

The Truth of Us

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Prologue

She rinses the cup in a sleepy daydream. Something tells her she's being watched. She senses the person there then, catches sight of a shape in the identical window opposite. She knows instinctively who it is, feels an energy, a warmth pass through the glass and leap the few feet from house to house and into her chest. Her heart drums out a response; she is scared to raise her head yet feels exhilarated, a thrilling tremor. Her ears fizz, her mouth dries, she cannot resist any longer and tentatively raises her eyes.

She's back.



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Christy

Twenty-four hours earlier

Christy drains her glass, unsteadily hoicks up her skinny jeans and trots downhill towards the ladies', self-consciously trying to give off an air of not caring who's watching. She needn't worry – nobody is. The other drinkers are a blur of raucous youth. Everything in the bashed-up old pub in Hoxton is slightly wonky; it reminds her of the funhouse at the fair. Full of clowns too. The Kestrel is her and her team's new favourite haunt for Thursday night drinks. After the pressure of a live television show, it's good to let off steam and as executive producer of *The Fair Files* it's only right she joins in. She's good at joining in – she's a margarita and four skinny bitches in; in the good old bad old days she would be after a sharpener now, a cheeky line of coke charmed from some sucker. But there's nothing charming about a forty-year-old still on the gear.

The lock on the cubicle is broken, so as she sits on the loo she leans forward awkwardly to hold the door shut. Her phone pings. Mum.

Call me please, love. It's important.

Christy groans, 'No thank you.' She washes her hands, looking in the domed mirror above the sink. Her nose looms cartoonishly large, like she's peering at herself in a spoon. Her slim frame looks odd in the glass – her trainers a vanishing point while her hair as usual looks too big, her shoulders thickly cloaked in dark blonde curls. Her eyes are huge and round, a startling blue-grey. They have been called mesmerising, ethereal, weird. She blinks and squints – her skin looks deathly in the gloom. She stumbles slightly, limbs flimsy with the booze. She's getting too old for this.

Back at the table Pippa is holding court, mean cheerleader pony-tail swishing as she yaps. She's twenty-three and one of the runners on the show. Face of a Disney princess, gob of a tabloid headline writer. She's in full flow. 'Urgh – imagine shagging that, then waking up next to a pile of his fake bits? False teeth, wig, hearing aid . . .'

The three others quieten down as Christy approaches. Ade sits up straighter, her big brown eyes growing wider, trying to warn Pippa. But she's in full flow. 'Bet he's got a cock like an old jalapeñ – oh.'

Christy slips back into her seat. 'Who's this then?' she asks brightly, although she knows the answer. Pippa flinches and gulps for air, a freshly landed tuna in a crop top.

'Oh, no one.' She smiles shakily, glaring at the rest of the table, pink blooming on her cheeks.

'No, come on,' says Christy, with a grin that doesn't reach her eyes. 'Tell all.' The entire table is swallowed by a yawning chasm of distilled awkwardness.

Then it is broken by Ade, always fire-fighting – 'Who wants another drink?' – and the team gratefully leap at the chance to move on, shouting their orders.

'I'll help you,' Christy says, and it's only when they're at the bar that she allows herself a deep breath.

'Ignore them,' Ade says softly, staring straight ahead. Christy replays Pippa's words in her head; the man she was talking about is barely fifty-two years old and definitely doesn't have any false bits, but the part that irked her most was Pippa referring to him as 'that'.

Little madam should watch her mouth.

'It's fine,' Christy lies. 'I don't blame them for gossiping – an executive producer sleeping with her top presenter? Not my finest moment.'

Ade, a wise head on young shoulders and Christy's most trusted producer, chuckles. 'Nobody's perfect. Just think of it as a dropped stitch in life's rich tapestry.'

Christy groans. 'Another one?'

Over the years, she's developed a terrible habit of mixing business with pleasure.

An hour later Christy is in an Uber, the driver pulsing his foot on the accelerator pedal so the Prius gently lurches every few seconds. The warmth of the car and the guy's oud aftershave makes Christy's stomach churn. She opens the window a touch and a light drizzle spritzes her face. She closes her eyes, surrenders to the breeze and tries not to think of her team talking freely about her now she's gone.

Last week's hurried and surprisingly hot post-show fuck with her presenter Marty Michaels was heard by the soundman, Steve. Normally the soul of discretion. Trouble is, his sideline as stage tech for metal band Throttle Punch has wrecked his hearing, so his headphones, which monitor all the mics, are cranked up so high that most of the sound bleeds out. A researcher had been standing right next to Steve just as a commotion came crackling

down one particular radio mic that'd been cast aside on the small sofa in Marty's dressing room. It took a couple of seconds for those listening to decipher the muffled moans – but then, loud and clear, boomed Marty's unmistakable voice, shouting, 'Fuck, Christy! I'm coming!'

Christy groans as the Uber pulls up. Clearly, gossip this hot travels like wildfire.

The cat greets Christy as she opens her front door. The hallway is dark and there's post on the doormat. Costa curls her tail around Christy's calf and meows hungrily. 'OK, OK,' she says. She heads to the kitchen, and as light floods the room she takes in the dirty coffee mugs in the sink and the banana quietly going brown in the fruit bowl. Not so much home sweet home. When she bought the flat five years before, she had imagined one day sharing it with someone. Being in love. Instead, it's just her and the black and white kitten that was dumped behind the wheelie bins of a coffee shop.

Costa paces up and down the kitchen worktop, stepping dexterously over the stacked bowls encrusted with cereal, and looks at Christy meaningfully. 'Right. Yes. Sorry.' There's no cat food, so she digs around in the cupboard, finds some tuna and tips out a tin into the cat's bowl. As she crouches beside the cat she loses her balance, slowly toppling backwards onto her bottom. She stays there a minute, leaning against the cupboard, legs stretched out in front of her on the cold tiles.

Thank Christ today's show was the last in this series. The live consumer-affairs programme is a ratings winner, but it's a full-on production. She needs a break. Her phone buzzes.

Sorry it's late, sweetheart. I imagine you're working. Please call, it's about Dad.