'Gloriously dark'
Jojo Moyes

'Completely addictive'
Lucy Foley

NONE OF THIS IS TRUE

HER LIES COULD KILL YOU

LISA JEWELL

THE TEN-MILLION-COPY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

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20 Vauxhall Bridge Road
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First published in the UK by Century in 2023

www.penguin.co.uk

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN 9781529195972 (hardback)
ISBN 9781529195989 (trade paperback)

Typeset in 12.5/17.38 pt Times New Roman by Jouve (UK), Milton Keynes
Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.

The authorised representative in the EEA is Penguin Random House Ireland,
Morrison Chambers, 32 Nassau Street, Dublin D02 YH68

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Prologue

Stumbling from the cool of the air-conditioned hotel foyer into the steamy white heat of the night does nothing to sober him up. It makes him feel panicky and claustrophobic. A sweat that feels like pure alcohol blooms quickly on his skin, dampening his spine and the small of his back. How can it be so hot at three in the morning? And where is she? Where is she? He turns to see if the girl is behind him, and sees her wishy-washy, wavy-wavy, in double-vision through the glass windows of the hotel. And then he sees a car indicate to pull over and his heart rate starts to slow. She's here. At last. Thank God. This terrible night is coming to an end. He squints to bring it into focus, to search the driver's seat for the reassuring gleam of her white-blonde hair, but it's not there. The window winds down and he recoils slightly.

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'What?' he says to the dark-haired woman behind the wheel. 'What are you doing here? Where's my wife?'

'It's OK,' says the woman. 'She sent me. She'd had too much to drink. She asked me to bring you home. Come on. In you get.'

He looks behind him for the girl, sees her leaving the hotel and walking quickly away in the opposite direction, her handbag clutched tight against her side.

'I've got water. I've got coffee. Come on. You'll be home in no time.'

The dog on her lap growls at him softly as he slides into the passenger seat.

'I thought you'd left?' he says, fumbling behind himself to find the seatbelt. 'I thought you'd gone away?'

The woman smiles at him as she unscrews the lid from a plastic bottle of water and passes it to him.

'Yes,' she says. 'I had. But she needed me. So. Anyway. Drink that. Drink it all down.'

He puts the bottle to his dry, dry mouth, and gulps it back. Then he closes his eyes and waits to be home.

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PART ONE

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Coming to Netflix in May: Hi! I'm Your Birthday Twin!

Now here's a strange one, coming your way from the people behind *The Monster Next Door* and *The Serial Date Swindler*. It's a podcast within a documentary, a kind of podumentary, if you will. In June 2019, popular podcaster Alix Summer, better known for her *All Woman* series of podcasts about successful women, branched out into a one-off project, which she called *Hi! I'm Your Birthday Twin!*, about a local woman who was born on the same day as her. As the project progressed, Summer started to learn much more about her unassuming neighbour than she could ever have imagined and, within weeks, Summer's life was in shreds and two people were dead. Absolutely spine-chilling stuff, with some shocking glimpses into the darkest corners of humanity: we guarantee you'll be bingeing the whole thing in a day.

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Hi! I'm Your Birthday Twin!
A NETFLIX ORIGINAL SERIES

Screen is dark. Slowly the interior of a recording studio is revealed.

The text on the screen reads:

Recording from Alix Summer's podcast, 20 June 2019

A woman's voice fades in slowly. 'You comfortable there, Josie?'

'Yes. I'm fine.'

'Great. Well. While I'm setting up, why don't you just tell me what you had for breakfast this morning?'

'Oh. Erm . . .'

'Just so I can test the sound quality.'

'Right. OK. Well, I had toast. Two slices of toast. One with jam. One with peanut butter. And a mug of tea. The posh stuff from Marks. In the golden box.'

'With milk?'

'Yes. With milk.'

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There is a short pause.

The camera pans around the empty recording studio, zooming in on details: the lines going up and down on the monitor, an abandoned pair of headphones, an empty coffee cup.

'How is it? Is it OK?'

'Yes. It's perfect. We're all set. I'll count down from three, and then I'll introduce you. OK?'

'Yes. OK.'

'Great. So . . . three . . . two . . . one . . . Hello, and welcome! My name is Alix Summer and here is something a little different . . .'

The audio fades and the shot goes back to darkness.

The opening credits start to roll.

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Saturday, 8 June 2019

Josie can feel her husband's discomfort as they enter the golden glow of the gastropub. She's walked past this place a hundred times. Thought: *Not for us*. Everyone too young. Food on the chalkboard outside she's never heard of. *What is bottarga?* But this year her birthday has fallen on a Saturday and this year she did not say, Oh, a takeaway and a bottle of wine will be fine, when Walter had asked what she wanted to do. This year she thought of the honeyed glow of the Lansdowne, the buzz of chatter, the champagne in ice buckets on outdoor tables on warm summer days, and she thought of the little bit of money her grandmother had left her last month in her will, and she'd looked at herself in the mirror and tried to see herself as the sort of person who celebrated her birthday in a gastropub in Queen's Park and she'd said, 'We should go out for dinner.'

