



BOOK CLUB KIT

The Four Loves Of Alex Hayes

NATASHA KARIS

Discussion Guide · 32 Questions

*“Three times I fell in love with the same man.
Three times the same person broke my heart.
It was still worth it, though.”*

SAOIRSE

A note for whoever is hosting

Two things worth knowing before you open the discussion.

THIS GUIDE CONTAINS SPOILERS

Parts One and Two assume everyone has finished the book. Part Three, on page 7, gives away the contents of the USB, what Ernest did, and the last chapter. If someone in your group is still reading, stop at the end of page 6.

ON THE SUBJECT MATTER

This is a novel about domestic abuse told from both sides of the usual story: a woman beaten by her husband, and a man beaten by his wife. It does not spare either. It also contains coercive control, a rape (off the page, and never described), an attempted suicide, a small child held upside down by her ankles, a terminal diagnosis, and a killing.

Almost every group will contain someone with a nearer view of this than they will say aloud. You do not need to manage that, and you should not go looking for it. Three small things make a real difference:

- Say at the start that anyone can pass on any question, no explanation needed.
- Let the conversation stay with Alex and Saoirse. People speak sideways, through a character, when they are not ready to speak directly — and that is a whole conversation in itself.
- Have the resources on the last page to hand. Not read aloud. Just there.

One further note. The short italic chapters scattered through the book — the kitchen floor, the stairs, the hand at the throat, the knife in the doorway — are written in the first person with no name and no gender. Readers assume different things about who is speaking, and are meant to. If your group can hold off on settling it until the end, the book pays that off.

HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

There are more questions here than any group needs. Pick six or seven. The ones marked with a star ✦ are the ones that reliably open a room. If your group likes to read aloud, page 9 has four passages chosen for it, each with a single prompt.

One structural suggestion. The novel is built as a set of interviews, one woman at a time. It discusses very well the same way: take Melinda first, then Bernice, then Cassandra, then Saoirse, and see how much of your verdict on the first three you have to revise by the fourth.

About *The Four Loves Of Alex Hayes*

At 10.47 on a Tuesday morning, a black SUV brakes hard at a set of traffic lights in Knockfarraig and the car behind it doesn't stop in time. Just over an hour later, Alex Hayes — a nurse, a father, a man everybody in the town has a kind story about — is dead of a single stab wound, and the man in the black cap has vanished.

Sergeant Vicky Fitzgerald cuts her holiday short and starts where she always starts: with the people who loved him. His wife Melinda, who counted the crying women in the church and understood, somewhere in that hour, that her husband had been unfaithful. His ex-wife Bernice. His mother Cassandra, who raised him alone in a town that would not let her forget it. And a fourth name that everyone she interviews eventually says out loud — Saoirse Thomas, the girl who left Knockfarraig fifteen years ago without a goodbye.

Then there is the note. Wedged into the seal of the coffin at the crematorium, in handwriting nobody can match: *Please forgive me. I didn't want to kill you.*

Every one of these women is telling Vicky the truth. Not one of them is telling her all of it.

ABOUT NATASHA KARIS

Natasha Karis is an Irish author based in Cork. She writes contemporary, emotional women's fiction that dives into heavy subjects — grief, abuse, addiction — but leaves the reader with hope. Many of her novels are set in the fictional coastal town of Knockfarraig, inspired by Youghal, Co. Cork. She shares her writing life with three children, a cocker spaniel and her husband.

TWO THINGS AT THE FRONT OF THE BOOK

The dedication is worth reading aloud before you start, given what the novel goes on to do with fathers:

For my father, Tom Maher. Many of the fathers in my novels are flawed. None of them were inspired by you. You are always the good guy in my story.

There is also a playlist — fifteen songs, from Kodaline's *All I Want* to Florence and The Machine's *Dog Days Are Over*, with a great deal of Taylor Swift in between. The link is printed in the front of the book. It makes very good background for the evening, and the running order is doing something.

