crime and its impact?
6. Take a look at Lucy and Simon's relationship—how does it change and evolve through the novel? What does this book say about mother-daughter relationships in general?
7. What did you think about Damien's role in the story? How is his role as a father different from Simone's embodiment of motherhood?
8. Simone and Lucy face numerous moral dilemmas and make complicated choices. How would you have handled these situations? Would you have acted differently?
9. How did the book challenge your views on morality, justice, and the role of family? Do you think the ending feels just?
10. What do you imagine happens to the characters after the novel's end? How will their experiences shape them and their relationships going forward?



CALLER UNKNOWN

PLAYLIST

TEXAS HOLD 'EM by Beyonce

CALIFORNIA by Chappell Roan

AUSTIN by Dasha

DOWN BAD by Taylor Swift

BIRDS OF A FEATHER by Billie Eilish

Problem Child by Jude York

Runaway by Devlin, Yasmin

Runaway by Kanye West

Half A World Away by REM

Cruel Summer by Taylor Swift

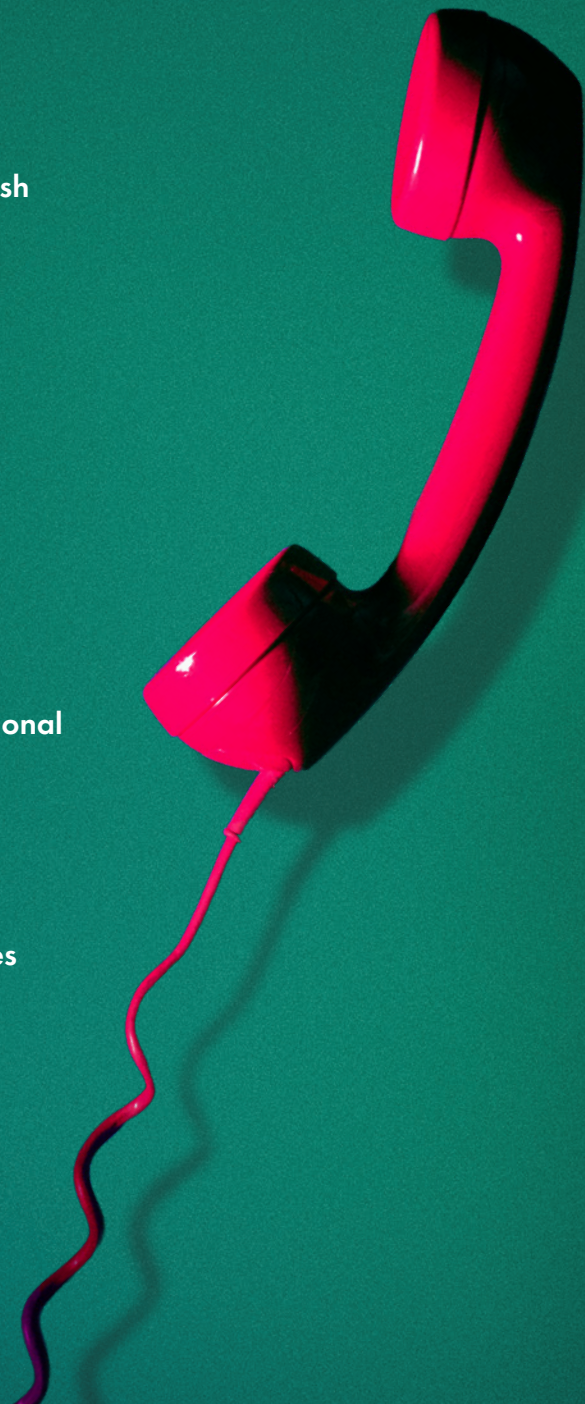
Nightswimming by REM

Tropic Morning News by The National

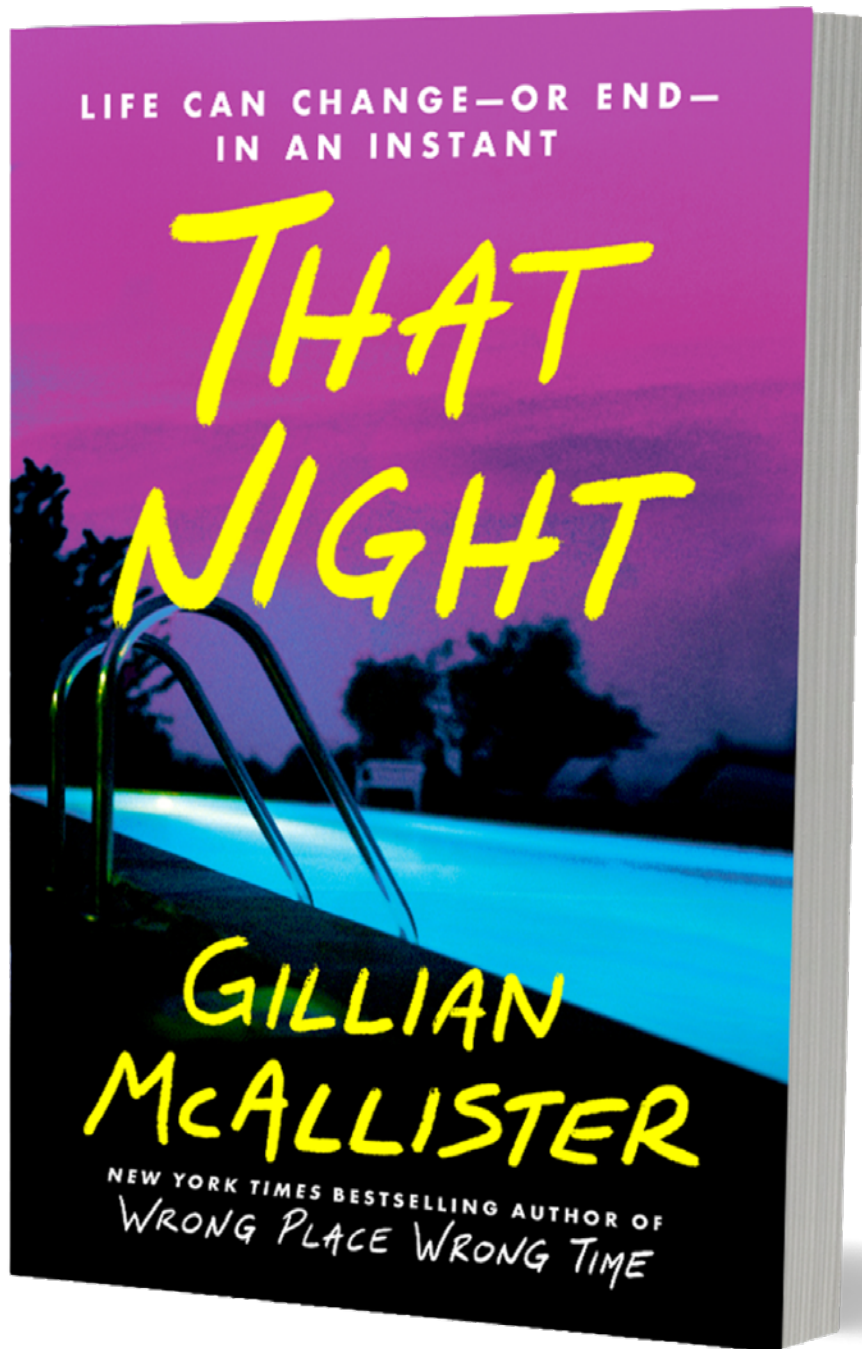
Mother by Meghan Trainor

Late Night Driving by ArrDee

Late Night Talking by Harry Styles



Read on for an excerpt of
THAT NIGHT
from *New York Times* Bestselling Author
GILLIAN McALLISTER



Prologue

“Help me, please help me,” I say into the phone.

“What?” My sister has panic in her voice, her usually muted tone immediately alert. “What?” The second *what?* is resigned, a full, heartbroken glob of a word, like syrup falling off a spoon.

The line crackles as if paper is being brushed across the mouthpiece, the signal poor. “Please help,” I say.

It’s nighttime, but there’s still just a hint of lightness at the edge of the horizon where the sun set hours ago, like somebody has torn a seam in the sky, just at the edge there. Otherwise, it’s completely black, the air scented with summer hay and the final embers of barbecues. “Please come,” I add, though I know she will. This is what family means. This is what our family means anyway.

She doesn’t say anything back, but that silence contains her agreement, I know it does.

I move my gaze away from the sky and stare downward, lighting up the ground with a flashlight which illuminates dust motes dancing in the air.

I slowly run the flashlight over it. Over the body.

1.

Cathy

Cathy only answers the phone call that comes in the middle of the night because she is awake, working. Chasing down bloods for a Labrador that she's concerned about. The results are already late, and the unreliable holiday Wi-Fi keeps cutting off just as she tries to send the email.