'OK then,' Walter had said. 'Anywhere in mind?'

And she'd said, 'The Lansdowne. You know. On Salusbury Road.'

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He'd simply raised an eyebrow at her and said, 'Your birthday. Your choice.'

He holds the door open for her now and she passes through. They stand marooned for a moment by a sign that says *Please wait here to be seated* and Josie gazes around at the early-evening diners and drinkers, her handbag pinioned against her stomach by her arms.

'Fair,' she says to the young man who appears holding a clipboard. 'Josie. Table booked for seven thirty.'

He smiles from her to Walter and back again and says, 'For two, yes?'

They are led to a nice table in a corner. Walter on a banquette, Josie on a velvet chair. Their menus are handed to them clipped to boards. She'd looked up the menu online earlier, so she'd be able to google stuff if she didn't know what it was, so she already knows what she's having. And they're ordering champagne. She doesn't care what Walter thinks.

Her attention is caught by a noisy entrance at the pub door. A woman walks in clutching a balloon with the words *Birthday Queen* printed on it. Her hair is winter blonde, cut into a shape that makes it move like liquid. She wears wide-legged trousers and a top made of two pieces of black cloth held together with laces at the sides. Her skin is burnished. Her smile is wide. A group soon follows behind her, other similarly aged people; someone is holding a bouquet of flowers; another carries a selection of posh gift bags.

'Alix Summer!' says the woman in a voice that carries. 'Table for fourteen.'

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'Look,' says Walter, nudging her gently. 'Another birthday girl.'

Josie nods distractedly. 'Yes,' she says. 'Looks like it.'

The group follows the waiter to a table just across from Josie's. Josie sees three ice buckets already on the table, each holding two bottles of chilled champagne. They take their seats noisily, shouting about who should sit where and not wanting to sit next to their husbands for God's sake, and the woman called Alix Summer directs them all with that big smile while a tall man with red hair who is probably her husband takes the balloon from her hand and ties it to a chair back. Soon they are all seated, and the first bottles of champagne are popped and poured into fourteen glasses held out by fourteen people with tanned arms and gold bracelets and crisp white shirt sleeves and they all bring their glasses together, those at the furthest ends of the table getting to their feet to reach across the table, and they all say, 'To Alix! Happy birthday!'

Josie fixes the woman in her gaze. 'How old do you reckon she is?' she asks Walter.

'Christ. I dunno. It's hard to tell these days. Early forties, maybe?'

Josie nods. Today is her forty-fifth birthday. She finds it hard to believe. Once she'd been young and she'd thought forty-five would come slow and impossible. She'd thought forty-five would be another world. But it came fast and it's not what she thought it would be. She glances at Walter, at the fading glory of him, and she wonders how different things would be if she hadn't met him.

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She'd been thirteen when they met. He was quite a bit older than her; well, a *lot* older than her, in fact. Everyone was shocked at the time, except her. Married at nineteen. A baby at twenty-two. Another one at twenty-four. A life lived in fast forward and now, apparently, she should peak and crest and then come slowly, contentedly down the other side, but it doesn't feel as if there ever was a peak, rather an abyss formed of trauma that she keeps circling and circling with a knot of dread in the pit of her stomach.

Walter is retired now, his hair has gone and so has a lot of his hearing and his eyesight, and his mid-life peak is somewhere so far back in time and so mired in the white-hot intensity of rearing small children that it's almost impossible to remember what he was like at her age.

She orders feta and sundried tomato flatbread, followed by tuna tagliata ('The word TAGLIATA derives from the verb TAGLIARE, to cut') with mashed cannellini beans, and a bottle of Veuve Clicquot ('Veuve Clicquot's Yellow Label is loved for its rich and toasty flavours') and she grabs Walter's hand and runs her thumb over the age-spotted skin and asks, 'Are you OK?'

'Yes, of course. I'm fine.'

'What do you think of this place, then?'

'It's . . . yeah. It's fine. I like it.'

Josie beams. 'Good,' she says. 'I'm glad.'

She lifts her champagne glass and holds it out towards Walter's. He touches his glass against hers and says, 'Happy birthday.'

