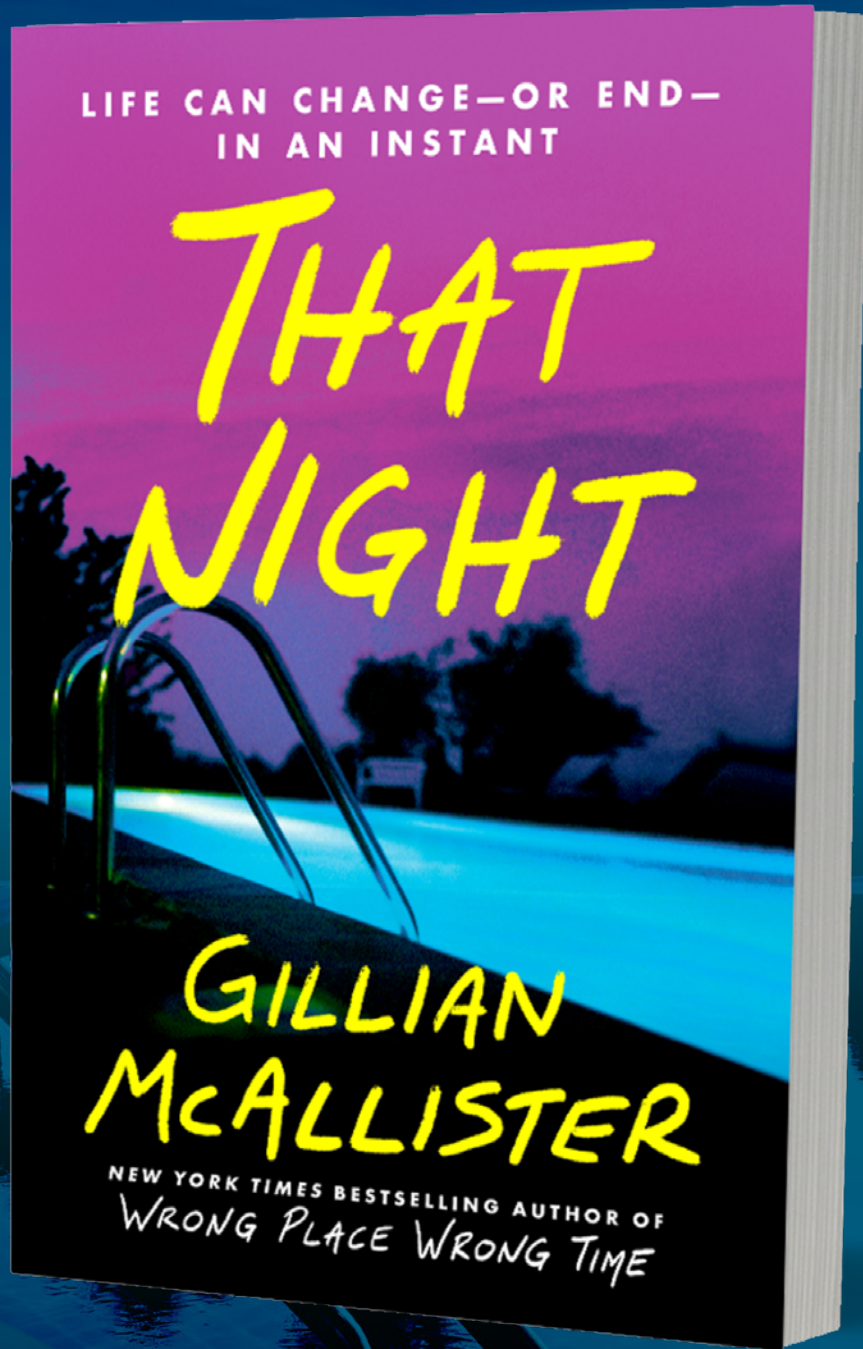


## THAT NIGHT BOOK CLUB GUIDE



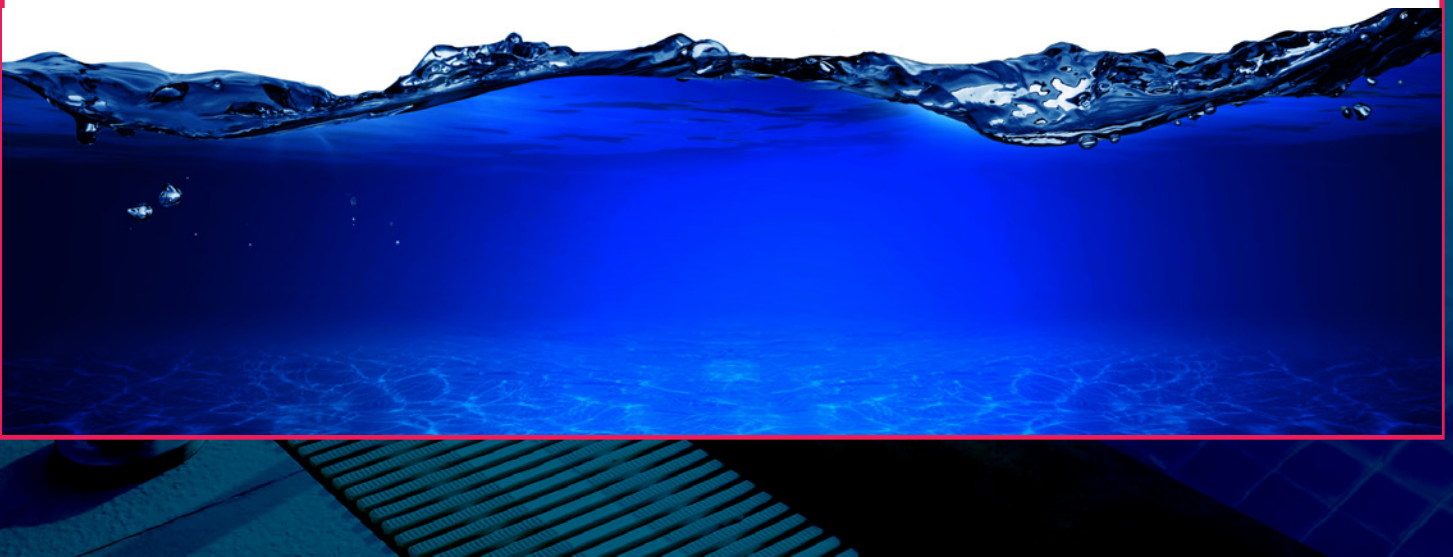
**"Gillian McAllister just keeps getting better and better."**

**—CLARE MACKINTOSH**

# THAT NIGHT

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. The story explores the tension between family loyalty and moral responsibility. How do Joe, Cathy, and Frannie navigate this conflict differently, and what does it reveal about their values?
2. Did you find a certain character more relatable out of Joe, Cathy, and Frannie? Whose actions would have aligned most with your own, if you were in their shoes?
3. How did gender roles and expectations influence the siblings' interactions and decisions?
4. What did you think about the sibling relationships presented by the novel? Did they remind you of your own family relationships? Were there aspects of the relationships here that you found more relatable than others?
5. What does the story suggest about the burden of shared secrets? How does it bring people together—and tear them apart?
6. What role does the setting of their Italian vacation—as compared to when they're back in the UK—play in shaping the story's atmosphere and themes?
7. What do you think happens after the novel concludes? How do you think the events of the story will continue to affect the characters' relationships?
8. How does the story challenge traditional notions of justice? In what ways is justice served (and in what ways is it not)?
9. Which twist surprised you the most?
10. Was there a moment where a character's actions became unforgivable to you?



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# 1

It was just after eight at night, and I was finally alone in the bookshop where I worked. Or so I thought.

