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Opening Extract from...

THE STORY OF OUR LIVES

Written by **Dawn O'Porter**

Published by **HarperCollins**

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HQ

An imprint of HarperCollinsPublishers Ltd
1 London Bridge Street
London SE1 9GF

This hardback edition 2018

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First published in Great Britain by
HQ, an imprint of HarperCollinsPublishers Ltd 2018

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

ISBN: HB: 978-0-00-820268-2

TPB: 978-0-00-820265-1



MIX
Paper from
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Printed and bound in Great Britain by
CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon, CR0 4YY

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For 'The Girls'

AUGUST 1997

‘One story dominates the news tonight – Diana, Princess of Wales, has died in a car crash in Paris.’

SOUTHWOLD

CHAPTER ONE

Sophie could feel herself starting to sweat as she tried to heave the stone pot to one side. Could it really be this one that the key was under? Surely they'd have put it under one that wasn't so bloody heavy. Instead of lifting it, she decided to try rolling it instead. Sure enough, the pot began to move but the momentum gathered pace more quickly than she had expected and it rolled unstopably towards her foot and straight over her toe. Breathless with pain and almost not daring to look for fear of the damage she might find, she examined her foot.

The toe of her Converse offered very little protection and sagged ominously where her big toe should have been. Gingerly, she pressed with her thumb and winced in pain. She slumped down onto the path, which was still wet from an earlier rain shower, and groaned as her jeans immediately absorbed the moisture. She knew without looking that the damp patch would have spread in a fascinatingly symmetrical fashion across her rear.

Maybe this weekend away wasn't such a good idea after all. The omens weren't great, with the shockwaves over Princess Diana's sudden death still reverberating throughout the country, and although the others had left it to her to organize everything, she knew they would moan about who was sharing with whom

and grumble about the house she had chosen from the listings in the *Evening Standard*.

Sophie looked up at the pretty whitewashed and thatched cottage, feeling a sudden stab of annoyance at its old-fashioned beauty. It was the sort of place retired couples would come for a weekend of birdwatching, rather than a group of twenty-something girls looking for a good time.

‘What the hell are you doing down there?’ The slightly gravelly Midlands accent reached her before its owner appeared at the gate and began to make her way up the path. Wearing tight bootleg jeans and a skinny white sleeveless top that contrasted with her smooth, dark brown skin, Melissa appeared not to have aged a day since they had first met. Her afro hair had been woven into cornrows that fell to her shoulders and apart from a slash of bright red lipstick, her pretty face was make-up free.

Sophie struggled to her feet and embraced her friend.

‘Hi, sweetie. Bit of a mishap while hunting for the key.’ She attempted to discreetly run her hand over her bum. Sure enough, it was soaking.

‘Did you find it?’

Typical of Melissa to be more concerned with getting into the house than whether Sophie was OK. ‘No. My suffering was in vain, sadly.’ As she spoke, Sophie’s eyes scanned the area around the door for other pots.

‘It’ll be under this one!’ Melissa cried, dumping her rucksack onto the path and darting towards a pretty Mediterranean-style pot that wasn’t much bigger than a mug. Sure enough, as Melissa effortlessly lifted it, the key glistened in the sunlight. She bent down with a balletic lunge and scooped it up. ‘See?’ she said, holding the key aloft triumphantly.

Sophie nodded. This tiny incident summed up their relationship perfectly. Sophie was the hard worker; the one who put in all the effort, only for Melissa to sail in at the end and collect the

trophy. Not that she resented Melissa for it. She loved her like a sister. In fact, she loved her more than her own sister, Georgina, with whom she had very little in common, as there was almost a whole decade between them.

‘Come on, what are you waiting for?’ Melissa threw the comment over her shoulder as she used the key to open the front door, which needed a good shove to dislodge it, and disappeared into the cool, dark hallway. ‘Christ, it’s a bit drab, isn’t it?’ she added.

And so it begins, thought Sophie, following her friend into the house, noting that she had to duck slightly as she stepped over the threshold, unlike tiny, perfect Melissa.

*

‘So how are things going with Steve then?’ Melissa’s huge brown eyes danced mischievously as she spoke. They were lying on separate squashy chintz sofas, facing each other, divided by a pine coffee table in the middle.

‘Fine.’ Sophie lifted up her foot and pretended to examine her sore toe. She didn’t want to have this conversation. She knew Melissa thought she and Steve were too young to have been in a ‘boring’ relationship for so long.