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The smile fixes on Josie's face as she watches Alix Summer and her big group of friends, her red-haired husband with his arm draped loosely across the back of her chair, large platters of meats and breads being brought to their table and placed in front of them as if conjured out of thin air, the sound of them, the noise of them, the way they fill every inch of the space with their voices and their arms and their hands and their words. The energy they give off is effervescent, a swirling, intoxicating aurora borealis of grating, glorious entitlement. And there in the middle of it all is Alix Summer with her big smile and her big teeth, her hair that catches the light, her simple gold chain with something hanging from it that skims her gleaming collarbones whenever she moves.

'I wonder if today is her actual birthday too?' she muses.

'Maybe,' says Walter. 'But it's a Saturday, so who knows.'

Josie's hand finds the chain she's worn around her neck since she was thirty; her birthday gift that year from Walter. She thinks maybe she should add a pendant. Something shiny.

At this moment, Walter passes a small gift across the table towards her. 'It's nothing much. I know you said you didn't want anything, but I didn't believe you.' He grins at her and she smiles back. She unpeels the small gift and takes out a bottle of Ted Baker perfume.

'That's lovely,' she says. 'Thank you so much.' She leans across and kisses Walter softly on the cheek.

At the table opposite, Alix Summer is opening gift bags and

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birthday cards and calling out her thanks to her friends and family. She rests a card on the table and Josie sees that it has the number 45 printed on it. She nudges Walter. 'Look,' she says. 'Forty-five. We're birthday twins.'

As the words leave her mouth, Josie feels the gnawing sense of grief that she has experienced for most of her life rush through her. She's never found anything to pin the feeling to before; she never knew what it meant. But now she knows what it means.

It means she's wrong, that everything, literally everything, about her is wrong and that she's running out of time to make herself right.

She sees Alix getting to her feet and heading towards the toilet, jumps to her own feet and says, 'I'm going to the ladies.'

Walter looks up in surprise from his Parma ham and melon but doesn't say anything.

A moment later Josie's and Alix's reflections are side by side in the mirror above the sinks.

'Hi!' says Josie, her voice coming out higher than she'd imagined. 'I'm your birthday twin!'

'Oh!' says Alix, her expression immediately warm and open. 'Is it your birthday today too?'

'Yes. Forty-five today!'

'Oh, wow!' says Alix. 'Me too. Happy birthday!'

'And to you!'

'What time were you born?'

'God,' says Josie. 'No idea.'

'Me neither.'

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'Were you born near here?'

'Yes. St Mary's. You?'

Josie's heart leaps. 'St Mary's too!'

'Wow!' Alix says again. 'This is spooky.'

Alix's fingertips go to the pendant around her neck and Josie sees that it is a golden bumblebee. She is about to say something else about the coincidence of their births when the toilet door opens and one of Alix's friends walks in.

'There you are!' says the friend. She's wearing seventies-style faded jeans with an off-the-shoulder top and huge hoop earrings.

'Zoe! This lady is my birthday twin! This is my big sister, Zoe.'

Josie smiles at Zoe and says, 'Born on the same day, in the same hospital.'

'Wow! That's amazing,' says Zoe.

Then Zoe and Alix turn the conversation away from the Huge Coincidence and immediately Josie sees that it has passed, this strange moment of connection, that it was fleeting and weightless for Alix, but that for some reason it carries import and meaning to Josie, and she wants to grab hold of it and breathe life back into it, but she can't. She has to go back to her husband and her flatbread and let Alix go back to her friends and her party. She issues a quiet 'Bye then' as she turns to leave and Alix beams at her and says, 'Happy birthday, birthday twin!'

'You too!' says Josie.

But Alix doesn't hear her.

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1 a.m.

Alix's head spins. Tequila slammers at midnight. Too much. Nathan is pouring himself a Scotch and the smell of it makes Alix's head spin even faster. The house is quiet. Sometimes, when they have a high-energy babysitter, the children will still be up when they get home, restless and annoyingly awake. Sometimes the TV will be on full blast. But not tonight. The softly spoken, fifty-something babysitter left half an hour ago and the house is tidy, the dishwasher hums, the cat is pawing its way meaningfully across the long sofa towards Alix, already purring before Alix's hand has even found her fur.

'That woman,' she calls out to Nathan, pulling one of the cat's claws out of her trousers. 'The one who kept staring. She came into the toilet. Turns out it's her forty-fifth birthday today too. That's why she was staring.'

'Ha,' says Nathan. 'Birthday twin.'

'And she was born at St Mary's, too. Funny, you know I always thought I was meant to be one of two. I always wondered if my mum had left the other one at the hospital. Maybe it was her?'

Nathan sits heavily next to her and rolls his Scotch around a solitary ice cube, one of the huge cylindrical ones he makes from mineral water. 'Her?' he says, dismissively. 'That is highly unlikely.'

'Why not!'

'Because you're gorgeous and she's . . .'

