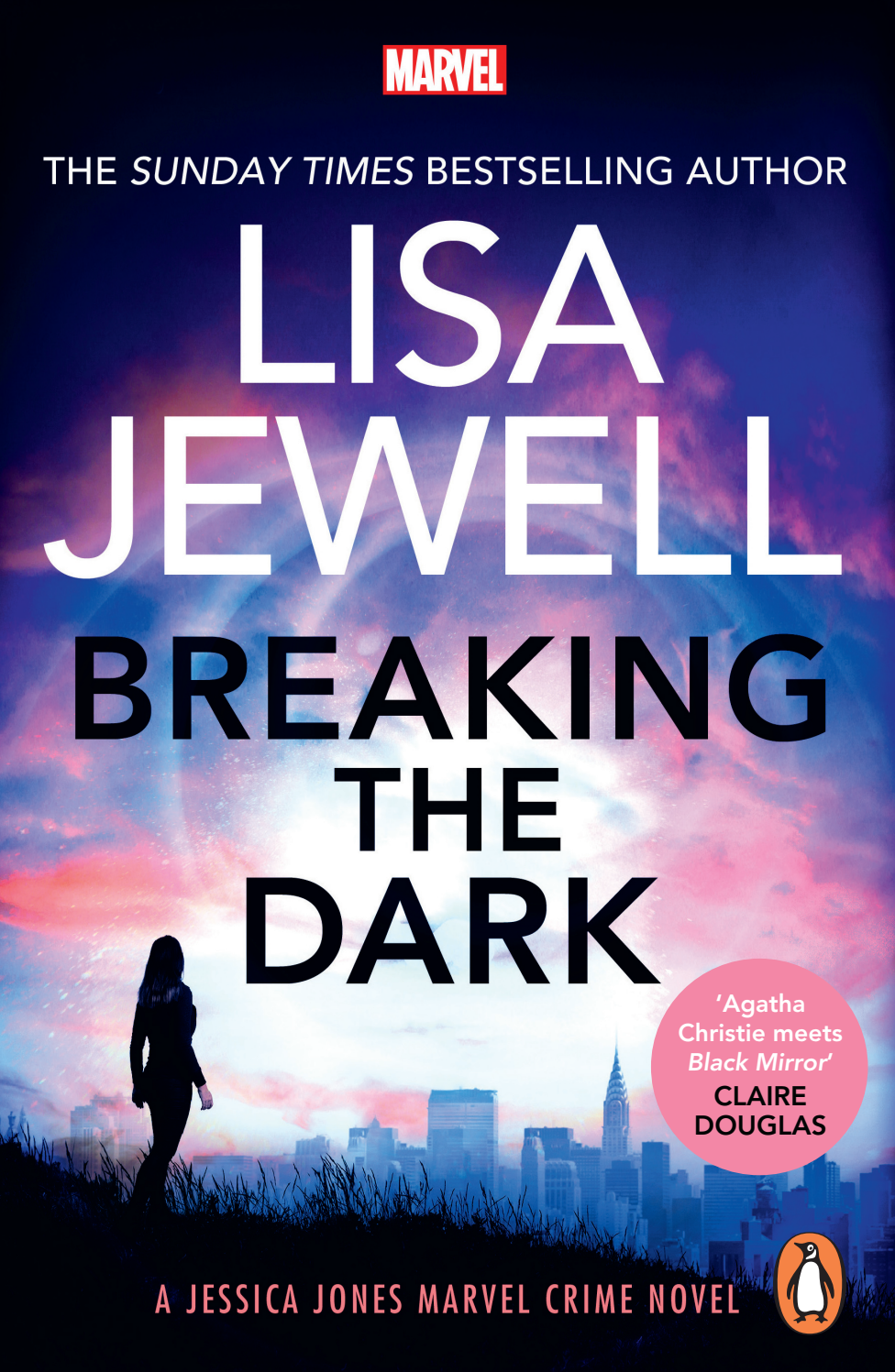

MARVEL
THE *SUNDAY TIMES* BESTSELLING AUTHOR
LISA JEWELL
BREAKING THE DARK
'Agatha Christie meets *Black Mirror*'
CLAIRE DOUGLAS
A JESSICA JONES MARVEL CRIME NOVEL



BREAKING THE DARK

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Praise for *Breaking the Dark . . .*

‘Fresh, lively, insightful – from page one, Lisa owned Jessica, and she owned me. Astonishing. The voice and dialogue are wry with a whiff of hard-boiled. The action scenes hit like a chop. Honest, earnest, and a really cracking story.’ A. J. Finn

‘Exhilarating, twisty and original. Agatha Christie meets *Black Mirror*!’ Claire Douglas

‘Immersive, page-turning, addictive, fresh and fun – *Breaking the Dark* will go down a storm with Lisa Jewell fans, with Jessica Jones fans, and with anyone who loves a fantastic story, brilliantly told. I adored it!’ Andrea Mara

‘Jewell at the height of her powers: the pace doesn’t let up, the characters never once slip . . . Tricksy, endlessly interesting and pure entertainment, don’t miss this one.’ Gillian McAllister

‘A classic Lisa Jewell with an amazing supernatural twist!’ Jenny Colgan

‘A fun, entertaining read that really packs a punch!’ Shari Lapena

‘A novel that reveals the depth and complexity of one of the most fascinating and indomitable characters in the Marvel canon. Lisa Jewell has found secret reservoirs of strength and perseverance in Jessica Jones that only a writer of her skill could articulate.’ S. A. Cosby