Melissa rolled onto her side and Sophie could feel herself starting to redden under Melissa’s suspicious gaze. ‘Fine? Talk about damning with faint praise...?’

Sophie sighed and turned to face Melissa. ‘Well, I’m not sure what else to say. It’s fine. No, it’s more than fine... it’s good. End of story.’

‘Bollocks!’

Sophie smiled, despite herself, at Melissa’s directness. ‘OK. Well, it’s just... oh, I don’t know.’ She tailed off and sat up, lifting her mug of tea from the coffee table and taking a long, soothing sip.

Melissa mirrored her actions and looked over at her in concern.

‘Soph? This isn’t like you. What’s the matter? I thought you and Steve were love’s young dream?’

Sophie shrugged. ‘We were. We are,’ she corrected herself quickly.

‘There’s a “but” coming...’

Sophie gazed at Melissa appraisingly. How to explain what she was feeling when she couldn’t really explain it to herself? ‘But I’m wondering if this is it,’ she said eventually. Hearing the words aloud caused her stomach to lurch. It scared her.

Melissa’s dark eyes narrowed slightly. ‘How’s work going?’

God, she was infuriating! How did Melissa know so much about what she was thinking and feeling? ‘It’s great,’ she replied, her tone of voice at odds with her words.

‘And therein lies the problem!’ Melissa finished her tea with a satisfied slurp and put the mug back on the table, before crossing her legs underneath her and steeping her fingers in the manner of a miniature tribal chief. ‘I’m right, aren’t I?’

Sophie started to nod miserably, then stopped herself. *Was* she right? Had Sophie really become so shallow that her exciting new job as TV news producer was causing her to look at Steve in a different light? Did the other guys she worked with at the TV company make Steve’s role in HR management look a little, well, *dull* by comparison? As the thoughts skittered through her head, she almost cringed with shame.

She thought back to when she and Steve had met, during their first week at university. They were in the same small tutor group and would often study together in the university library or in Sophie’s room whenever Melissa, who was her room-mate, was out. He was funny and clever, and out of all them, seemed the most likely to succeed. Although Steve was tall, blond and good-looking, it never really occurred to Sophie that he could be anything other than a friend.

But gradually, they also started socializing together and before

long, they were seeing each other most days. It was during a drunken end-of-term house party, when she saw him kissing Natalie Evans – the most beautiful girl in their year, who funded her way through university by modelling for John Galliano and often wore a T-shirt emblazoned with ‘Galliano’s Girls’ just in case anyone needed reminding of just how beautiful she was – that Sophie realized with a start that her feelings for him had deepened.

That summer, she invited him to come and stay at her parents’ house on the north coast of Northern Ireland. They spent their days going for long walks along the wide white sandy beaches at Portrush and Portstewart, surfing the huge Atlantic waves at White Rocks, then going out drinking and dancing in the evenings. By the time Steve returned home, they were smitten with each other. They had moved in together the following term, despite everyone’s dire warnings that it was too soon. They had been together ever since.

‘There’s someone else, isn’t there?’ Melissa frowned as she spoke, her expression suddenly serious.

Sophie shook her head but couldn’t actually bring herself to deny the accusation aloud. She never lied to Melissa, partly because she didn’t want to and partly because she knew Melissa would be able to tell if she did.

Melissa pursed her lips, as if weighing up whether to believe her or not. ‘It’s probably just the seven-year itch. It’ll pass.’ Melissa half nodded as she spoke, as if trying to convince herself of the truth of what she was saying.

‘You’re probably right.’ Sophie stood up and walked over to the window, pretending to look out. But all she could see was someone else’s face reflected back at her in the glass. And it wasn’t Steve’s. Her head swirled uncomfortably, as guilt mingled with excitement. She didn’t get that same frisson when she looked at Steve these days.

‘If things ever get a bit difficult, you can always come and stay with me, Soph. Give yourself a break, you know?’

Sophie looked towards Melissa but couldn’t quite meet her eye.

‘Thanks, but things aren’t that bad. In fact, they’re great.’

‘Are you trying to convince me or you?’

A prickle of irritation quivered in Sophie’s chest.

‘Thing is,’ Melissa continued, standing up and stretching, showing off her toned stomach as her T-shirt rode up. ‘You can leave Steve any time you want. But what then? Think about it, Soph.’