'What?' Alix feels righteousness build in her chest. She

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loves that Nathan thinks she's pretty, but she also wishes that Nathan could see the beauty in less conventionally attractive women, too. It makes him sound shallow and misogynistic when he denigrates women's appearances. And it makes her feel as if she doesn't really like him. 'I thought she was very pretty. You know, those eyes that are so brown they're almost black. And all that wavy hair. Anyway, it's weird, isn't it? The idea of two people being born in the same place, at the same time.'

'Not really. There were probably another ten babies born that day at St Mary's. Maybe even more.'

'But to meet one of them. On your birthday.'

The cat is curled neatly in her lap now. She runs her fingertips through the ruff of fur around her neck and closes her eyes. The room spins again. She opens her eyes, slides the cat off her lap and runs to the toilet off the hallway, where she is violently sick.

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Sunday, 9 June

Josie awakens suddenly from a shallow puddle of a dream, a dream so close to the surface of her consciousness that she can almost control it. She is in the Lansdowne. Alix Summer is there and calling her to join her at her table. The table is dressed with extravagant bowls of fruit. Her friends leave. The pub is empty. Alix and Josie sit opposite each other, and Alix says, 'I need you.' And then Josie wakes up.

It's the buses.

The buses always wake her up.

They live right next to a bus stop on a busy, dirty road on the cusp of Kilburn and Paddington. The large Victorian villas on this street were built, according to a local history website, in 1876 for wealthy merchants. The road once led to the spa at Kilburn Priory and would have rumbled with the wheels of carriages and clicked with the hooves of horses. Now every grand villa on the road is split into clunkily converted apartments and the stucco exterior walls are stained the colour of old newspaper by the endless traffic that passes so close. And

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the buses. There are three on this route and one passes or stops outside every few minutes. The hiss of the hydraulics as they pull up at the bus stop is so loud that it sometimes sends the dog cowering into the corners.

Josie looks at the time. It is 8.12 a.m. She pulls back the heavy denim curtains and peers into the street. She is a matter of feet from the faces of people sitting on the bus, all oblivious to the woman spying on them from her bedroom window. The dog joins her, and she cups his skull under her hand. 'Morning, Fred.'

She has a mild hangover. Half a bottle of champagne last night and then they finished with a Sambuca. Much more than Josie is used to drinking. She goes to the living room, where Walter sits at the dining table in the window overlooking the street.

'Morning,' he says, throwing her a small smile before turning his gaze back to his computer screen.

'Morning,' she replies, heading to the kitchen area. 'Did you feed the dog?'

'Yes, indeed I did. And I also took him out.'

'Thank you,' she says warmly. Fred is her dog. Walter never wanted a dog, least of all a handbag dog like Fred, who is a Pomchi. She takes full responsibility for him and is grateful to Walter whenever he does anything to help her with him.

She makes herself a round of toast and a mug of tea and curls herself into the small sofa in the corner of the room. When she switches on her phone, she sees that she had been

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googling Alix Summer late last night. That explained why she'd been dreaming about her when she woke up.

Alix Summer, it appears, is a reasonably well-known podcaster and journalist. She has eight thousand followers on Instagram and the same on Twitter. Her bio says: 'Mum, journo, feminist, professional busybody & nosey parker, failed yoga fanatic, Queen's Park dweller/lover.' Then there is a link to her podcast channel, which is called *All Woman*, where she interviews successful women about being successful women. Josie recognises some of the names: an actress, a newsreader, a sportswoman.

She starts listening to one: a woman called Mari le Jeune who runs a global beauty empire. Alix's voice in the introduction is like velvet and Josie can see why she's pursued this particular career path.

'What's that you're listening to?' she hears Walter ask.

'Just a podcast thing. It's that woman, Alix, who I met in the pub last night. My birthday twin. It's what she does,' she replies.

She carries on listening for a while. The woman called Mari is talking about her marriage at a young age to a man who controlled her. 'Everything I did, he controlled, everything I ate, everything I wore. He turned my children against me. He turned my friends against me. My life was so small, like he took it and squeezed every last drop of *me* out of it. And then, in 2005, he died, quite suddenly. And it was like pressing the "reboot" button on my life. I discovered that all through those dark years with my husband, when I thought I was all alone in

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the world, there'd been a cast of people waiting in the background for me to come back to them, they'd been there all along. They picked me up and they took me with them.'

Then Alix's voice is back. 'And if your husband – and I hope this doesn't sound like a harsh or unfeeling thing to say – but if he hadn't passed away at such a young age, what do you think might have been your path? Do you think you might have found your way to where you are now? Do you think in any way that your success, everything you've achieved, that there was maybe some kind of destiny at play? Or do you think that it was only the tragic passing of your husband that allowed you to follow this path?'