‘I was hooked from the start and couldn’t turn the pages fast enough. Original, clever and cinematic.’ Alice Feeney

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‘The perfect blend of psychological thriller and supernatural chiller. Lisa’s huge army of fans will love it.’ Mark Edwards

‘It’s perfect! So cleverly plotted and as ever beautifully written. I know nothing about the Marvel world but it’s certainly another brilliant Lisa Jewell novel. Bravo!’ Harriet Tyce

‘Fast-paced, addictive and SO. MUCH. FUN. Will delight Lisa’s existing fans and attract a legion of new ones.’ Tammy Cohen

‘Absolutely compulsive, complex and gripping. A classic mystery weaved seamlessly into the Marvel Universe. I loved it.’ Nadine Matheson

‘Such an exciting, riveting, adrenaline-pumping story. I couldn’t have loved it more.’ Liz Nugent

‘Absolutely perfect.’ *Booklist*

‘A gripping read.’ *Heat*

‘Clever concept, characters and compelling prose will keep you hooked.’ *Woman & Home*

‘The novel seamlessly integrates superhero lore with the gritty realism of a crime thriller. Jewell’s portrayal of Jessica Jones is faithful to its Marvel roots while also refreshingly innovative, offering a deeper exploration of her flawed psyche and struggle for redemption. You’ll be cheering her on. 9/10.’ *Daily Mirror*

‘Twisty, authentic, gripping.’ *Platinum Magazine Book Club*

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The Truth About Melody Browne
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The House We Grew Up In
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The Girls
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BREAKING THE DARK

A JESSICA JONES MARVEL CRIME NOVEL

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This book is dedicated to Grace O'Connor,
my brilliant friend.

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PART ONE

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One

Jessica turns onto her side and blinks into the darkness. The drapes are wide open, but the sky outside is so dark that they may as well be shut. It is not nighttime, but a storm is brewing over Hell's Kitchen, black and bruised and heavy.

The clock by her bed tells her that it is one minute past nine.

Her head tells her that she had her last drink about four hours ago.

She drags herself from her bed and listens to the first distant rumbles of thunder, coming from somewhere far away from the city.

Coffee. Black, strong, burned. A bowl of Cheerios with ice-cold milk from the fridge. The storm moves closer, the sky turns electric-white, and Jessica jumps—slopping milk

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from the bowl onto the floor—as a clap of thunder splits the universe in half. For a moment she wonders about a thunderstorm this early in the day, but then she thinks, why not? The whole world has felt so dramatic lately, people seem so riled up all the time, always looking for fights and division. Things move so fast, theories come and go, superstars are born and get canceled, technology, fashions, politics all spin in dizzying, insane cycles, and meanwhile the planet is set to burn to cinders, and, yes, why not a brooding, sinister morning storm over Hell's Kitchen on a cool October morning, why not?

Her neighbor Julius just adopted a cat, then three days later had to go away to visit a sick relative. She owed Julius a favor and said she'd feed it for him. It's named Speckles.

She has a 9:45 in her calendar and it is now 9:20. She needs a shower and another coffee, but first she thinks she'll go down the hall and deal with Speckles.

She grabs the key to Julius's apartment and walks barefoot down the hall, leaving her door on the latch behind her. She wears a T-shirt that still smells of last night's chicken wings where she'd rubbed her greasy fingertips, but also smells of Luke's laundry detergent. Luke is her not-quite-boyfriend. Actually, her not-at-all-boyfriend, but boyfriend enough for her to have ended up at some point or other with one of his T-shirts in her apartment. And he really does do magic things with his laundry, she doesn't know what or how, but everything he wears smells so good.

Julius has painted the inside of his apartment into something decent: the walls are midnight blue and velvet gray. He

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favors mid-century furniture, teak and oak and pointy legs. He likes table lamps. They are everywhere, six in the living room alone. There is a tall, thin clock against a wall that *tick-tock*s self-importantly as Jessica walks toward the kitchen, and then there is another *flash-bang* of whiteness and she counts to twelve, and as the next thunderstrike arrives as loud as a dropped saucepan on a stone floor, she enters the kitchen to find the cat sitting terrified in a corner, all bulging eyes and flat ears. She gets closer and can see that Speckles is quivering, vibrating, that Speckles is overloaded with adrenaline.

Jessica doesn't know what to make of cats. She feels she should like them and certainly she feels bad right now for this one in its current state of mortal terror, but she doesn't know how to approach them, touch them, make them like you. She puts out a hand and says, "Listen. It's okay, all right? This is just some crazy shit that the people up there do from time to time, to remind us how small and pointless we all are. Just hang tight, kitty. Hang tight."

Speckles squeezes himself farther into the corner and Jessica reaches into the cupboard above him for the bag of cat food. Then she leans down to lift the bowl from the floor, and as she does so another thunderclap hits and the cat startles and dashes, and Jessica turns and remembers that she left Julius's front door open.

"Shit!" She drops the bowl on the kitchen counter. "Shit!" She chases the cat through the door and out into the hallway. "Speckles!" she calls out louder than she'd like to. "Speckles! Stop!"