‘I’m not thinking of leaving him!’ Sophie protested, Melissa’s words reverberating around her brain, making it feel crowded with noise. ‘I love him. Anyway, I know you think he’s boring.’

Melissa hesitated. ‘No, that’s not true. Maybe I think it’s a bit boring to have been with one person all this time, but I don’t think *he’s* boring. I love him.’ Melissa gave Sophie a hug. ‘And I love you,’ she added, turning abruptly away as if suddenly embarrassed. ‘Which is why I don’t want you to do something you’ll regret.’

Sophie bit her lip and followed Melissa out into the hallway towards the kitchen. She opened her mouth to protest. To tell her she was wrong. But again, the lie dried in her throat. She tried to think what else to say, but before she could get the words out, the doorbell rang.

‘That’ll be the others!’ Relief flooded through Sophie as she ran towards the front door. Through the stained glass in the front door she could see two shadows and felt a sudden shiver of excitement. Emily and Amy had caught the train together and shared a taxi from the nearest station. It had been a while since they had last seen each other and she couldn’t wait for them to be together again as a group.

There was a shriek of delight as she unlatched the heavy door and swung it open, before both girls enveloped her. As she disentangled herself, Sophie stood back to look at them. ‘Oh, isn’t

this just so brilliant!' She could feel tears pricking her eyes as she took in the two beaming faces in front of her.

'Don't you start blubbing or you'll set me off!' Amy reached down to grab her bag, her glossy mane of auburn hair tumbling over her shoulders as she did so. 'Right, who's sleeping where?'

'I'm having the biggest room!' Melissa poked her head around the door of the kitchen. 'Hey, you guys!'

'Liss!' they squealed, tottering towards Melissa and smothering her in hugs, causing her tiny frame to disappear altogether for a few moments.

Sophie looked at each of her friends with a feeling of deep contentment. They might not have spent much time together as a group for years but already she could feel the special bond between them reconnecting. This was going to be the best weekend ever.

CHAPTER TWO

‘I can’t believe you were organized enough to bring all the food and booze!’ Amy lifted her champagne flute for Sophie to refill and smiled. ‘You put the rest of us to shame. If you opened my fridge you’d be lucky to find a pint of milk at the moment.’ It wasn’t true. Her fridge would never be empty but she wanted to show Sophie how grateful she was.

Sophie smiled back at her. ‘Well, you know me and my stomach. I couldn’t risk having nothing to eat. Or worse, nothing to drink.’ She made a joke of it but actually Sophie *was* very organized and unless she’d brought the food and drink this weekend, they would have been left with tap water and cornflakes.

‘You’ll have to let us know how much we owe you. It’s not fair for you to pay for it all.’

Sophie threw Amy a grateful look. ‘Thanks, Amy, I will.’

Amy had lived in the single room the other side of Sophie and Melissa’s double room in their first year at university and the others had quickly cottoned on to the fact that she was the only one with any cooking ability and had exploited it fully. When they all went their separate ways after the first year, Sophie used to say that it was Amy and her prowess in the kitchen that she missed the most.

‘Have a look at what I’ve brought and let me know if there’s

anything you need that I've forgotten,' Sophie said. 'I think there's a small shop in the village.'

Amy nodded. It was automatically assumed that she would do the cooking. She didn't mind. She loved cooking. It was her passion.

Amy could feel Sophie's eyes on her, scrutinizing her face with a faint scowl of suspicion. 'What?' She tried to laugh but it came out as more of a snort.

'You're looking particularly... well,' Sophie began, taking a sip of her Cava and narrowing her eyes meaningfully.

Amy raised her eyebrows. Sophie was a TV news journalist and a nosy one at that. There was no hiding anything from her.

'There's a reason for that, isn't there, Amy?' Emily blurted, nudging Amy hard, causing her Cava to swirl dangerously close to the rim of her flute.

'Hey, careful!' Amy tried to look annoyed but she couldn't extinguish the smile that had spread across her face, or dampen the sudden heat in her cheeks.

'Oooh, I like the sound of this!' Melissa said, as they all leaned slightly towards Amy, waiting to hear what she had to say.

Amy knew that resistance was futile with her oldest friends. They could read her so well. And she didn't want to keep it a secret anyway – she was much too excited. 'Well...' she began, picturing the pinkness that she knew would be spreading from her neck to her cheekbones. 'I've met someone.'