'That's such a good question and, actually, I think about it all the time. I was thirty-six when my husband passed away. At the time of my husband's prognosis, I was nowhere near strong enough to leave, I'd been subconsciously waiting until the children were older. But I'd already spent so many years dreaming about the things I would do when I did leave that I had the blueprint for my life without him all drawn up, even if I didn't know how I would ever get away. So it's possible, yes, that I could have followed this path without losing him to cancer. But it just happened sooner, I suppose. Which gave me longer to really build the company, to know it, nurture it, grow with it. It would have been different if I'd waited. And as awful as it sounds, death is a clean break. There are no grey areas. No ambiguity. It's like a blank canvas in a way. And that proved very helpful to me in terms of negotiating the endless possibilities that opened up to me during

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those first few years. I would not be where I am at this very moment had he lived.'

Josie presses pause. Her breath has caught slightly; she feels almost winded. *Death is a clean break*. She glances across the room at Walter, to see if he's noticed, but he is oblivious. She presses play and listens to the rest of the podcast. The woman called Mari now owns three properties around the world, employs all four of her children in her family business and is the founder of the biggest anti-domestic-violence charity in the UK. At the end of the podcast Josie sits for a moment and lets all she has heard about this woman's extraordinary life percolate through her. Then she goes back to the Google results and scrolls through Alix's Instagram feed for a while. She sees, as she'd known she would, a large kitchen with an island, red-headed children on windswept beaches, views from London skyscrapers, cocktails and cats and rose-gold holidays. Alix's children look young, probably no older than ten, and Josie wonders what Alix was doing for all those years before; what do you do when you're thirty years old if you're not raising children? How do you spend your time?

She pauses at a photograph of Alix and her husband. He is tall, even compared to Alix, who is taller than most, and his thatch of thick red hair looks much redder under the effect of some kind of filter than it looks in real life. The caption says: 'Fifteen years today since you came into my life. It hasn't always been easy, but it's always been you and me', followed by a string of love-heart emojis.

Josie has social media accounts, but she doesn't post on

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them. The thought of slapping a photograph of her and Walter on to the internet for people to gawp at and to judge makes her feel queasy. But she's happy for others to do so. She's a consummate lurker. She never posts, she never comments, she never likes. She just looks.

Sunday dawns hot and sticky. Nathan is not beside her in their bed and Alix tries to pull the fragments of the night before into some semblance of a bigger picture. The pub, the champagne, the tequila, the walk home around the park, talking to the ducks in the petting zoo through the fence, *wack wack*, Nathan pouring Scotch, the cat curled on her lap, the smell of the scented reed diffuser in the downstairs toilet mixed with the smell of her vomit, peering into the kids' rooms, eyelashes touching cheeks, nightlights, pyjamas, Nathan's face in the mirror next to hers, his mouth against her neck, hands on her hips, wanting sex, NO ARE YOU ACTUALLY MAD, then bed. But the pillow on Nathan's side of the bed has not been touched. Did they have a row? Where is he sleeping?

She gingerly climbs off the bed and peers into the en suite. He is not there. She takes the stairs down to the hallway and hears the sound of her children. The television is on in the kitchen, and Eliza is lying on the sofa in front of it with the cat lying on her chest. Leon is on the laptop. Breakfast detritus is scattered across the long cream kitchen counter.

'Where's Dad?'

Eliza glances up. She shrugs.

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'Leon. Where's Dad?'

He removes his headphones and squints at her. 'What?'

'Where's Dad?'

'I dunno.'

Alix wanders into the garden. The flagstones on the back terrace are already warm underfoot. Nathan is not in the shed; nor is he in the studio. She pulls her phone out of her pyjama pocket and calls him. It rings out.

'Did you see him earlier?' she asks Eliza as she walks back into the kitchen.

'Nope. Mum?'

'Yes.'

'Can we go to the bookshop today?'

'Yes. Of course. Of course we will.'

Alix makes coffee and drinks water and eats toast. She knows what's happened and she knows what to expect. It hasn't happened for a few months, but she remembers the shape of it, the awful, grinding nightmare of it. The pleasure of her birthday night lies already in tatters in her memory.

As she sits with her second coffee, she remembers something from the night before.

The woman in the toilets who shared her birthday. What did she say her name was? Or maybe she didn't.

She wonders what the woman is doing this morning. She wonders if her husband has disappeared silently in the night, leaving her to wake alone. No, she thinks, no, of course he hasn't. That's not what other husbands do. Only hers.

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He reappears at 4 p.m. He is wearing the same clothes he was wearing the night before. He brushes past her in the kitchen to get to the fridge, from where he pulls out a Diet Coke and drinks it thirstily.