Frannie. Slide to answer. Cathy's eyes flick to the top of the screen to check the time. It's 1:25 a.m. The room is completely dark around the blue bubble of light the phone creates. All she can see is her sister, calling her in the early morning. Calling Cathy because she knows Cathy will be alone, because Cathy is always alone, whether on holiday or at home.

She sits up in the bed and swipes to answer. The sheet falls away from her. She's wearing pajamas even in the Italian heat. It seems somehow wrong to sleep naked. That particular luxury, for Cathy, is reserved for the future, she hopes, with some as yet unknown man.

"Help me, please help me," Frannie shouts as soon as Cathy answers. Electricity shoots across Cathy's chest and down her arms.

"What? What?" Cathy says. Sweat forms on her upper lip and between her breasts.

"Please help me," Frannie says.

"Where are you? Are you safe?"

"Please come. I'm on the road. Turn right off the dirt road and then left. Half a mile, tops," Frannie garbles.

Cathy waits. For Frannie to start making sense.

“It’s him. The man from the market,” Frannie says, and then hangs up.

Him.

Shit.

Cathy gets out of bed and starts scrambling around for clothes to throw on. She finds a pair of pink shorts she bought in Verona a couple of days ago and pulls them on, the price tag scratching against her lower back.

Why didn’t she stay on the line? Cathy tries to call back, but there’s no answer.

She rams her feet into her dusty flip-flops and grabs her bag. As she leaves the silent villa, not thinking to wake anyone, the closing of the large wooden door behind her sounds like a gunshot in the night.

The outskirts of Verona are completely black at this hour. Even after a week and a half, Cathy still isn’t used to it. Struggling to see her own feet as she walks.

The only light comes from her bedroom window in the villa behind her. It projects a neat rectangle of light onto the patio. And then: nothing, like she might be at the edge of the world.

Frannie sounded so scared. She tries to call again, but this time it goes to voicemail. Maybe she is exaggerating. Cathy hopes so. She’s always enjoyed the drama of Frannie’s hyperbole, the way she tells a great story. She’s the family dreamer. “There were literally fifty dogs in the waiting room today,” she once said. She’s the receptionist at their family veterinary practice. She had refused to concede when Cathy probed. “Yeah, *actually* fifty,” she’d said, and Cathy had thrown her head back and laughed. “You must have had to sit some behind the reception desk,” she had said, while Frannie nodded emphatically.

Cathy rushes, muttering pointless prayers out loud, the long, tough grasses whipping and snapping around her ankles like

snakes. Please be okay. Please don't be hurt, or frightened. As she reaches the end of the drive, she turns and sees headlights in the distance.

It must be their rental car, the Land Rover none of them likes driving. "It feels like a *bus*," their brother, Joe, had said on the first day.

She breaks into a proper run down the road. Right and then left, just like Frannie said. *It's bim. The man from the market.*

It's bim.

Cathy's pace slows when she sees the silhouettes. She would know them anywhere: her siblings. Joe, standing by the Land Rover, his hands on his hips. And Frannie, kneeling down, her hair and long limbs illuminated by the headlights. She is so beautiful, has always been so. A wide nose. Cat eyes. A mane of dark, shiny hair.

Why is she on the ground? Cathy stares, then takes a breath, just one. She breathes it out as slowly as she can. This is . . . She stares at the shadows and the lights. A sweep of fear covers her shoulders. She starts to go cold.

She knows, somehow, that if she walks forward, something is going to happen.

Joe has evidently just arrived too, from his end of their large, shared villa, and he paces across the lights, in and out of shadow, like a flickering bulb. Cathy wraps her arms around her middle. A bad feeling settles over her, like she is being watched. A small, unsavory part of her is disappointed that Frannie called Joe before her. Cathy would certainly not call Joe first in a crisis—she might not call him at all.

She turns on the light from her phone and shines it along the pale, dusty ground in front of her. Around them are the smells of Verona: dry heat, parched grass. It's been the hottest July on record. They had to buy sunburn lotion most days. They've been through bottles and bottles of it. All of Cathy's clothes are oily at their hems.

She can hear only the car's engine and the cicadas.

Cathy moves toward them and sweeps the light slowly over Frannie, who is still kneeling. And that's when she sees it.

Frannie is leaning over, staring at the ground. Cathy stops walking but can't stop looking at Frannie. She has something—a T-shirt?—in her hands. As Frannie stands up, Cathy realizes, stunned, that she's taken off her top, that she's in just her bra.

In the glare of the headlights, Frannie lifts up her hands. Red drips run down her wrists. Her stomach is streaked with blood. It's dried, burgundy, the color of red wine. She is a terrible tableau. Nausea rises up through Cathy. "Fucking hell," she whispers to nobody.