'I knew it! Tell us everything!' Sophie demanded.

Amy beamed, before crossing her long legs underneath her and taking a leisurely sip of her drink, teasing out the moment, as the others held their breath in front of her, their eyes wide.

'His name is Nick—'

'Good name,' Melissa cut in, before being silenced by glares of frustration from the others. 'Sorry. Go on.'

'His name is Nick and I met him through work.'

‘Colleague or client?’

Amy raised her eyebrows. ‘Good to see your journalistic training wasn’t wasted...’

Sophie shrugged. ‘It’s the obvious question.’

Amy smiled. She worked as an events organizer, organizing events for wealthy international clients.

‘To be fair, that’s what I was going to ask!’ Melissa grabbed a handful of crisps and began shovelling them into her mouth one after the other.

Amy paused, looking at each of them in turn, enjoying being the centre of attention for once. ‘Client!’

Another chorus of squeals followed.

‘Is he *very* rich?’ All eyes turned towards Melissa in mock disgust but quickly flicked back to Amy expectantly.

‘Well, it depends what you mean by *very* rich...’ Amy wondered how honest she should be before deciding that they would only find out anyway. ‘Yes! He’s loaded!’

‘But is he a good person?’

‘Oh, Emily! Who cares if he’s a good person?’ Melissa shot Emily an incredulous look.

‘No, Emily’s right.’ Amy raised her hands, as if she was refereeing a boxing match. ‘It *is* important that he’s a nice guy...’ She paused for a second, enjoying the moment. ‘But that’s the best thing of all – he’s awesome!’

An indecipherable sigh swept through the room as each of them digested her news. Amy’s eyes were drawn to Emily, wondering what she might be feeling. Even though she was just twenty-five, she was already a single mum to four-year-old Jack. She had fallen pregnant with him in their last term at university and as far as any of them knew, she had never had anything further to do with Jack’s father.

She couldn’t be sure of this because none of them actually knew for certain the identity of Jack’s father. Emily had always refused

to say who it was and despite years of prodding and cajoling from each of them, either collectively or individually, it had become clear that she was never going to reveal the truth. They all strongly suspected that the father was one of their lecturers but Emily wasn't confirming or denying anything. She just flatly refused to discuss it.

Emily noticed Amy watching her and smiled, her eyebrows raised questioningly. 'Why are you looking at me like that?'

Amy shrugged. 'I was just wondering if you'd met anyone new? It seems such a waste someone as gorgeous as you being single.' They had all thought it over the years but rarely voiced it, as Emily could be prickly. But it was true. She was a beautiful girl and must have had dozens of offers.

Emily shook her head quickly, her dark eyes clouding as her shoulder-length, raven-coloured hair swished from side to side and she lowered her gaze. 'No. I don't have time. There's only one man in my life and that's Jack.'

'Aw, how is the little love? Have you got any recent pictures?' Amy was happy to change the subject.

Immediately, Emily's face transformed. She grabbed her large bag from the hall and rummaged in it for a minute, before pulling out a creased photo. They all cooed as they handed it around. Amy's heart jolted as she looked at it. Jack was absolutely gorgeous. His hair was almost white-blond and long enough to look cool but short enough to stop it looking ridiculous. His full mouth, which could have given him a sulky appearance, was counteracted by the wideness of his smile, revealing perfectly white milk teeth. His eyes were a bright, piercing blue and even at four years old, it was already clear he was going to be tall.

'Oh, Em, he's really beautiful.' Unlike the others, Amy had always yearned for children of her own, something she had told Nick on their second date and when he hadn't run a mile, that's when she had decided he could be the one for her.

Emily flushed with pride and reached out to take the photo from Amy's grasp but she hung on to it. 'He doesn't look like you at all...'

'Well, I'm definitely his mother, if that's what you're suggesting – I've got the stretch marks to prove it!' Emily tried to grab the photo but Amy swiped it out of her reach.

'I'm just trying to think who he reminds me of...' Amy stared hard at the photo. It was one of their old lecturers, she was sure of it. A vague memory of Emily becoming fixated on one of them – Anton, she thought it was – bubbled to the surface, but although she ran through a mental Rolodex of their faces, after four years the images were already too blurred and hazy.