Alix eyes him, waits for him to talk.

'You were out cold,' he says. 'I was still . . . buzzing. I just needed to . . .'

'Drink some more?'

'Yes! Well, no. I mean, I could drink here. But I just wanted to be, you know, *out*.'

Alix closes her eyes and breathes in hard. 'We were out all night. All night, from six until midnight. We saw all our friends. We drank for six solid hours. We had fun. We came home. You had whisky. And then you wanted more?'

'Yeah. I guess. I mean . . . I was very drunk. I wasn't thinking straight. I just followed my urges.'

'Where did you go?'

'Into Soho. Giovanni and Rob were there. Just had a few more drinks with them.'

'Until four in the afternoon?'

'I took a room in a hotel.'

Alix growls gently under her breath. 'You paid to sleep in a hotel rather than come home?'

'I wasn't really capable. It just seemed the best option at the time.'

He looks appalling. She tries to imagine him stumbling around Soho in the middle of the night, tipping drink after drink down his throat. She tries to imagine what he must have

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looked like reeling into a hotel at four in the morning, his bright red hair awry, breathing the putrid breath of a long night of alcohol and rich foods into the receptionist's face, before collapsing into a hotel bed and snoring violently in an empty room.

'Didn't they kick you out at midday?'

He rubs at the salt-and-pepper stubble on his chin and grimaces slightly. 'Yeah,' he says. 'Apparently, they made quite a few attempts to get me up. They, erm, they had to let themselves in in the end. Just to check I wasn't, you know, dead.'

He smirks as he says this, and Alix realises that twenty years ago this would have been something they would have joked about. It would have been funny, somehow, a grown man drinking for nearly twelve hours, going AWOL in Soho, forcing hotel staff to enter his room because they thought he might be dead, finding him, no doubt, spread-eagled and half-naked on the bed, oblivious, hungover, revolting.

She would have laughed.

But not any more.

Not now she's forty-five.

Not now.

Now she's simply disgusted.

Josie listens to nearly thirty episodes of Alix's podcast over the following week. She listens to stories of women bouncing back from a hundred different kinds of crud: from illness, from bad men, from poverty, from war, from mental health issues and from tragedy. They lose children, body parts, autonomy;

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they are beaten, they are humiliated, they are downtrodden. And then they rise up, each and every one of them, they rise up and find goals they didn't know they had. The podcast series has won awards and Josie can see why. Not only are the women's stories inspiring, but Alix's approach is so empathetic, so intelligent, so human that she would make an interview with anyone she chose to talk to sound moving. Josie tries to uncover more about Alix from the internet, but there's very little to go on. She has rarely been interviewed, and when she is, she gives little away. Josie assumes her to be a self-made woman, in control of her life. She assumes she has a similar tale to tell as the women whom she interviews, and Josie entertains fantasies about crossing paths with Alix again, swapping their own stories, Alix maybe mentoring Josie somehow, showing her how to be the person she thinks she was always meant to be.

Then one afternoon there is a new photo on Alix's Instagram feed. It's a birthday party for one of the children. There are balloons with the number eleven on them and the daughter with the red hair is dressed as a punk fairy and the father stands behind her watching proudly as she purses her lips to blow out the candles on a huge pink cake and other people stand behind, their hands cupped halfway to applause, faces set in smiles. And then Josie zooms in to the background at the sight of something familiar. A school photograph on the sideboard behind the group, the two children in crested polo shirts, pale blue with a dark blue logo. And she realises that Alix Summer's children go to the same school that Roxy and

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Erin went to when they were small and suddenly she feels it again, that strange wire of connection, that sense that there is something bringing her and Alix Summer together, something in the universe. She pictures Alix Summer in the same playground that she had spent so many years of her life standing in, going into the same overheated office to pay for school trips and dinner money, sitting squashed on the same benches at the back of the same small hall to watch assemblies and nativities, hanging out the same navy and sky-blue uniforms to dry.

Born on the same day.

In the same hospital.

Celebrated their forty-fifth birthdays in the same pub, at the same time.

And now this.

It means something, she's sure it does.

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Monday, 17 June

Alix watches her husband in the kitchen, his hair still wet from the shower, the back of his shirt stuck to his skin – she's never understood why he doesn't dry himself properly before he gets dressed – drinking coffee from his favourite mug and nagging the children to move faster, eat up, get their shoes on. He's acting as if it's a normal Monday, but it is not a normal Monday. It is the Monday after his second bender in a row. The Monday after he failed to come home yet again and appeared once more, bedraggled and pitiful, on a Sunday afternoon, stinking of the night before. It is a Monday when Alix has started seriously wondering about the future of their marriage again. If she keeps wondering about the future of their marriage in this way, this could well be the Monday that marks the beginning of the end. Nathan has always been a walking list of pros and cons, from the very first time she met him. She'd even written a list after their third date to help her decide whether or not she should carry on seeing him. His behaviour these last two weekends has suddenly added

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a huge weight to the cons column, which is bad because the pros have always been quite slight. Being a good dancer, for example. Great on a second date, but not so important fifteen years down the road with two children, two careers and a future to worry about.

