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LISA

JEWELL

A NOVEL

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THIS IS

TRUE

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A NOVEL

LISA JEWELL

**ATRIA** BOOKS

New York London Toronto Sydney New Delhi

# PROLOGUE

Stumbling from the cool of the air-conditioned hotel foyer into the steamy white heat of the night does nothing to sober him up. It makes him feel panicky and claustrophobic. A sweat that feels like pure alcohol blooms quickly on his skin, dampening his spine and the small of his back. How can it be so hot at three in the morning? And where is she? Where is she? He turns to see if the girl is behind him, and sees her wishy-washy, wavy-wavy, in double vision through the glass windows of the hotel. And then he sees a car indicate to pull over and his heart rate starts to slow. She's here. At last. Thank God. This terrible night is coming to an end. He squints to bring it into focus, to search the driver's seat for the reassuring gleam of her white-blond hair, but it's not there. The window winds down and he recoils slightly.

"What?" he says to the dark-haired woman behind the wheel. "What are you doing here? Where's my wife?"

"It's OK," says the woman. "She sent me. She'd had too much to drink. She asked me to bring you home. Come on. In you get."

He looks behind him for the girl, sees her leaving the hotel and walking quickly away in the opposite direction, her handbag clutched tight against her side.

"I've got water. I've got coffee. Come on. You'll be home in no time."

The dog on her lap growls at him softly as he slides into the passenger seat.

"I thought you'd left?" he says, fumbling behind himself to find the seat belt. "I thought you'd gone away?"

The woman smiles at him as she unscrews the lid from a plastic bottle of water and passes it to him.

“Yes,” she says. “I had. But she needed me. So. Anyway. Drink that. Drink it all down.”

He puts the bottle to his dry, dry mouth, and gulps it back. Then he closes his eyes and waits to be home.

# PART ONE

**Coming to Netflix in May:  
Hi! I'm Your Birthday Twin!**

Now here's a strange one, coming your way from the people behind *The Monster Next Door* and *The Serial Date Swindler*. It's a podcast within a documentary, a kind of podumentary, if you will. In June 2019, popular podcaster Alix Summer, better known for her *All Woman* series of podcasts about successful women, branched out into a one-off project, which she called *Hi! I'm Your Birthday Twin!*, about a local woman who was born on the same day as her. As the project progressed, Summer started to learn much more about her unassuming neighbor than she could ever have imagined and, within weeks, Summer's life was in shreds and two people were dead. Absolutely spine-chilling stuff, with some shocking glimpses into the darkest corners of humanity: we guarantee you'll be bingeing the whole thing in a day.

# **Hi! I'm Your Birthday Twin!**

## **A NETFLIX ORIGINAL SERIES**

*Screen is dark. Slowly the interior of a recording studio is revealed.  
The text on the screen reads:*

### **Recording from Alix Summer's podcast, 20 June, 2019**

*A woman's voice fades in slowly.* "You comfortable there, Josie?"

"Yes. I'm fine."

"Great. Well. While I'm setting up, why don't you just tell me what you had for breakfast this morning?"

"Oh. Erm..."

"Just so I can test the sound quality."

"Right. OK. Well, I had toast. Two slices of toast. One with jam. One with peanut butter. And a mug of tea. The posh stuff from Marks. In the golden box."

"With milk?"

"Yes. With milk."

*There is a short pause.*

*The camera pans around the empty recording studio, zooming in on details: the lines going up and down on the monitor, an abandoned pair of headphones, an empty coffee cup.*

"How is it? Is it OK?"

"Yes. It's perfect. We're all set. I'll count down from three, and then I'll introduce you. OK?"



“Yes. OK.”

“Great. So... three... two... one... Hello, and welcome! My name is Alix Summer and here is something a little different...”

*The audio fades and the shot goes back to darkness.*

*The opening credits start to roll.*

# SATURDAY, 8 JUNE, 2019

Josie can feel her husband's discomfort as they enter the golden glow of the gastropub. She's walked past this place a hundred times. Thought: *Not for us*. Everyone too young. Food on the chalkboard outside she's never heard of. *What is bottarga?* But this year her birthday has fallen on a Saturday and this year she did not say, Oh, a takeaway and a bottle of wine will be fine, when Walter had asked what she wanted to do. This year she thought of the honeyed glow of the Lansdowne, the buzz of chatter, the champagne in ice buckets on outdoor tables on warm summer days, and she thought of the little bit of money her grandmother had left her last month in her will, and she'd looked at herself in the mirror and tried to see herself as the sort of person who celebrated her birthday in a gastropub in Queen's Park and she'd said, "We should go out for dinner."

"OK then," Walter had said. "Anywhere in mind?"

And she'd said, "The Lansdowne. You know. On Salisbury Road."

