

WE NEVER REMEMBER THE DEAD GIRLS.
WE NEVER FORGET THE KILLERS.

DON'T FORGET THE GIRL

"Absolutely phenomenal!"

—JULIE CLARK,

New York Times bestselling author
of *The Last Flight* and *The Lies I Tell*

A Novel

REBECCA MCKANNA

READING GROUP GUIDE

1. What does Bree think she deserves? Where did that belief start, and how does it shape her actions throughout the book?
2. Describe Chelsea's relationship with her faith. What effect does her priesthood have on her relationships? Does that change throughout the book?
3. True crime filmmakers and podcasters insist that they are trying to honor the victims of the crimes without glamorizing their perpetrators. Why, as in the case of the Ryan Worth show about Jon Allan Blue, does spectacle continuously win over those intentions?
4. What effect do Jay's probing exercises have on Abby during her acting class? How does the rivalry between Abby and Bree prevent them both from seeing Jay clearly?
5. When Abby mentions an acquaintance coming out to test her mother's reaction, her mom replies that it would hurt

her greatly to watch her child deal with the challenges of a homophobic society. How does this reaction shut Abby down? How can our fears for our children send mixed messages about their identities?

6. Bree notes that she and Chelsea mourn different versions of Abby. How do their versions of Abby shape how they want her to be remembered? Why do we feel like different people in different settings?
7. What stops Chelsea from sharing the truth about her relationship with Abby for so many years? What kind of privacy do we owe to the dead?
8. How would you characterize Detective Frye? Do you believe he's "just a detective who was doing his best," as he claims?
9. Chelsea's husband is hurt that she can't "let go" of the case around Abby. How would you feel knowing that your spouse would always be dedicated to something you didn't understand?
10. How should Abby be remembered? What do you think is next for Bree and Chelsea?

A CONVERSATION WITH THE AUTHOR

What was your inspiration for *Don't Forget the Girl*?

Years ago, I was researching Ted Bundy for another writing project, and I wanted to know more about one of his victims, Caryn Campbell. There was little I could find about her other than the basics. She was a twenty-three-year-old nurse. She had a family who loved her. Because of all the books and series about Ted Bundy, he was everywhere, and she was nowhere—just a name in a list of victims. Something about the injustice of that gnawed at me, and I wanted to write a book centered around a victim and her loved ones.

Abby is positioned oddly in the Jon Allan Blue investigation, assumed to be a victim but unconfirmed as such. Why did you decide to add that layer of ambiguity?

To me, it seemed like one more way Abby was overshadowed by Blue. She can't even be counted fully as one of his victims, and yet everything about what happened to her is tied to him. That tension was interesting to me, and it seemed like it would make the true crime spectacle around the case even more painful for her loved ones.

Throughout the book, we see a number of ways that our memorials for the dead strip them of their humanity, particularly by sanctifying them. Do you think we are capable of grieving people in a more complex way?

I hope so, but I also understand the pressure to protect and curate people's reputations in death. Bree criticizes Chelsea for doing this with Abby, but as the author, I found myself doing it, too. When I first started writing Abby, she was totally different from the character in the published novel. She was sweet and meek and never made any mistakes. Because I knew what was going to happen to her character, I was protecting her, sanctifying her. I had to let myself write a messier version of her, despite knowing what lay ahead.

When Abby takes her concerns about Jay to the head of the department, she finds it difficult to express the magnitude of her discomfort, and she's sure that nothing will be done. Without being alarmist, how can we take students' concerns more seriously even when they're vague?

I think a lot of people—especially women and other folks from marginalized groups—have had the experience of knowing something was off without being able to articulate it to someone who hasn't experienced it. I was reading something the other day that said what some people call gossip other people call a survival mechanism. Whisper networks often allow people to identify someone who doesn't feel safe or who is displaying red flag behavior.

Chelsea realizes she's been holding her loved ones to a double standard by hiding the truth of her relationship with Abby

but expecting them to know the depth of her grief. Why is it so hard to be truthful with the people we need support from?

I think it can be really hard to be vulnerable, even with the people we love. We fear judgment or that people's perceptions of us will change. This is especially hard for Chelsea, because she's worked so hard to create a facade that protects her from people really knowing her.

Bree's decision to clear Alayna's name is a sacrifice not often seen in fiction. Why was it important to you to have her own up to her actions?

By the end of the book, Bree realizes she's not going to magically turn into the type of person she wants to be. Instead, she has to start making different choices. Clearing Alayna's name and owning up to her mistakes is a huge step she makes in that direction. It also allows her some closure from Frye. By taking responsibility for what she did with Zach, she's able to do what Frye was never able to do in his relationship with her—take responsibility for abusing his power.

The interstitials from various true crime media contrast starkly with Bree's and Chelsea's personal stories. Even Rachel Morgan's approach, which aims for greater empathy, doesn't always sit right with them. Do you think true crime as a genre is inherently exploitative, or are there ways to approach it more ethically?

Writing this book really changed my relationship with true crime. While I was writing it, whenever I listened to a true crime podcast or watched a true crime series, I started to become

conscious of how the victims were characterized (or in many cases, not characterized). While I think true crime will always have an ethical tension because it's a genre centered on real life suffering, I do think some media is more exploitative than others. I've appreciated shows that give victims or their loved ones a voice or those that focus more on characterizing the victims versus glamorizing the killers.