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But he doesn't stop, he thinks he can outrun the thunder and he helter-skelters away from her, his paws skidding over the shiny marble flooring, and suddenly he is at the other side of the building, the bit that Jessica never sees, where the doors are the same as the doors on her side of the building but are so alien to her that they may as well be in another country. And down there is a window and it is open and who knows where it leads. Jessica has never seen the window before and she lets out a small husk of a scream, her hands clamped to her face, as she sees Speckles leap six feet and disappear into the dark, granite sky filled with clouds like rolling boulders.

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Two

The cat has run down two flights of the fire escape and now sits on a narrow stone ledge that joins Jessica's building to the flat roof of the next building along. On either side of the stone ledge is oblivion. Jessica sticks her head through the window and assesses the situation. If the cat doesn't want to die, it needs to jump back onto the fire escape. But the cat is too scared to work this out for itself and sits in stasis.

Jessica sighs. It's too early for this bullshit. All she has is Cheerios and coffee to work with. But she cannot tell Julius that she let his cat die, so she allows the sickening transfusion to occur, the blood, the water, the mucus in her body to warp and distort, to become something closer to diesel and paraffin, to lighter fuel and tarmac, and she can almost smell it, taste it

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at the back of her throat. It makes her want to gag as she stands out on the windowsill, high above the streets below, but she swallows it down, crouches slightly, her eyes shut hard—

. . . but . . .

. . . the clouds split apart, and the rain falls hard and quick, and the cat changes its stance, sashays back toward Jessica's building, its tail a spiky brush of panic and fury, jumps onto the fire escape and then straight into Jessica's arms.

Carrying a wet, freaked-out cat through a window and down a hallway is not easy. It scratches her arms, it scratches her face. A door opens as she passes by with the cat rolling and squirming in her arms. A woman with a baby in a stroller eyes her up and down three times, a glint of disgust followed quickly by wry amusement. The baby stares at her and the cat with wide eyes. Jessica keeps walking.

As she turns the corner toward Julius's apartment, she stops.

A small girl stands by his open door. She has dark eyes, and her hair is tied in puffballs on either side of her head. She wears a metallic fur-trimmed coat and stripy tights. Jessica narrows her eyes at the girl. "You okay, little girl?"

The girl nods, her gaze held firmly on Jessica, oblivious to the angry wet cat in her arms.

"Where's your mom?"

The girl stares. She says nothing.

The sky cracks with thunder again and hard rain lands like thrown gravel against the walls of the building. The cat jumps out of her arms and runs into the apartment.

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Jessica feels something burn her from the inside out. Her head rolls back, and she closes her eyes. When she opens them again, the girl is gone.

* * *

Jessica is in her grimy T-shirt and underwear, having failed to have a shower or brush her teeth, when her intercom buzzes five minutes later.

"Yeah," she says. "Come up."

She hits the button, then throws on a black jacket over her stale shirt, pulls on blue jeans and a pair of boots. She can still smell the chicken grease and the old beer on her breath, but it is too late to do anything about that now as the sound of heels clacking against marble echoes down the hallway outside her apartment.

She runs her hands over her hair and makes some kind of a smile with her face as she opens the door.

In front of her is a thin woman in an ankle-length shearling coat. Her hair is the color of butterscotch, and she has a tan that looks like it came from the sort of place that Jessica could never afford to go to.

"Hi," says the woman, visibly recoiling at the sight of Jessica, her stained clothing, her damp hair and scratched-up arms and face, the broken-down-looking room behind her. "Amber Randall." The woman looks at the door sign reading ALIAS INVESTIGATIONS, then back at her. "Are you Jessica Jones?"

Jessica nods. "Sure," she says. "Yes. Come in. Sorry."

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The woman looks about forty but could be fifty. It's hard to tell with rich ladies.

Amber Randall shakes out her umbrella in the hallway and leaves it leaning against the wall. Entering, she takes off her shearling and folds it in three with the arms turned inward, hangs it neatly on the arm of Jessica's leather sofa, and sits down. She is wearing a black knitted dress with a white lace collar and black leather boots with rubber soles.

Her eyes roam around the walls of Jessica's office, searching, Jessica suspects, for one pretty thing. When her eyes fail to find anything pleasing, they come to rest on her.

"You're not what I was expecting," Amber Randall says. "I thought you'd be . . ." Her hands flutter around aimlessly for a moment before coming to rest on her lap. "Never mind. I know you have . . . I know you are . . ." Her hands flutter again. "But really, I don't need that from you. None of that. I need your . . . *contacts*. Your *insight*. You know. Because I think there's something happening, and I think it's something to do with your people."

Jessica blinks. *Your people*. She doesn't have "your people." She only has herself.

"Listen," she says. "I really don't think—"

"Hear me out," the small woman says harshly before softening. "Hear me out. Please. I need you, Jessica. I really do."

Jessica tilts her head and appraises the woman sitting in front of her. Her bones are so fine her hands are like tiny claws. The big, incongruous boots give her the air of a child,

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while her mouth sags at the sides where gravity—and life—has come to play.

"Try me," Jessica says.

Amber Randall smooths down her dress. "My ex-husband, Sebastian, is British. I met him when I was studying Classical Dance in London many moons ago. We got married and he came to live with me here in New York, and we had our twins sixteen years ago. A girl and a boy. Lark and Fox."

"Lark and . . . ?"

"Fox. Yes."

"Okay then."

"After we divorced Sebastian moved back to England, and every summer since then the twins have flown over to London for four weeks to stay with him. He has a mews house in Pimlico."

"Pim . . . ?"