He'd simply raised an eyebrow at her and said, "Your birthday. Your choice."

He holds the door open for her now and she passes through. They stand marooned for a moment by a sign that says "Please wait here to be seated" and Josie gazes around at the early-evening diners and drinkers, her handbag pinioned against her stomach by her arms.

"Fair," she says to the young man who appears holding a clipboard. "Josie. Table booked for seven thirty."

He smiles from her to Walter and back again and says, "For two, yes?"

They are led to a nice table in a corner. Walter on a banquette, Josie on a velvet chair. Their menus are handed to them clipped to boards. She'd

looked up the menu online earlier, so she'd be able to google stuff if she didn't know what it was, so she already knows what she's having. And they're ordering champagne. She doesn't care what Walter thinks.

Her attention is caught by a noisy entrance at the pub door. A woman walks in clutching a balloon with the words "Birthday Queen" printed on it. Her hair is winter blond, cut into a shape that makes it move like liquid. She wears wide-legged trousers and a top made of two pieces of black cloth held together with laces at the sides. Her skin is burnished. Her smile is wide. A group soon follows behind her, other similarly aged people; someone is holding a bouquet of flowers; another carries a selection of posh gift bags.

"Alix Summer!" says the woman in a voice that carries. "Table for fourteen."

"Look," says Walter, nudging her gently. "Another birthday girl."

Josie nods distractedly. "Yes," she says. "Looks like it."

The group follows the waiter to a table just across from Josie's. Josie sees three ice buckets already on the table, each holding two bottles of chilled champagne. They take their seats noisily, shouting about who should sit where and not wanting to sit next to their husbands, for God's sake, and the woman called Alix Summer directs them all with that big smile while a tall man with red hair who is probably her husband takes the balloon from her hand and ties it to a chair back. Soon they are all seated, and the first bottles of champagne are popped and poured into fourteen glasses held out by fourteen people with tanned arms and gold bracelets and crisp white shirtsleeves and they all bring their glasses together, those at the furthest ends of the table getting to their feet to reach across the table, and they all say, "To Alix! Happy birthday!"

Josie fixes the woman in her gaze. "How old do you reckon she is?" she asks Walter.

"Christ. I dunno. It's hard to tell these days. Early forties? Maybe?"

Josie nods. Today is her forty-fifth birthday. She finds it hard to believe. Once she'd been young and she'd thought forty-five would come slow and impossible. She'd thought forty-five would be another world. But it came fast and it's not what she thought it would be. She glances at Walter, at the fading glory of him, and she wonders how different things would be if she hadn't met him.

She'd been thirteen when they met. He was quite a bit older than her; well, a *lot* older than her, in fact. Everyone was shocked at the time, except her. Married at nineteen. A baby at twenty-two. Another one at twenty-four. A life lived in fast-forward and now, apparently, she should peak and crest and then come slowly, contentedly down the other side, but it doesn't feel as if there ever was a peak, rather an abyss formed of trauma that she keeps circling and circling with a knot of dread in the pit of her stomach.

Walter is retired now, his hair has gone and so has a lot of his hearing and his eyesight, and his midlife peak is somewhere so far back in time and so mired in the white-hot intensity of rearing small children that it's almost impossible to remember what he was like at her age.

She orders feta-and-sundried-tomato flatbread, followed by tuna tagliata ("The word TAGLIATA derives from the verb TAGLIARE, to cut") with mashed cannellini beans, and a bottle of Veuve Clicquot ("Veuve Clicquot's Yellow Label is loved for its rich and toasty flavors") and she grabs Walter's hand and runs her thumb over the age-spotted skin and asks, "Are you OK?"

"Yes, of course. I'm fine."

"What do you think of this place, then?"

"It's... yeah. It's fine. I like it."

Josie beams. "Good," she says. "I'm glad."

She lifts her champagne glass and holds it out toward Walter's. He touches his glass against hers and says, "Happy birthday."

The smile fixes on Josie's face as she watches Alix Summer and her big group of friends, her red-haired husband with his arm draped loosely across the back of her chair, large platters of meats and breads being brought to their table and placed in front of them as if conjured out of thin air, the sound of them, the noise of them, the way they fill every inch of the space with their voices and their arms and their hands and their words. The energy they give off is effervescent, a swirling, intoxicating aurora borealis of grating, glorious entitlement. And there in the middle of it all is Alix Summer with her big smile and her big teeth, her hair that catches the light, her simple gold chain with something hanging from it that skims her gleaming collarbones whenever she moves.

"I wonder if today is her actual birthday too?" she muses.

"Maybe," says Walter. "But it's a Saturday, so who knows."

Josie's hand finds the chain she's worn around her neck since she was thirty; her birthday gift that year from Walter. She thinks maybe she should add a pendant. Something shiny.