Joe is leaning over her now. Frannie extends her hands to Cathy and shouts: "Help me."

The headlights are a Venn diagram of light, a portrait of her sister, and a body lying at her feet.

2.

Joe

Joe—highly strung, totally crazy, actually—has always had bad dreams, and this must surely be one of them.

What the fuck, what the fuck, what the fuck, he is thinking as he arrives in front of the car and stares at his sister. She is kneeling on the ground. He can see each knot of her spine, illuminated in the headlights in alternating patterns of shade and light. She's too skinny. Always has been. He used to make her snacks after school, cheese on toast, yogurts with nuts and berries. Anything fattening. They called it her second lunch.

"What . . ." he says, but his sentence ends there, like a match that fails to strike. He shakes his head. He can't believe what he's seeing. A body. "What the fuck!" he whispers. "What the fuck!"

"Help me!" Frannie shouts over her shoulder to him. In the distance, he can see the pinprick of Cathy's flashlight. Thank God, he thinks. She'll know what to do. He doesn't. Joe is a panicking kid in a man's body, it sometimes feels like. Cathy may be shy, but she's cool in a crisis.

"I hit him," Frannie screams to both of them. "I hit him with the car." Cathy's light beam wavers as she runs toward them, leaving tracks in the night air like a sparkler. "It's the man from the market."

"What?" Joe says. He can't stop looking at the man lying in front of her. His skin is both bloodied and waxy, smears of red against the gray.

Joe cautiously approaches Frannie, even though he doesn't

want to. Tears have left clear tracks in the blood on her face. A smear of snot sits underneath her nose. He wants to turn away from it, run back to his villa, and to Lydia. Away from this—this grotesque chaos.

It feels like he's walking through water that won't part in front of him. He tries to step forward, but he can't. He forces himself to look at the person lying on the ground. Tall, slim—his hip bones are visible. Frannie's lifted up his shirt. His torso is bleeding. His glasses are cracked.

He's very obviously dead.

Most of the Plant family are vets, including Joe and Cathy, and death is obvious to vets.

There's so much blood. Pints and pints of it. He begins to panic. He's usually fine with blood, but not like this. He tries to slow his breathing. It's a panic attack, he tells himself. Not uncommon for him, but not quite like ones he's had before either.

He gets out his phone as Cathy has and shines his light across the road. The blood shimmers back like petrol. There's so much of it. Joe tries not to gag. It smells fetid, both metallic and rotten, like just-turning food.

He turns to look at his sister, in a begging position in the road. "What the fuck's gone on?" he says.

"Please help," she says. "Don't be—"

"Don't be what?"

"Just help me," she says, through tears. Frannie hardly ever cries. She's sunny and messy and imaginative and loves buying too many clothes on eBay. She isn't a crier.

Something deep and familial rises up suddenly through him. He felt it when Frannie fell off a swing onto her back when she was three, and was winded for ten whole seconds, the longest of Joe's life. When she choked on a sweet and Joe thumped her hard between her shoulder blades and she coughed it right up. The first time Frannie went out as a teenager and Joe waited up for her,

although even their mother had gone to bed. He still remembers it now: the ticking of the grandfather clock in their hallway, the hum of the fridge. And the relief as Frannie's key turned in the lock.

And, of course, it reminds him of Rosie.

"I hit him—I hit him."

"I can't—*how?*?" he says.

Joe kneels down next to the body. Cathy joins him, but she's just looking, silently. He wishes he had her cool head. He and Cathy recently operated together on a greyhound and she spent at least a minute, after they'd opened him up, just looking. Not rushing. Just gathering information, in that way that Cathy does.

"Frannie," he says, the word exploding out of him like a cough.

"I hit him on his side," she says, gesturing. "It was my fault. It was my fault. It's the man from the market. If we try to stem the bleeding, we . . . we just need to stop the bleeding, then he'll be okay, he'll be okay," she begs them.

Joe glances sharply at Cathy.

"Hold your T-shirt to the wound," Cathy says. "Tight as you can." Her face is inscrutable.

She moves toward the body. Her long hair is piled on the top of her head. She is a less beautiful version of Frannie. Thicker set. Features slightly distorted somehow, or perhaps they only look so compared to Frannie's. Joe feels guilty every time he thinks it, but it's true.

Cathy peers at the body. "That's a glancing wound," she says. "He's bleeding a lot for something like that." She reaches to take his pulse.

"He'll be okay, won't he?" Frannie says.