"—lico. A posh area in London. And he has recently bought a big house in Essex." Looking at Jessica, she adds, "In the countryside. So, every year the twins fly over for a month and usually they spend time in London. They see their cousins. Sometimes Sebastian takes them to France, or to the Spanish islands. Then they come back to me and go back to school and, look—*anyway*—this year, they spent the entire time at his new house in Essex, just with him, nobody else, and I just feel very strongly that *something happened*."

"Something happened?"

"Yes. They've been home for four weeks and the thing

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is—and I don't really know how to explain this—but ever since they got back, I've grown more and more convinced that it's not them. That *they* are not *them*."

Jessica feels a rush of energy spike through her, and her posture changes a degree. "How do you mean?"

"Like I say, it's hard to explain. They look basically the same, they sound the same, for all intents and purposes it is them. But"—Amber leans forward, her pale toffee hair swinging as she moves—"I don't think it is them. I think something happened over there this summer. I think someone got to them. Someone *did* something to them." She leans forward a little more. "Replaced them."

Jessica lets her eyes close for a moment. She ponders the reality of this type of woman, as observed through the media of TV shows and newspaper articles: a rich woman abandoned on the scrap heap by a rich husband, in middle age. A woman filled with resentment, possibly, of a new girlfriend or a second wife who is bound to be younger and better-looking, and of the new life in which her children have been immersed for four weeks, returning to her, no doubt, with glossy tales of experiences to which Amber Randall is not party. She imagines toxicity in every crevice of Amber Randall's life, and she sees that toxicity playing out now in this idea that her ex-husband has somehow replaced her children. She opens her eyes again and stares at Amber, openly.

"Listen," she sighs. "This sounds, I dunno, kind of messy. It sounds like maybe you and your ex—"

"No!" Amber slams her hands down against the leather

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sofa. "No. This is nothing—*nothing*—nothing to do with our divorce. Our divorce was amicable. I'm very fond of Sebastian. He's a very nice man."

Jessica lifts one brow and nods. "Can you provide me with any examples of your children's behavior, or particular events that have led you to this point?"

"Yes. Yes, I can. Fox is a good-looking boy and he, well, he's just starting to know it. He's kind of vain. And particular. And he has this way of touching his hair. Like this." Amber prods at her hair with tiny fingers. "Every time he passes a mirror. And he's always taking selfies, and he always has the same smile and the same pose and the same way of looking at the camera, and since he got back, he just doesn't do it anymore. He walks straight past mirrors without acknowledging them. He doesn't use his phone for selfies anymore. He never touches his hair and, I swear, before, he had his fingers in his hair constantly. And Lark—she is a shy girl, she has some nervous habits, chews the insides of her cheeks a lot. Sometimes she pushes her finger into her cheek while she's doing it, it's just part of what it's like being Lark, it's part of her. She takes the skin off around her fingernails too, and she shreds paper. And since she got back, none of that. Her hands are just . . . *still*. Both of them seem so still."

Amber finishes talking, and Jessica hesitates before responding.

"Have they had some therapy? In the UK, maybe?" Jessica ventures. "Like some CBT or something?"

"No." Amber Randall sounds exasperated. "Nothing like

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that. Trust me, I'm a therapist, I would've known. And they would have told me. And why would they, anyway? They're perfectly normal kids."

"Did something happen? A trauma?"

"No. Listen. Jessica. Please stop trying to provide rational explanations. If there were a rational explanation for it, do you think I would be sitting here now talking to you? And another thing—their skin. Both of them had the usual kind of teenage complexions before they left, and Lark, she had this tiny scar, just above her eyebrow, from chicken pox, and since they got back, their complexions are just—they're *flawless*."

Jessica winces. "Maybe the air in England is purer?"

"No, Jessica. *No*. The air in England is *not* purer. They have *not* had CBT. This is . . . *look*. Maybe this wasn't a good idea." Amber Randall stands and grabs her shearling coat. "Maybe I should just find someone who—"

"What do you want from me?"

She lets the shearling drop. "I want you to go to England and find out exactly what happened when they were there this summer."

Jessica recoils slightly. "You want me to go to England?"

"Yes."

"You should know that I don't have a passport."

Amber widens her eyes at Jessica and sighs. "Seriously?"

"Yes. Seriously. Nobody ever took me anywhere I needed to use one."

"My God. You have a birth certificate though, yes?"

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"Yes. I have a birth certificate."

"Well, we can sort that out for you, then."

Jessica blinks. "I have a lot going on."

This isn't entirely true. Jessica just finished a case two days ago and has precisely nothing going on.

Amber nods, as if sensing the closing of a deal. "I can pay you your hourly rate and more. Plus a healthy retainer."

Jessica narrows her eyes. She has $128 in her bank account right now.

"Let me think about it."

Amber sighs. "Please don't think about it. Just do it. I can't live like this for another minute. It's killing me, this sense that I'm living with . . . *strangers*. Are they even my children? And if they're not my children, then where are they really, and what's happening to them?"

A moment passes and then Jessica feels it, the soft, sickening release of acquiescence. "Fine," she says. "Okay. I'll do it. But I'll need the retainer up front. Like now."

"How much?"

Another moment passes and Jessica says, "Five thousand."

Amber's eyes flash slightly at the realization that she is being ripped off, but she smiles and says, "It's a deal. It'll be in your account by this afternoon. Let's meet tomorrow to discuss strategy." She casts her gaze briefly around Jessica's office. "Come to my club. The Finch. East Twenty-Seventh. Ten a.m. And you might want to . . ." She gestures vaguely at Jessica's T-shirt.