I was supposed to be tidying the children's fiction section, but I was actually measuring myself against a giraffe height chart to combat a thought that had been following me around all day: I was sure I had always been six feet, but my colleague and friend Jacha had said earlier, "What're you, about five eight?"

On the chart, I was coming in at five ten, a fact I found strangely humiliating. Either I was shrinking, aged thirty-three, or had always been wrong.

But that's when I sensed it. A feeling that I was not, actually, alone. It pulled me away from the sort of behaviours you get embroiled in when you work mostly by yourself (or with other bookworms who tend also to not behave completely normally). I turned in a slow circle. The shop was silent and looked as it usually did: tired green carpets, clutter by the tills. It smelled of hoovering and the dry chalk scent new books have when they first come in.

I couldn't account for why I felt it, only that I did.

Out front were mullioned windows and, beyond those, the mist that had been clinging to the buildings and pollarded trees of London all autumn, the world near-permanently disappeared from the shoulders up, tops of buildings absent. The only other thing I could see was my own (stumpy) reflection, framed perfectly in one of the panes.

No, it was all fine. It was time to go home, was all, to stop imagining supernatural novels come to life. I got the keys and my rucksack from the back. In the shared courtyard behind the staff room, a gust caught, scattering some dried and crispy leaves into an elegant

swirl like a cat turning in circles before settling. That space actually had its own address, grandly called itself Piazza One, but really was a square of concrete at the back of my shop (which was not my shop at all, but felt like it was). It was shared with a café that sold only instant tea and coffee and a hairdresser's containing two bald smoking barbers who sat outside a lot and discussed Olaplex hair oil.

I headed to the front and opened the door. Outside was Dickensian: the streets cobbled, the lamps ornate. The air was close to frozen, and the mist held the autumnal scent of a lifelong smoker's house.

That's when I heard it—they—footsteps. The careful, crunching setting down of boots on uneven ground.

The mist was too thick to make anything out. My car was only ten feet away—taking advantage of the on-street parking for businesses—but I couldn't really see it. I found myself shivering, part cold, part something else. Scared.

"Alright, mate," a voice said right by me. A flash of adrenaline rippled in my stomach like a stone dropped in water. I turned, phone and keys in hand. The stranger who was about to insert himself into my life was huge (definitely over six feet on the giraffe chart), reasonably old, and wearing a dark blue gilet, his hands in its front pockets. His weight was rocked back in the way some men did when they wanted to look even bigger. "Have you got a second?" His accent—cut glass, PPE at Oxbridge—didn't match his appearance, his big neck, his grey sideburns. He was late-fifties, maybe even sixty. Crooked teeth. Grey beard. Wise eyes.

"What for?"

And then he stepped closer to me. "Can I borrow your phone?" he asked. "Mine's out of charge, I owe my wife a text."

I hesitated. Sophie would immediately tell this guy to get lost. "This is London!" she'd say to me. "Don't be stupid."

"Ah, sorry, I'm er . . . late myself," I said to him.



This guy looked incongruous outside a bookshop. He was the sort of man you'd find at a football match, no, *rugby* actually, drinking Guinness, nothing like the lanky and somewhat unkempt booksellers I worked with.

"Please, mate, there's no one else around." He brought a blank phone out of his pocket, pressed the side button to show me it was dead.

"No, I . . ." I said.

He took a step back. "Sorry, sorry, I wouldn't ask if I wasn't desperate."

"I know—it's just . . ." I gestured uselessly to inner London, saying something without actually saying it.

"No, it's okay, I'll ask someone else." Two steps away, then he stopped. "Unless . . ." he threw these words over his shoulder. "Could you text her, if I gave you the number? Please, we've got our grandkid with us, mate. Need to let her know where I am, I'm missing bedtime."

On his left hand was a wedding ring, present and correct. How dangerous could a granddad be? Alright: I could send a simple text for him. "Okay," I relented. "Number?"