At this moment, Walter passes a small gift across the table toward her. "It's nothing much. I know you said you didn't want anything, but I didn't believe you." He grins at her and she smiles back. She unpeels the small gift and takes out a bottle of Ted Baker perfume.

"That's lovely," she says. "Thank you so much." She leans across and kisses Walter softly on the cheek.

At the table opposite, Alix Summer is opening gift bags and birthday cards and calling out her thanks to her friends and family. She rests a card on the table and Josie sees that it has the number 45 printed on it. She nudges Walter. "Look," she says. "Forty-five. We're birthday twins."

As the words leave her mouth, Josie feels the gnawing sense of grief that she has experienced for most of her life rush through her. She's never found anything to pin the feeling to before; she never knew what it meant. But now she knows what it means.

It means she's wrong, that everything, literally everything, about her is wrong and that she's running out of time to make herself right.

She sees Alix getting to her feet and heading toward the toilet, jumps to her own feet, and says, "I'm going to the ladies."

Walter looks up in surprise from his Parma ham and melon but doesn't say anything.

A moment later Josie's and Alix's reflections are side by side in the mirror above the sinks.

"Hi!" says Josie, her voice coming out higher than she'd imagined. "I'm your birthday twin!"

"Oh!" says Alix, her expression immediately warm and open. "Is it your birthday today too?"

"Yes. Forty-five today!"

"Oh, wow!" says Alix. "Me too. Happy birthday!"

"And to you!"

"What time were you born?"

"God," says Josie. "No idea."

"Me neither."

"Were you born near here?"

"Yes. St. Mary's. You?"

Josie's heart leaps. "St. Mary's too!"

"Wow!" Alix says again. "This is spooky."

Alix's fingertips go to the pendant around her neck and Josie sees that it is a golden bumblebee. She is about to say something else about the coincidence of their births when the toilet door opens and one of Alix's friends walks in.

"There you are!" says the friend. She's wearing seventies-style faded jeans with an off-the-shoulder top and huge hoop earrings.

"Zoe! This lady is my birthday twin! This is my big sister, Zoe."

Josie smiles at Zoe and says, "Born on the same day, in the same hospital."

"Wow! That's amazing," says Zoe.

Then Zoe and Alix turn the conversation away from the Huge Coincidence and immediately Josie sees that it has passed, this strange moment of connection, that it was fleeting and weightless for Alix, but that for some reason it carries import and meaning to Josie, and she wants to grab hold of it and breathe life back into it, but she can't. She has to go back to her husband and her flatbread and let Alix go back to her friends and her party. She issues a quiet "Bye then" as she turns to leave and Alix beams at her and says, "Happy birthday, birthday twin!"

"You too!" says Josie.

But Alix doesn't hear her.

## 1 A.M.

Alix's head spins. Tequila slammers at midnight. Too much. Nathan is pouring himself a Scotch and the smell of it makes Alix's head spin even faster. The house is quiet. Sometimes, when they have a high-energy babysitter, the children will still be up when they get home, restless and annoyingly awake. Sometimes the TV will be on full blast. But not tonight. The softly spoken, fifty-something babysitter left half an hour ago and the house is tidy, the dishwasher hums, the cat is pawing its way meaningfully across the long sofa toward Alix, already purring before Alix's hand has even found her fur.

"That woman," she calls out to Nathan, pulling one of the cat's claws out of her trousers. "The one who kept staring. She came into the toilet. Turns

out it's her forty-fifth birthday today too. That's why she was staring."

"Ha," says Nathan. "Birthday twin."

"And she was born at St. Mary's too. Funny, you know I always thought I was meant to be one of two. I always wondered if my mum had left the other one at the hospital. Maybe it was her?"

Nathan sits heavily next to her and rolls his Scotch around a solitary ice cube, one of the huge cylindrical ones he makes from mineral water. "Her?" he says dismissively. "That is highly unlikely."

"Why not!"

"Because you're gorgeous and she's..."

"What?" Alix feels righteousness build in her chest. She loves that Nathan thinks she's pretty, but she also wishes that Nathan could see the beauty in less conventionally attractive women too. It makes him sound shallow and misogynistic when he denigrates women's appearances. And it makes her feel as if she doesn't really like him. "I thought she was very pretty. You know, those eyes that are so brown they're almost black. And all that wavy hair. Anyway, it's weird, isn't it? The idea of two people being born in the same place, at the same time."

"Not really. There were probably another ten babies born that day at St. Mary's. Maybe even more."

"But to meet one of them. On your birthday."

The cat is curled neatly in her lap now. She runs her fingertips through the ruff of fur around her neck and closes her eyes. The room spins again. She opens her eyes, slides the cat off her lap, and runs to the toilet off the hallway, where she is violently sick.