"I have clean clothes, yes, thank you."

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Jessica closes the door behind Amber Randall a minute later and keeps her body pressed against it until she hears the whiz and click of the elevator and the hum as it descends to street level, and then she slides down to her haunches, drops her head into her chest, and groans.

What the hell has she just agreed to?

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Thirty-eight years ago
Harlem, NYC

Ophelia slides onto the stool in the near-empty bar. The golden early evening light shines through the grimy windows, adding a sense of magic to the downbeat surroundings. A thin man stands hunched over an arcade game in the corner; a less thin man sits at a table in the window, turning the pages of a newspaper without seeming to be reading it. She stares at the man behind the bar. He wears a gray T-shirt, a plaid overshirt, jeans. His long hair is tied back, and his hand is stuffed inside a glass mug as he shines up its exterior with a cloth.

"What can I get for you?" he asks.

Ophelia feels it hard, the certainty that this man is the one she's been looking for, the one who can save her.

Finally.

She smiles and says, "Could I have a tequila sunrise? Thank you."

"Oh!" says the barman. "A Brit!"

"Yes. Yes, I am."

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"Whereabouts are you from?"

"Oh, all over really. But I was born in Portsmouth. On the south coast."

"Nice."

He turns the clean glass over and stacks it on the shelf behind him, then gets to work on her cocktail. She watches him. He has a broad back, narrow hips, ears that protrude slightly from his head. He's tall and she likes the way he moves. As she watches him, she becomes aware of a song playing in the background.

She's got perfect skin . . .

She's heard it before, she thinks.

Cheekbones like geometry, eyes like sin . . .

The barman turns back to face her, and she is struck again by how exactly right he is. She'd followed his scent across an entire ocean to find him, and here he is, standing before her looking like the most normal guy in the world. No one would guess what makes him tick, she thinks, no one would ever think it of him. Only she knows the truth about him.

As if reading her thoughts, he smiles and says, "So, what brings you to New York?"

"Oh, just adventure. Fun. Never been, always wanted to."

"Well, welcome to the City That Never Sleeps," he says, tipping tequila into a highball. "It's good to have you here."

She considers him for a moment and then leans into the bar. "I've been waiting all my life for this."

"Wow." He raises an eyebrow at her. "That's a bold statement. I'd better make this a good cocktail, then."

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She smiles at him. He has no idea, she thinks, just how long she has waited for this. No idea whatsoever.

He pours orange juice over the tequila and stirs them together. Then his hand reaches for the grenadine from the shelf behind him. It glows red and fresh. She watches as the grenadine hits the orange juice, watches it sink slowly to the bottom of the glass.

Her eyes go to his and she smiles. “Looks like blood, doesn’t it?”

His gaze locks hard onto hers, and a flash of desire passes through his eyes. “Yes,” he says to Ophelia. “I guess it does.”

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Three

The Finch is a narrow townhouse squeezed between two wide townhouses. It has long thin windows with frames painted taupe and a heavy bower of pink silk flowers looped over the front door. The signage describes it as an energizing, welcoming space for every woman.

A young woman sits at the front desk behind an oversized vase of green and pink hydrangeas. She wears black overalls and red lipstick and glances up through thick-framed glasses. She smiles widely at Jessica, who appears to have passed muster in a black blouse, black jeans, a black leather jacket, and a perfunctory attempt at makeup.

"Hi!" says the woman. "How can I help you today?"

"I'm meeting Amber Randall. Jessica Jones."

The woman clicks her keyboard with nails painted forest

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green. "Ah, yes! She's on the second floor, in the Marsha room. Go right up."

Upstairs, Jessica finds Amber sitting on a tiny gray sofa in the corner of a tiny room. She has a teapot on a table in front of her with two cups, and a plate of warm-looking chocolate cookies. She asks Jessica to close the door behind her and then invites her to take a seat on the chair opposite.

"English breakfast?" she asks, lifting the teapot by its handle and its spout. "How do you take it?"

Jessica stares at the pot and draws a blank.

Amber goes ahead and pours it, adding milk from a small glass bottle, and passes the cup to Jessica. "You look nice," she says. "Better."

"Yeah, well, you caught me on a bad day yesterday." She lifts the cup and drinks the tea. It tastes of dirty flowers. She takes a cookie and eats it in three bites, having had no breakfast and nothing to eat since the previous lunchtime.

"Have another?" says Amber, pushing the plate toward her.

Jessica swallows down the goo of the cookie with the remains of her tea and shakes her head. "Mrs. Randall, shall we just . . . ?"

"Yes. Of course. And call me Amber, please. So . . ." Amber pulls a folder from inside a green leather briefcase on the floor by her feet and passes it to Jessica. "I can sense that you think this is all somewhat in my head. I thought that before we go any further you should see the twins for yourself."

Jessica pulls photos out of the folder and examines them. Two fine-featured children: a boy with a plume of dark blond

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hair, James Dean eyes, and a hard smile; a girl with a severe bob and brutal bangs, her dark brown eyes turned to the floor, a ring through her left nostril. Both look tall and rangy, unlike their small-boned mother. Both have strong noses and high foreheads. They remind Jessica of some kind of paintings by some kind of European artist from the 1920s.

"Nice-looking kids," she says.