Just at that moment, a message came in from Sophie. I'll be at the one passing through in ten mins, she'd sent, eighth carriage down. Catch me if you can! We found romanticism in trying to get on the same Tube. Even when we timed it, it always felt like the most fortuitous, dumb luck that we had landed on the same carriage, or maybe that was just being in love.

I've got the car!! I replied to her, typing quickly.

That is insanely lazy and I admire it, came right back.

I smiled the private smile of a lover, then brought up a new message. The man took a step towards me and, suddenly, he was right by my shoulder. "Zero seven . . ." he started, but that was as far as he got before everything changed.

Another man emerged from nowhere, and then, before I had

processed any of it, they had me. The phone was batted out of my hand, my keys, too, metal landing on pavement ringing out like a breaking window.

And the first guy was using the keys to open my car, the amber lights two orange sunsets in the mist, and then the other man— younger, taller, and leaner—had the trunk open, and one had his arms around my body, the other around my legs, and then I was in. The whole thing took five seconds, from writing 07 to being flat on my back in the trunk of my own car.

There was never anything I could have done. Their strength was almost balletic. They knew to pull my upper arms close to my body. They knew how to tip me into a trunk, and how to get it closed before I could sit up.

While my wife got on a Tube to meet me at our house where I wouldn't show up, I was captive, among paperbacks and a coat I hadn't seen since the spring. Then they shut me in, and things went completely black, and, absurdly, I was thinking only that I wished I hadn't had McDonald's (Egg McMuffin) that morning and left the gross wrapper in the front.

Another five seconds, and then these men, these strangers, were driving.

"WHAT?" I SAID, though it was more of a scream. "What the fuck?"

My spine was bent awkwardly, no space to turn. I had no phone. All I had were racing thoughts about kicking out tail lights and stupid viral threads I'd seen on how to escape car boots by using some hidden unlocking device. But where was that? I tried to sit up, but there wasn't space. I was a turtle on my back, an idiot who trusted that a stranger was who he said he was.

The boot was completely impenetrable. No parcel shelf, nothing. I felt in the dark with both hands, flailing like a caught fish on a hook, my body bucking in fear. I closed my eyes so the air felt less confrontingly black. What was I supposed to do?

I slotted a foot into a small gap where I thought the taillight might be (but who knew, really? Not me) and began to kick. Absolutely nothing happened at all. I found the other one with my hand and, there in the murkiness, began to punch so hard my hand was throbbing within seconds.

Nobody told me to stop. I couldn't hear them talking at all. It was like being in an aeroplane, a confined space close and low to the rumble of the engine.

These things did not happen to me. Kidnappings. Being held in boots of cars! I almost laughed, there in the dark, maniacal and bizarre, like something from the masculine novels I sometimes sold men who pretended that *Catch 22* was their favorite novel.

What was I supposed to be thinking—something profound, something about survival? But I wasn't. Instead, I was thinking only: Who were they? What did they want? Why didn't they just steal the car, if it was that?

I opened my eyes. Still complete darkness. I pushed upwards, but nothing happened, and all it did was make me think of coffin lids and begin to panic again.

"Who are you?" I screamed, bashing at the sides of the car so hard I must have wounded myself. Nobody answered. Adrenaline masked the pain, but one of my knuckles was wet.

The car was being driven carefully, a fact I actually found sinister. These careful organised criminals knew not to trigger speeding cameras and police attention. Detached, I wondered where it would be that they eventually killed me.

No. Don't be pessimistic. Think. Were they talking to each other? Could I hear anything? Was there anything distinctive coming up in London that I could pinpoint, to know where I was going?

But the world was silent around me in my little black box that absolutely nobody knew I was inside. Sophie was on the Northern Line, expecting me at home. How long would she give it before



she called the police? Hours, surely. Nobody would have seen anything outside a postage-stamp bookshop in the mist; I had disappeared completely.