WHERE IT SITS

A standalone. Sergeant Vicky Fitzgerald investigates this case, and her own story is told in *The Three Stories For Vicky Fitzgerald* — if your group reads both, read this one first and the reference to Christian will land properly. Knockfarraig is the town shared by Natasha Karis's other novels, and they can be read in any order.

The women in the church

A wife, an ex-wife and a mother, each of them certain about somebody else.

TO START

- 1 The whole novel is built out of interviews: a woman talks, Vicky's pen scratches, and we only ever see Alex through somebody who wanted something from him. Did that structure work on you — and did you notice yourself changing sides?
- 2 ♦ Melinda counts the women crying in the pews and reaches a conclusion before the coffin has moved. "*Their tears highlighted my lack of them.*" Was she right for the wrong reasons, or wrong for the right ones?
- 3 Asked why she was livid rather than grieving, Melinda answers flatly: "*Because he left me, and he wasn't allowed to leave.*" Did you like her at that point? Did you ever?

MELINDA

- 4 The wine glass at The Edge, the framed poem in the hall, the rice left on the hob. Each of these has two completely coherent readings, and the book gives you Cassandra's and Melinda's side by side without deciding. Which version of the poisoning do you actually believe?
- 5 ♦ Cassandra's verdict on her daughter-in-law: "*There are many types of love. Hers was the suffocating kind.*" Is jealousy on Melinda's scale a character flaw, a symptom, or a warning the book wants you to take seriously?
- 6 Melinda stopped painting because she believed her art nearly killed her husband. Alex's last act — the parcel of paints that arrives after his death — is what starts her again. Is that the kindest thing anyone does in this novel?

BERNICE, AND CASSANDRA

- 7 Bernice explains the marriage in one line: "*You can't fall in love with a woman when your heart has no room left.*" She is not lying about that. Does it excuse anything? Does it explain anything?
- 8 Cassandra's account of Alex's birth — the midwife who kept calling her *Miss*, the priest who would not christen him, the empty chair at the parent-teacher meeting — is a small history of a particular Ireland. What does the book want that history to explain about the man Alex became?
- 9 ♦ Cassandra married John back because of a leaking roof, a communion, and loneliness, and calls it her biggest mistake: "*marrying John wrapped a noose around mine and Alex's neck.*" She spends the rest of the novel trying to undo that decision. Does she manage it?
- 10 Lily is the only person in the book who tells Vicky the truth immediately, and Vicky nearly misses it. "*My mum gave him the bruises.*" Why is a child the one who says it plainly?

Alex, and Saoirse

What was done to him, and what he did with it.

THE VIDEOS

- 11 ♦ Alex hid cameras in every room of his own house for years and never showed the footage to a living soul. “*The hardest part of it all was thinking I was less of a man.*” Is that shame the reason he stayed, or the reason he survived?
- 12 “*A weapon is a weapon no matter who is holding it.*” The novel puts a six-foot man and a five-foot woman in the same room and asks who a court would believe. Has anything about that changed since? Would it change for a man in your own town?
- 13 Bernice’s method is not really the bottle — it is the threat of what she will say. She punches her own face; she turns her bruised wrists towards him; she mentions who she has been talking to in the street. Which of her weapons frightened you most?
- 14 ♦ Alex gave Bernice the house, made himself homeless, and left the cameras running so he could keep watching. Was that a father protecting his children, or a man who had confused surveillance with safety?