At eight fifteen Nathan leaves. He calls out his goodbyes from the hallway. It's been a long time since they habitually kissed when leaving the house. Ten minutes after that, Alix walks the children to school. Leon is grumpy. Eliza is hyper.

Alix walks between them, looking at her phone, checking her emails, looking at websites for the puppy she has promised they will get some time this year, an Australian Shepherd that should, ideally, have mismatched eyes and hence is proving impossible to find, about which Alix is secretly relieved. She hasn't got space in her head right now for a puppy, as much as she misses having a dog in the house.

She's just finished recording the thirtieth episode of *All Woman*; it's launching next week and then after that she wants to try something new. The theme has run its course and she's ready for a new challenge, but she's still waiting for inspiration to strike and her diary is empty and an empty diary is as stressful as a full diary when it comes to a career.

The children are gone a few minutes later, sucked into the maelstrom of the playground, and Alix turns to head home. After a cloudy morning, the sun suddenly breaks through and dazzles her. She delves into her handbag, looking for her sunglasses, and then, when she's found them, she looks up and sees a woman standing very close to her. The woman is

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immediately familiar. She thinks for a brief moment that she must be a mother from the school and then it hits her.

'Oh,' she says, folding down the arms of her glasses. 'Hello! You're the woman from the pub. My birthday twin!'

The woman looks surprised, almost theatrically so. 'Oh, hello!' she parrots. 'I thought you looked familiar. Wow!'

'Are you – do you have children here?' Alix gestures at the school.

'No! Well, at least, not any more. They did come here but left a long time ago. They're twenty-one and twenty-three.'

'Oh. Proper grown-ups!'

'Yes, they certainly are.'

'Boys? Girls?'

'Two girls. Roxy and Erin.'

'Do they still live at home?'

'Erin does, the oldest. She's a bit of a recluse, I suppose you might call her. And Roxy – well, she left home when she was quite young. Sixteen.'

'Sixteen. Wow! That is young. I'm Alix, by the way.' She offers her her hand to shake.

'Josie,' the woman replies.

'Nice to meet you, Josie. And who's this?' she asks, noticing a tiny caramel-and-cream-coloured dog on a lead at Josie's feet.

'This is Fred.'

'Oh, he's adorable! What is he?'

'He's a Pomchi. Or at least, that's what they told me. But I'm not so sure now he's full-grown. I think he might be more

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of a mix than that. I do wonder about the place we got him from – I'm not entirely sure they were kosher, you know, now I think back on it. I keep meaning to get one of those DNA tests. But then, you know, I just look at him and I think, whatever.'

'Yes,' Alix agrees. 'He's gorgeous whatever he is. I love dogs.'

'Do you have one?'

'No. Not at the moment. We lost our girl three years ago and I haven't quite been able to get my head around replacing her. But I have been looking. The kids, you know, they're at that age where I think having a dog will be really good for them: coming into adolescence, the teenage years. Teeny was my dog, the dog I had before I had kids. This one would be for them. But we'll see.'

She reaches down to pet the dog, but it backs away from her.

'Sorry,' says Josie, overly apologetically.

'Oh,' says Alix, 'he's shy. That's fair enough.'

Alix glances at Josie and sees that she is staring at her meaningfully. It makes her feel uncomfortable for a moment but then Josie's face breaks into a small smile and Alix sees that she is, as she'd thought on the night they met in the pub, quietly, secretly pretty: neat teeth, rose-petal lips, a small Roman nose that gives her face something extra. Her hair is hazel brown and wavy, parted to the side and tied back. She's wearing a floral-print T-shirt with a blue denim skirt and has a handbag also made of blue denim. Alix notices that the dog's collar and lead are blue denim too and senses a theme. Some people have that, she ponders, a repeat motif, some defining aesthetic tic that somehow makes them feel protected.

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Her friend's mother only bought things that were purple, she recalls. Everything. Purple. Even her fridge.

'Anyway,' Alix says, unfolding her sunglasses and putting them on. 'I'd better get on. Nice to see you again.'

She turns to leave, but then Josie says, 'There's something I'd like to talk to you about actually. If you've got a minute. Nothing important. Just . . . to do with us being birthday twins. That's all.' She smiles apologetically and Alix smiles back.

'Oh,' she replies. 'Now?'