"Thank you. But listen, Lark's been invited out after school today, starting off at a friend's and then heading to a concert over in Williamsburg. They're getting on the subway, five of them. You should follow them. Tail them, listen in, see what she talks about, how she behaves, who she talks to, what she does. These are the friends . . ."

She hands Jessica another sheaf of photos. Jessica flicks through them mindlessly, then puts them down: Two boys, two girls, rich kids, they all look the same.

"Do you have covert recording equipment?" asks Amber.

Jessica thinks of the recording app on her smartphone, the same one that Amber no doubt has on hers. Anyone could be a private eye these days. "Er, yeah, sure."

"Could you use it?"

"Sure." Jessica pushes the nasty tea away from her and reaches for another cookie. "What's the name of the band?"

Amber pulls a flyer from her folder and passes it to her.

The lettering on the flyer says AKINESIZ.

"Never heard of them."

"No," sighs Amber. "Neither have I. Singer-as-the-band-name kind of thing. Indie-emo-rock-pop something. I don't

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know. It's sold out, so you won't be going in. Just follow them to the venue, then you can leave."

Jessica slides the flyer into the pile with the photos, rubbing at a smudge of chocolate she's left on its corner.

"What time are they leaving?"

"Oh, Lord knows. Teenagers never leave when they say they're going to leave. But they're going from Tara's house, here." She taps the address on a list from the folder. "So just be where you can see them. Any time from six, I guess."

Jessica nods and starts to ready herself to leave.

"Did you bring your birth certificate?"

Jessica pauses and lowers herself back onto her chair. "Mrs. Randall . . . I'm not ready to hand over something like that just yet. Let's get this first report done and then we'll talk about birth certificates."

"Fine," says Amber. "Fine. So let's meet back here, tomorrow, midday?"

"Sure," says Jessica, getting to her feet. "Can we have something"—she waves her fingers over the remaining cookies—"*savory* tomorrow? All that sugar's made me feel a bit . . ." She rubs her belly.

"I'll see what I can do."

Amber throws her a small hard smile, then lowers her reading glasses onto her nose, lifts the lid of her laptop, and pours herself another cup of tea from the big white pot. Jessica closes the door behind her.

* * *

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Jessica still feels a little nauseous as she walks back to her office. She stops to buy a bottle of water from a fancy Kips Bay grocery store and downs it in a few gulps. This helps a little, but not entirely. In truth she could happily go back to bed for an hour or two, but she has work to do.

Back at her desk in Hell's Kitchen, she's just opened the lid of her laptop when she sees movement through the glass panel of her apartment door. She can hear breathing too, and then the sound of knuckles knocking uncertainly against the wood.

"Yo. Jessica."

A small voice. A familiar voice.

She pulls open the door. It's Malcolm Powder, her very own bespectacled seventeen-year-old wannabe-private-eye-slash-stan who follows everything she does.

She sighs. "Yes."

"Whoa," he says, recoiling slightly. "What happened to your face?"

She puts her fingertips to her skin. "A cat happened. What do you want, Malcolm?"

"It's been four days."

"Four days since what?"

"Four days since you said I could come work for you."

"I did not say you could come work for me."

"You gave me your word, Jessica. You said if I found someone who knew where the Spider-Woman-Girl chick was, I could have a part-time job—and I *did* find her and literally helped you save her life, and you said—"

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"I said if you had permission from your parents."

Malcolm turns and beckons to someone lurking to his left. A small woman appears. She looks like Malcolm, even wears the same style of glasses.

"Mom," Malcolm grunts. "Can you just tell her?"

The woman smiles. "I give Malcolm my permission to work for you."

Jessica sighs loudly. "Great," she says under her breath. She fixes the mother with a hard stare. "It can be dangerous work."

"Malcolm is a sensible boy. It will be a good experience for him, before college. Get him off the street."

Jessica turns the question around onto Malcolm. "You're going to college, huh?"

"Yeah. Next fall."

"Fine. Okay. I might have to be out of the country for a while with my current job. It could be good to have someone based here, keeping the office running."

Malcolm's face bursts open in a hundred different directions. *"Oh my God,"* he says. "Oh my God. *Seriously*. You want me to run the office?"

"No! Geez! Not run it." Jessica gestures at her desk. "Just sit in it. That is *all*."

"Yes! Totally! I can totally sit in your office! *Absolutely!"*

"And not touch anything."

"No. Nothing. Definitely not. When can I start?"

Jessica closes her eyes and sighs again. "Not yet, okay. I'll message you."

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"You don't have my number."

Jessica hands him a piece of paper and a pen. He beams at her briefly before scribbling down his number.

"Great," says Jessica, snatching back the paper. "Now goodbye."

The boy smiles at her again and turns to leave, but Jessica suddenly thinks of something. "Oh. Malcolm. Heard of this guy?"

She holds up the flyer.

"Akinesiz? Yeah. He's awesome."

"What sort of clothes do his fans wear? What do they look like?"

He looks her up and down, at the black-on-black-on-black outfit she wore to meet Amber, and shrugs. "Kind of like you, I guess," he says. "Except young."

"Get out of here," she says. "Geez."

* * *

Jessica is halfway through a premade egg salad sandwich from a fancy deli. It was superexpensive and looked amazing when she chose it but for some reason the smell is making her nauseous. She's scouting for a trash can to dispose of it in when she hears noise and movement coming from the apartment block to her left. A girl who looks like Lark Randall emerges, followed by an assortment of faux-raggedy rich kids flaunting nonconformist affectations and talking very loudly.