- 15 Cassandra, at the end, reaches a conclusion about her own son: in raising him to defer to women, she also taught him to hand over control. “*It wasn’t about me being small and my husband being bigger... the lesson is about being made to feel smaller.*” Is she right? Is she being too hard on herself?
- 16 A seven-year-old on the ground in a school yard, and a boy who breaks the circle and explains what her name means. Everything in the novel runs off that one afternoon. Did the book earn a love that large from a beginning that small?
- 17 Saoirse’s account of the caged bird — the one that stops flying at the bars, then stops noticing the open door — is the clearest thing in the book about why people stay. “*Until it forgets it even has wings.*” Would you hand that page to someone? Who?
- 18 ♦ She insists there was no affair, and means it: “*Even if I had cheated, the person I was cheating with was Fintan.*” Is that a distinction that holds up? Would it hold up for Melinda?
- 19 Alex will not talk her out of it, only plant seeds — the cameras, the shelter, the sentence she says out loud in the dark: “*I’m in charge. I control my life.*” Is that how leaving actually works, or is it the version a novel needs?
- 20 She left at eighteen without a word rather than let Alex know what his father had done to her, and carried the shame of it for fifteen years. She says telling Vicky was what finally set her free. What does the novel believe silence costs?
- 21 ♦ The title. Who are the four? Cassandra, Bernice, Melinda and Saoirse — or does Lily take a place, or Ernest, who names Alex as his own first love? Argue it out; it is a better question than it looks.

DISCUSSION • PART THREE

The swap, and the sergeant

Do not open this page until everyone has finished the book.

- 22 ♦ Alex looked up, found the one working camera on the street, and smiled before he hit the car. He engineered the whole confrontation and had it filmed. Did that reframe him for you — from victim to something else?
- 23 The man cremated as Alex Hayes was Fintan Clancy, and it was Alex lying behind the door of the privacy room while his wife identified a stranger's body. Of everything in the book, that is the cruelty that lands on the most innocent person. Can you forgive him for it?
- 24 Ernest has eight weeks to live and no reason left to be careful. "*I had nothing to lose.*" Does a terminal diagnosis change what he did, or only what it costs him?
- 25 ♦ He killed twice: John Hayes on the stairs at eighteen, Fintan on the floor of a derelict building at thirty-three. "*I am a murderer. Twice now.*" He regrets neither — what he regrets is fifteen years of keeping Saoirse's secret. Is he right about which was the greater wrong?

DISCUSSION • PART THREE • CONTINUED

TO END ON

-
- 26 Cassandra staged her husband's death for a son who had not killed him. Ernest killed him. Neither knew about the other for fifteen years, and Alex and Saoirse lost those years to the gap between them. What is the novel saying about protecting people by not telling them things?
- 27 "*Do you do the right thing? Or, maybe the question you should ask is, what is the right thing?*" Ernest hands Vicky an unprovable confession and a dilemma. What would you have done in that hospital room?
- 28 ♦ Vicky lets it go, and writes it up as *justice was done*. A man is cremated under another man's name and buried as a murderer; two children lose a father who is alive. Is that justice, or is it a Garda deciding she likes one set of people better than the other?
- 29 Melinda works it out before Vicky does and chooses to stop: "*Let us all be, Vicky. Each one of us has hurt enough.*" She loses her husband twice over and still shuts the door on the truth. Where does she get that from?
- 30 Alex is alive, and Bernice's children are being raised abroad by their grandmother on the strength of his faked death. He gets his forever; his son and daughter get a grave. Did the ending sit right with you?
- 31 Melinda's ending is the quietest and possibly the best: an exhibition called *Pieces Of Him*, a man called Daniel, and a plane. "*Alex left her long before he died.*" Whose ending did you most want to read one more chapter of?
- 32 "*Love takes on the form and flaws of the person who receives it.*" Four women received the same man's love and four different things came back. Which of them do you think got the truest version of Alex Hayes?

Four passages, four questions

Capture that bird and shove it in a cage ... If you cover the cage with a sheet, if you restrict food and water, if you don't talk to it for hours, the bird will go quiet ... Until the bird can't remember what it feels like to fly. Until it forgets it even has wings.

ASK: WHERE HAVE YOU WATCHED SOMEONE STOP NOTICING THE OPEN DOOR?

Real men don't get beaten by their wives, do they? ... A weapon is a weapon no matter who is holding it.

ASK: IF A MAN YOU KNOW SAID THIS TO YOU TOMORROW, WHAT WOULD YOU ACTUALLY DO?

