

MARVEL

#1 *NEW YORK TIMES* BESTSELLING AUTHOR

**LISA
JEWELL**

**BREAKING
THE
DARK**

**A JESSICA JONES
MARVEL CRIME NOVEL**

The book cover features a dark, atmospheric background. On the right side, there is a profile of a woman's face, rendered in a vibrant purple and blue color scheme. The background also shows a city skyline at night with illuminated buildings and streets. The text is overlaid on this background.

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BY

**LISA
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**HYPERION AVENUE
LOS ANGELES NEW YORK**



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Contents

Title Page
Copyright
Dedication
Part One
One
Two
Three
Four
Five
Six
Seven
Eight
Nine
Ten
Eleven
Twelve
Part Two
Thirteen
Fourteen
Fifteen
Sixteen
Seventeen
Eighteen
Nineteen

Twenty
Twenty-One
Twenty-Two
Twenty-Three
Twenty-Four
Twenty-Five
Twenty-Six
Twenty-Seven
Twenty-Eight
Part Three
Twenty-Nine
Thirty
Thirty-One
Thirty-Two
Thirty-Three
Thirty-Four
Thirty-Five
Thirty-Six
Thirty-Seven
Thirty-Eight
Thirty-Nine
Forty
Forty-One
Forty-Two
Forty-Three
Forty-Four
Forty-Five
Forty-Six

Forty-Seven

Forty-Eight

Forty-Nine

One Year Later: The Pulse

Acknowledgments

About the Author

Also by Lisa Jewell

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

PART ONE



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 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 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-tocks* 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.

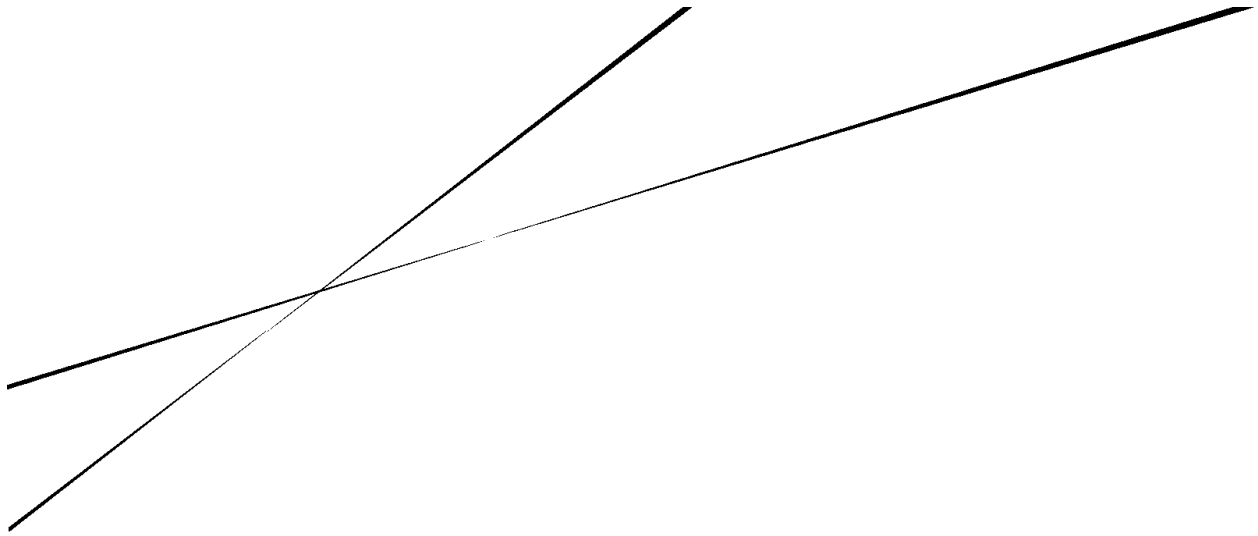
Jessica doesn't know what to make of cats. She feels she should like them and certainly she feels bad right now for this one in its current state of mortal terror, but she doesn't know how to approach them, touch them, make them like you. She puts out a hand and says, "Listen. It's okay, all right? This 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!"

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.



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 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.

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.”

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, 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 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 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 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?”

“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?”

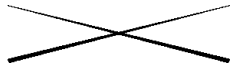
Another moment passes and Jessica says, “Five thousand.”

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.”

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?



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.”

“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.