The roads were indistinct. Pauses, left-turns, right-turns, perhaps a roundabout. One set of sirens, so distant I might've imagined them. I thought suddenly of Jacha. He was a proper man. He'd figure a way out of this easily, some spare tyre trick that would enable him to crawl on the underneath of the car to safety.

Just as I was thinking these stupid, mental, and useless things, we slowed way, way down. The crawl and shiver of near-stationary traffic, of somebody studying buildings to find their way, of the almost-over journey. I held my breath. The hairs along my body stood up. I hadn't been in the car even ten minutes.

Then we stopped completely, the soft tick of an indicator somewhere next to my head. A pause, a lurch to the left, up a small slope, then downhill, slowly, slowly, slowly, and it became clear: we were going underground.

THE ENGINE WAS off. I didn't know if I wanted them to let me out or leave me alone completely. I shut my eyes so tightly it hurt my cheeks. I brought a balled fist to my mouth, about to cry. For a second, I wanted my long-dead mother so viscerally, it hurt my chest.

A pop, a click, and the trunk yawned its mouth open, revealing fluorescent lights, a concrete multi-story car park ceiling, and the two heads of the men, looking in and down at me. They hadn't covered their faces. I would be able to identify them so easily, and it was that thought that made me conclude that they did intend to kill me, these criminals who had transported me across London like I was stolen goods.

"What the fuck is going on?" I shouted. I wasn't bound or gagged, and I sat up and immediately tried to get out.

"Hello, Matt," said the second guy.

They knew my name.

“Come with us,” the older guy said, that politician’s accent. Together, they grabbed either side of me, right around each of my shoulders, and frog-marched me out of the boot. And I was kicking my legs, I was screaming, but it didn’t make any difference. Singularly, they were each stronger than me (I was a man who read Jane Austen all day and ate doughnuts for lunch from a coffee hatch nearby) and together they were unstoppable. They took me away from my car, and I was half-dragged, half-walking over the concrete towards a set of automatic doors. All I gleaned was that it was a completely empty car park. Unidentifiable, no signs for shops or civilization. Just rows and rows of vacant spaces, no clear entrance or exit, no daylight, the only sound the struggle I was trying to create.

“I’m going to call the police the second I can,” I shouted, writhing against them, while they ignored me, implacable them.

The automatic doors opened for us like they were sentient, and across them like a frieze was a pattern: blue and white squares. Something municipal about it, something official. I had only a second to look at it before we moved on. I couldn’t place it . . .

“Let me go,” I screamed, while they did nothing, just walked with me, their grip on my arms vice-like. The first man was big and burly, wiry hair turning white at his temples and merging with his beard. The second was angular and clean-shaven. High cheekbones, slim wrists. He might not have been thirty. My brain uselessly recalled some villains in some Roald Dahl book, *Fantastic Mr. Fox*, was it? One lanky . . .

They were propelling me into a small, abandoned foyer containing a set of bare concrete stairs with a black handrail, and a service lift. I stared at them as they pressed the button to take us up. The lift opened immediately. They didn’t let go, didn’t loosen their grip at all as I trembled beneath their hands, and ineptly wondered if I might wet myself in fear.

It was a sealed box of a lift, unfinished floor, plain walls, a small

metal plate bearing the numbers from one to nine. I stared around with that curious feeling that sets in just before panic. The second guy reached out to press 8, his slim arm across my body, the other free. He found keeping me still so easy.

The lift began to rise upwards, the two men still holding one of my arms each, and then drifted to a slow settle at the top.

On the wall behind the bigger man was a sign affixed. I strained to look at it. *This is a protected site under Section 128 of the Serious Organized Crime and Police Act 2005. Trespass on this site is a criminal offence.*

What? Where was I? What kind of site was protected? Protected from—what?

The doors opened onto a nondescript foyer, translucent glass meeting room doors ahead of us, and right in front of that, everything finally revealed itself.

These men were not criminals: quite the opposite.

A huge fuck-off sign on the wall, crest and everything, said:

MI5 | SECURITY SERVICES | THAMES HOUSE

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