How do men who hurt women know the exact limits of their love and stop a millimetre short? Is there some secret manual distributed around to these men when they come of age?

ASK: IS THE RAGE IN THAT PASSAGE EARNED — AND IS IT FAIR?

That's why first love is unforgettable. We have no idea of the pain in store, until it goes. Any love after is less pure, but deeper, because we understand what we might lose.

ASK: LESS PURE BUT DEEPER. WOULD YOU TAKE THAT TRADE?

IF YOUR GROUP LIKES TO THEME IT

- **White freesia on the table.** They are on the cover, and the whole book turns on flowers that mean something — Lily named after one, Cassandra's jigsaw of her own, Melinda's paper-and-fabric petals that take a day each to build.
- **Put the playlist on.** Fifteen tracks, printed in the front of the book — Kodaline, Talos, Freya Ridings, and rather a lot of Taylor Swift. Low, in the background, for the whole evening.
- **Cheese crackers.** A packet of them is how Alex tells Saoirse he is free, at eighteen, without saying a word. Put them out and do not explain why until somebody asks.
- **The jigsaw question.** Vicky explains her job to Lily as a jigsaw with the middle pieces missing. Open the evening by asking everyone which piece they had slotted in wrongly, and when they realised.
- **Read the italic chapters in order.** Pull out Chapters 4, 12, 18, 33 and 44 and read the five of them aloud, back to back, before question one. Ten minutes, and the room will not agree about who is speaking.

Support

You do not have to be sure it counts. You do not have to be ready to leave. You only have to tell one person.

DOMESTIC ABUSE — WOMEN

Ireland — Women's Aid National Freephone Helpline, 1800 341 900, 24 hours, every day · womensaid.ie

United Kingdom — National Domestic Abuse Helpline, run by Refuge, 0808 2000 247, free, 24 hours · nationaldahelpline.org.uk

United States — National Domestic Violence Hotline, 1-800-799-7233, or text START to 88788, 24 hours · thehotline.org

DOMESTIC ABUSE — MEN

Ireland — Men's Aid Ireland confidential helpline, 01 554 3811, Monday to Friday 9am–5pm, or email hello@mensaid.ie · mensaid.ie

United Kingdom — Men's Advice Line, 0808 8010 327, Monday to Friday 10am–5pm · mensadviceline.org.uk

United States — The National Domestic Violence Hotline above supports men and answers 24 hours.

RAPE AND SEXUAL VIOLENCE, RECENT OR LONG AGO

Ireland — National 24-Hour Rape Crisis Helpline, freephone 1800 77 8888 · drcc.ie

United Kingdom — Rape Crisis England & Wales, 24/7 Support Line · rapecrisis.org.uk

United States — RAINN National Sexual Assault Hotline, 1-800-656-4673, 24 hours · rainn.org

IF IT FEELS DARKER THAN THAT

Ireland & United Kingdom — Samaritans, 116 123, free, 24 hours, every day · samaritans.org. In Ireland, Pieta also runs a free 24-hour crisis line, 1800 247 247, or text HELP to 51444 · pieta.ie

United States — 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline, call or text 988

If you are outside these countries, findahelpline.com will point you to a service near you.

MORE FROM NATASHA KARIS

Vicky's own book. *The Three Stories For Vicky Fitzgerald* — a storm, a dead grandfather permitted one night back, and three stories the sergeant needs to hear before the second of November.

Knockfarraig. The town appears across the novels, and they can be read in any order. Titles are listed in the back of the book.

Meet the author. Natasha is happy to join book clubs by video call where she can. Get in touch through natashakarisbooks.com and say when you are meeting.

If the book was worth the evening. Reviews are how stories like this one find the readers who need them. A single sentence on Amazon or Goodreads makes a real difference — and a book club leaving several at once makes more.

This kit may be freely printed and shared for book club and library use.
The Four Loves Of Alex Hayes © Natasha Karis · natashakarisbooks.com