"Shit." She screws the half-eaten sandwich up and hurls it

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toward the nearest garbage can. It lands, a perfect bull's-eye. Rubbing her hands down the sides of her jeans, she steps toward the kids.

Lark is more beautiful in the flesh than in the photo that Amber showed her this morning. She's a full four inches taller than the other girls and closer in height to the two boys. She is wearing a sheer black lace sleeveless top and a turtleneck and baggy jeans with huge construction boots and an oversized denim jacket that she's shrugged off her shoulders so it hangs from her thin milk-white arms. On her head she wears a black beanie with studded black cat's ears. Her eyes are ringed with black liner and her lips are painted pale pink. Her nose ring catches the light almost like an exclamation mark to her beauty, but nevertheless she's standing slightly apart from the others, who are all looking at a phone belonging to one of the girls and laughing.

Jessica sees Lark's eyes go to the sky, as if she's studying the rosy, dusk-tinged clouds, committing them to memory. The others start to move as one toward the subway and it takes Lark a second or two to notice she's been left behind. She picks up her pace to catch up with them and Jessica follows suit.

The group passes through the turnstile and down into the station, where the air is warm and fetid with the breath of the last of the evening rush hour. Lark dawdles behind her friends, her gaze constantly being drawn upward as if she is seeing things overhead that nobody else can see. Her hands, the hands that Amber said once used to be always in motion,

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hang neatly by her sides. The train arrives and Lark follows her friends on board. Jessica enters by the adjacent doors and takes a seat two down from Lark, then presses record on her phone.

The conversation mainly revolves between the girl named Tara and another named Anna. The two boys sit opposite each other staring at their phones, legs akimbo. Lark gazes up at the roof of the train car and Jessica looks closely at her now that they are stationary. Her skin does look extraordinary, especially here under the harsh strip-light of the 4 train. Her gaze moves from the ceiling down to the floor and a small smile passes over her mouth.

"Lark."

Jessica squints to look. This one's Tara.

"Earth calling Lark!"

Lark breaks her trance and turns slowly to face her friend. "Yeah?" she asks, pleasantly.

"Do you have a lip balm?"

"No," she replies simply before looking away again.

Jessica observes Tara and Anna exchanging a look.

"Okay then," says Tara, a little snarky, before exchanging another look with Anna and changing the conversation.

The kids change onto the L train at Union Square and Jessica follows suit. The carriage looks like an emo party, pale kids from all four corners of New York being funneled toward Williamsburg. The carriage smells of that vanilla scent that teenage girls all smell of these days and Jessica experiences another wave of nausea.

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At the recognition of the nausea, her mind turns to a night with Luke when it's possible they'd been maybe a little less than careful. How many weeks ago was it? She can't remember. But no. Even drunk she would not be that idiotic, and anyway, isn't it called *morning* sickness? Not all-day-long sickness? She shakes the idea from her head, returns her thoughts to the matter at hand, the five teenage children sitting across the aisle from her, the beautiful girl with the cat-ears beanie who does not look at her phone, does not engage with her friends, does not move her hands, who just sits, her eyes so focused and glassy, her skin so smooth and poreless, like a life-sized doll.

Jessica jolts at this realization, and for the first time since Amber Randall walked into her office yesterday morning, she starts to believe that maybe this is something more than just a wronged wife's twisted paranoia.

"Lark."

It's Tara again.

"Lark!"

Lark turns to Tara and smiles. "Yes."

"Oh my God, you're so drifty."

Tara faces Anna as she says this, and they share a pulse of laughter.

"Drifty," says one of the boys. "Is that even a word?"

"Whatever," says Tara. "You know what I mean." She turns back to Lark. "Are you okay? You're just, like, so quiet."

"Yeah. I'm good. I'm just zen."

"Zen?"

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"Yeah. You don't need to worry about me. Just have fun."

"But—we want you to have fun too. You've been looking forward to tonight for months. It was all you could talk about before you left this summer."

Lark nods mechanically. "Yeah, I remember that. I remember being excited."

"But now you're not?"

"Yeah. I'm super excited. Just in a different way."

"Are you okay, Lark?"

"Never better. Truly. Don't worry about me. I'm perfect."

"If you say so."

"I do say so."

Then Tara throws her arms around Lark and squeezes her hard and the conversation moves away from Lark and on to other things, but Jessica's eyes stay on Lark.

On her hands.

Her staring eyes.

On her perfect, perfect skin.

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Thirty-eight years ago
Harlem, NYC

When you've seen the most beautiful woman in the world, you know it with every single piece of you. You know it with your eyes, your head, your gut—but you also know it in your blood, and with the veins that carry that blood to all the parts of the body that need to be informed that you've just seen the most beautiful woman in the world.

The blood is the important thing. Blood contains everything, every atom of who you are: Your mother, your father, a million mothers and fathers before them. It contains your fear, your passion, your weaknesses, your strengths. It contains your future and your past. It is the most powerful essence in the world.

For some people there is more than one most beautiful woman in the world. But not for me. There is only one. She is called Ophelia.

You might say that I'm obsessed. I wouldn't blame you. She's all I think about, every second of every day. My blood pumps harder when I think of her. It touches me in places that

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lie dormant the rest of the time. The blood sends a rosy flush to my cheeks, sends endorphins throughout my body, sends heat to my groin.

I am all blood. I cut myself, sometimes, when she's left, just to see it, stare at it; it glows extra red, I'm sure, when it's full of her.