'Yes. If you have a minute?'

'I'm so sorry, I can't really now. But maybe another time.'

'Tomorrow?'

'No, not tomorrow.'

'Wednesday?'

'Oh God, Josie, I'm sorry, I really am. But I'm busy pretty much the rest of the week, to be honest.'

She starts to leave again but Josie places a hand gently on her arm. 'Please,' she says. 'It would really mean a lot to me.'

There is a sheen of tears across Josie's eyes; she sounds desperate somehow, and Alix feels a chill pass through her. But she sighs softly and says, 'I have a spare hour tomorrow afternoon. Maybe we could grab a quick coffee.'

Josie's face drops. 'Oh,' she says. 'I work afternoons.'

Alix feels a sense of relief that maybe she has swerved the commitment. But then Josie says, 'Listen. I work at that alterations place, by Kilburn tube. Why don't you come along tomorrow – we can chat then? It won't take longer than a few minutes, I promise.'

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'What is it that you want to chat about?'

Josie bites her lip, as if considering sharing a secret. 'I'll tell you tomorrow,' she replies. 'And if you've got anything that needs altering, bring it along. I can give you a twenty per cent discount.'

She smiles, just once, and then she walks away.

6 p.m.

Josie works part-time: midday to five-thirty, four days a week. She's worked at Stitch for nearly ten years, ever since it originally opened. It was her first-ever job, at the age of thirty-five. She'd always made clothes for the girls when they were little, and given that she left school at sixteen with virtually no exams and then spent the next ten years looking after her husband and raising children, she didn't have many skills to draw on when she finally decided it was time for her to do something outside the house. She could have worked with children – in a school, maybe. But she's not great with people and this job is not public-facing. She sits behind her sewing machine next to a huge sash window which overlooks the tube tracks and rattles in its frame every time a train goes past. She chats with the other women occasionally, but mainly she listens to Heart FM on her earphones. She spent the whole of today sewing large fake-fur beards on to printed images of a groom's face on twenty stag night T-shirts. They were all off to Riga apparently. But usually it's just hems and waistbands.

Walter is sitting at the dining table in the window when she

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gets home, staring at the laptop. He turns and hits her with a single smile when he hears her. 'Hello,' he says. 'How was work?'

'Work was fine.' She thinks about telling him about the fake-fur beards but decides that, really, it would lose in the telling.

'How was your day?' she replies, scooping the dog into her arms and kissing his head.

'Quiet. Did some research into the Lake District.'

'Oh, that's nice. Find anything good?'

'Not really. Everything seems so expensive. Feels like one big rip-off.'

'Well, remember, I've had my windfall. We could probably stretch it a bit further this year.'

'It's not about whether we can afford it,' he says. 'Don't like feeling ripped off.'

Josie nods and puts the dog back on the floor. Half the reason the dog is not a real Pomchi is that Walter refused to pay the going rate for a real Pomchi and was determined he could get a bargain. She'd just gone along with it.

'What shall we have for dinner?' she says. 'There's loads in the fridge. Some of those readymade meatballs. I could make a pasta?'

'Yeah. That'd be great. Put some chilli in it. I fancy something spicy.'

Josie smiles. 'I'm just going to get changed first,' she says. 'Then I'll start.'

She walks past Erin's room to get to hers. The door is shut as it always is. She can hear the squeak of the gaming chair

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in Erin's room, the expensive one they bought her for her sixteenth birthday that's held together with duct tape these days. Walter puts WD40 on the base every few months, but it still squeaks when she moves. Josie can hear the click of the buttons on the controller, and the muted sound effects leaking from Erin's headphones. She thinks about knocking on Erin's door, saying hi, but she can't face it. She really can't face it. The stench in there. The mess. She'll check in on her tomorrow. Leave her to it for now. She touches the door with her fingertips and keeps walking. She acknowledges the guilt and lets it pass away like a cloud.

But as soon as the guilt about Erin passes, her concern about Roxy turns up; they always come in a pair. She picks up the photo of Erin and Roxy that sits on top of the chest of drawers in her bedroom, taken when they were about three and five. Fat cheeks, long eyelashes, cheeky smiles, colourful clothes.

Who would have guessed? she thinks to herself. Who would ever have guessed?

And then she thinks of Alix Summer's children this morning in their Parkside Primary uniforms: the girl on a snazzy scooter, the boy scuffing his feet against the pavement, their smooth skin, and their hair that she knows without going anywhere near them will smell of clean pillowcases and children's shampoo. Young children don't exude smells. That happens later. The shock of scalpy hair, of acrid armpits, cheesy feet. And that's just the beginning of it. She sighs at the thought of the sweet children she once had and resets the photo on the chest.

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