"How fast were you going?" Joe asks. He thinks he's going to be sick. Sweat has broken out across his forehead and his stomach is rolling over and over, like a rough ocean. His sister has hit somebody and there's blood everywhere. And now—now it is his problem too. He's got to help her.

“Barely,” Frannie says, but Joe’s forgotten what he asked. God, he wants a cigarette, for the first time in months. An old vice of his, he’s mostly quit, save for vacations, treats, and times of stress, which amounts to, well—almost all of the time, actually.

“Have you called an ambulance?” Cathy says to Frannie, kneeling over the body.

“Has he got a pulse?” Frannie asks. “It will be fine, won’t it?”

“How have you not taken a pulse?” Joe says. He leans over, his hands on his thighs, breathing heavily. Stomach acid sloshes up his esophagus. Get it together, he tells himself. “Where’s the ambulance?”

“There isn’t one, okay?” Frannie shouts. “I haven’t called one.”

“Why?” Cathy says. She draws the word out in shock.

“I . . . I called you two, instead.”

“We’re not doctors.” Joe raises his head as he says it. “We’re not fucking doctors, Fran,” he almost whispers, turning his head to the side and looking into the distance.

“We don’t have anything,” Cathy says. “Adrenaline, bags of blood . . . look—you need to—”

Frannie holds up a hand. “Please just help,” she says. “If we save him—if he’s fine—then . . .”

Cathy starts CPR, though she must surely know it to be pointless, and Joe joins in. He takes the heart while she straightens the head, the way they have with animals before. The body is cool beneath his fingertips. He darts a look at Cathy, who doesn’t meet his gaze. He stares back down at it in the gloom. A dead man.

He pumps at the man’s chest, his fingers just a few inches from this stranger’s heart.

Cathy checks and opens the man’s airway, a quick finger swabbing around inside his mouth.

“How did you hit him?” Joe puffs.

“Turn the car engine off,” Cathy says to Joe. “I can’t hear myself think.”

It takes Joe two attempts. The world goes dark, pierced by a single upward beam from Cathy's phone. Cathy puts her ear to the man's mouth in the silence. "How long has he been here?" she asks Frannie.

"He was right in my path, I just turned without thinking—"

"How long ago?"

"Half an hour."

A beat of silence.

"What? What've you been doing? In all that time?" Cathy says.

"Half a fucking hour!" Joe shouts, walking over to them and going back to the chest compressions.

Cathy puts her mouth over the man's. She spits, licks her lips, then resumes.

She takes off her own T-shirt. "Use this one to stem the bleeding," she says to Frannie. She passes her the T-shirt. "Yours is saturated."

He's not the right temperature, Joe thinks, as his hands pump at the man's chest. The Verona night air is warm, at least twenty degrees, and the skin against his hands is moist from it. But the man isn't hot. He is slightly cooler than he should be, like a doll.

Frannie reaches for the man's wrist with the other hand. "I can feel a flickering," she says hopefully, and Joe grabs his other arm.

"It's your own pulse," he says, after a few seconds. "In your fingertip. Because you're frightened. I'm sorry. There's no pulse."

"Keep going, then," Frannie says hysterically.

"I *am*."

Joe is staring at the body as he pumps away. Even if he gets the heart going again, it would be useless. He will be brain-dead. Half an hour.

It's futile.

He sits back on his heels, looking at Frannie. All three siblings' hands are covered in blood. The man's body is stamped with their red fingerprints.

Cathy breathes into the man's mouth, then listens again. After two more breaths, she must come to the same conclusion as Joe, because she stops too. "I'm sorry," she says. "I'm so sorry."

"No, no," Frannie says. She sits cross-legged, just as she did when they were children, her head in her hands, one still holding the wrist of the body to her face like a comforter. Frannie, the baby of the family. "No, please, Cathy—Joe. Please keep going," she says.

"He's cold," Cathy says quietly. "He's lost a lot of blood. His heart isn't responding."

Frannie is shaking and shaking her head, over and over. "No," she starts saying. "No—don't say it, Cathy, keep going, keep going."

"He's dead," Cathy says. She looks to Joe for confirmation.

"I'm so sorry, Fran," he says. He reaches for her, but she doesn't respond, her head still in her hands.

"I was on the wrong side of the road," Frannie says. "I forgot. I forgot they drive on the right here." She drops her head toward the body like a condemned woman. Joe stares at her, aghast. Cathy closes her eyes. "I'll go to prison," Frannie says in a voice so quiet Joe has to strain to hear her.

He looks at Frannie. Then at the body.

He knows the man is dead. But what he hadn't quite pieced together is that this means his sister is a killer.

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