She agrees to join me for dinner on the night of her twentieth birthday. At thirty-six I'm considerably older than her, and I feel maybe she is being polite, but I don't show my doubt. Doubt observed is a killer.

I wear my favorite shirt; it's blue with tiny white buttons on the collar tips that hold a tie in place. I have had a haircut and a professional shave. She's only ever seen me in my plaid shirt and jeans behind the bar, and I want her to see who I really am.

At the restaurant, she orders clams in tomato sauce; I order a steak, rare, *bleu*.

She eats the clams straight out of their shells, the sauce leaving a red circle around her lips. Another rush of desire overcomes me, and I neutralize it with a nervous joke about the waiter's mustache. My steak oozes blood onto my dinner plate each time I prod it, viscous, watery. I can smell the fear in it, smell the animal's last moments of terror, picture its wide black eyes. I stifle a groan.

I invite her back to my apartment imagining that she will say no.

She says yes. Yes.

Suddenly I am poleaxed with doubts. My apartment is

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clean and neat, but it might be less luxurious than someone with shiny Manhattan dreams might have been imagining.

However, she saunters in, seems pleased with how she finds it, and allows me to take her coat. She tells me it's nice and touches the spines of my books and admires a framed print of Central Park on my wall that I've always wondered about. Is it tacky? But now I am reassured that it is not, because she has told me she likes it.

The effect of her here in my private space is intoxicating.

She sits on my sofa and drinks the wine I pour for her. I put on some music, the sort of music I like, and she laughs when the first bars play and tells me that it's the sort of thing her mother used to listen to. I take the joke in good humor.

Then she says she has something to tell me.

Something about her.

About who *she* really is.

She grabs my hands. She squeezes them hard. And she whispers something in my ears no human has ever before heard.

She seems relieved that I have not recoiled. Was she too seized by doubt?

I say, "Why did you tell me?"

She says, "Because I knew you'd understand."

And then she turns my hand so that my palm is facing up. She runs her fingertips across the soft white skin, sending my blood fizzing, blasting—pumping so hard it makes my vision blur for just one second. She brings the palm up to her lips, her soft, perfect lips, and presses them against it. I feel just the suggestion of suction, of pressure, of my skin being pulled into her

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mouth, the tip of her tongue running up and down, gentle, fleeting as a feather, and then she brings my index finger into her mouth and sucks it before clamping down on it with hard, sharp teeth, her dark blue eyes never once leaving mine.

She releases my finger from between her bloody teeth and stares hard into my eyes.

"I know who you are," she says. "I know what you are. I know what you can do. I need you and you need me. You and I were meant to be."

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Four

Jessica leaves the teens as they shuffle into the venue and takes the subway back to Fiftieth, where she heads into the sharp night, the first cold one of the year. She thinks about what she will tell Amber when she sees her tomorrow morning. She has nothing concrete to report. She has seen nothing out of the ordinary tonight, but still, she feels unsettled, she feels strange, and for some reason she feels sad. As she thinks this, she turns the corner two blocks from her apartment, and there's a small girl standing in front of her, just outside the mini-mart, and it's the same girl who was standing outside Julius's apartment the previous morning, the girl with the puffball hair, the silver parka, the stripy tights.

She smiles at Jessica as Jessica passes her.

"You again. Where's your mom?"

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The girl shrugs.

Jessica looks around her, pokes her head around the door of the store, which is empty apart from the clerk, looks across the street and turns back to the little girl. "You all on your own? What's going on?"

The girl doesn't reply and Jessica sighs. What the hell is she supposed to do about this?

"Do you live in my building? Where I saw you yesterday? Is that where you live?"

The girl shakes her head.

"So, where do you live? Do you live up there?" She indicates the apartments above the mini-mart.

The girl shakes her head again.

Jessica turns in desperation, looking up and down the street, but there is no one in any direction who seems to be the parent of the child in front of her. She calls to the guy behind the counter, "Hey, any idea whose kid this is? Outside your store?"

The guy slides off his stool and slowly comes to the door. He looks down and then looks at Jessica.

"What kid?"

Jessica looks down too. The girl is nowhere to be seen.

* * *

Jessica arrives at the Finch at noon the following day and is directed to the Simone room, where she finds Amber Randall sitting with a plate of avocado maki rolls and a pot of coffee.

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Amber closes her laptop when Jessica walks in, then picks up the coffee pot.

"How do you like it?"

"Black. Please."

Amber pours her a cup and passes it to her. "I got you sushi. I hope that's okay?"

Jessica nods, although she feels very strongly that she won't be eating any. "Thank you."

"So, how did it go?"

"It went fine. I mean, as in I found them, I followed them, I heard them, I recorded them. It all went according to plan. But in terms of finding anything out—not really. Just that her friends also think something's up with her . . ."

"They do?"

"Yeah. They exchanged a few looks. That kind of thing. And when they asked Lark if she was okay, she said she was 'perfect.'"

"Yes!" Amber sits up smartly. "Yes, that's what she says to me too! And Fox! Both of them have said that to me when I've asked them if they're okay. Isn't that a strange thing to say, don't you think? 'Perfect'?"

Jessica sips her coffee and nods.

"And what else?"

"Nothing really. She just seemed a little spacy. A little disconnected. And yeah, I did see what you meant about her complexion. It's kind of freakishly immaculate."

"Yes. Like it's been airbrushed." Amber shakes her head

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