Reluctantly, she handed the photo back to Emily, who looked slightly panicked. For the millionth time, Amy wondered why she didn't trust anyone enough to tell them the truth. Even Emily's parents didn't know the identity of Jack's father and Emily had actually lived with them for the first couple of years after she left university. She had finally moved into a flat of her own but it was still close to her parents' home in south-east London and her mum looked after Jack all the time when Emily was at work.

'Anyway, Sophie,' she said, turning her attention away from Emily. 'Isn't it about time you and Steve had a baby?'

Sophie's eyes bulged in Amy's direction. 'What? Where the hell did that come from? I'm only twenty-five!'

Amy shrugged. 'So am I but if I was in a settled relationship like you, I'd do it while I was still young. Get it out of the way like Emily did.'

Emily spluttered on her Cava. 'Christ! I don't think anyone should follow my example... I love Jack to distraction but it's been bloody hard from day one. Given the choice I would definitely wait until I had established my career and was a lot more secure financially.'

'But you haven't got a partner like Sophie ha—' Amy tailed

off in embarrassment as she realized too late how tactless her words sounded.

‘No. I don’t have a partner. Thank you for pointing that out, Amy.’ Emily looked suddenly furious.

‘I’m sure Amy didn’t mean it like that.’ Sophie shot Amy a warning look as she spoke. ‘No, I’m not planning babies any time soon, thanks, Amy. Anyway, we’re not even married,’ she added.

‘What’s your name? Jane Austen?’ Amy teased and a low snigger of amusement emitted from Melissa.

‘No, it’s just...’ Sophie stood up and scrunched her long chestnut hair distractedly into a ponytail. She looked flustered. ‘Well, I can’t imagine what it must be like to throw away the condoms and actually plan to make a baby. We’ve all spent so many years trying desperately *not* to get pregnant after what happened to Em... Sorry, Em, but you know what I mean, don’t you?’

Emily nodded, slightly wearily.

Amy’s head whirled with thoughts of Nick. She tried not to get too carried away – after all, they had only been dating for four months. But already she could picture them as parents. Nick was so protective of her and caring. He made her feel special in a way that no one ever had before. She knew she didn’t have the wit or the brains or the personality that the others had. She was the quiet one who hated any kind of confrontation and would go along with what everyone else wanted to do in order to keep the peace. But Nick seemed to find her captivating and hung on her every word. He wanted to spend every waking minute with her and told her he couldn’t get enough of her. She loved it.

She wondered idly whether their children would inherit her auburn hair and green eyes or Nick’s swarthy dark good looks, hoping it would be the latter. He was such a beautiful man – even thinking about him now made her feel weak with longing. She had had many boyfriends in the past but Nick was different. Special. She already felt that he was ‘the one’.

‘Do you think you and Steve will get married then?’ Emily interrupted the silence, cutting through Amy’s daydream.

All eyes locked on to Sophie, who seemed to quail slightly as she spoke: ‘Uh... maybe. I’ve never really thought about it.’

‘Oh, you should!’ Amy clapped her hands together several times, excitement bubbling up inside her. ‘It would be so fantastic to have a wedding to go to. I could bring Nick...’ She left the thought hanging tantalizingly in the air, imagining already what she might wear, how perfect Nick would look in a morning suit.

‘Well, I’m not planning to get married just so that you lot can have a day out.’ Sophie frowned at Amy. ‘And you need to stop daydreaming, Amy. You’ll frighten him off if you’re too keen.’

Amy grinned. ‘I can’t help it. You know what I’m like. And it hasn’t frightened him off so far.’

‘True. But then, he hasn’t met me yet!’ Melissa stood up and stretched languorously, showing off her toned, brown-skinned belly as she did so. Amy laughed, though a tiny prickle of nervousness passed through her. Melissa was a legendary flirt. But despite her sexiness and beauty, she had never enjoyed anything more than flings and one-night stands. Men never seemed to stick around. And she didn’t think Melissa was Nick’s type anyway. He was always telling Amy how much he loved her because she was so unusual, with her long, slim legs, mane of red hair and dazzling green eyes. She could easily have been a successful model but standing and posing in front of a lens had never interested her. She was too dreamy. Too creative. If anything, she wanted to be the one holding the camera.

‘Anyway, girls, enough of this nonsense. I’m starving.’ Melissa threw Amy a pleading look. ‘Amy, get a move on and cook our dinner.’