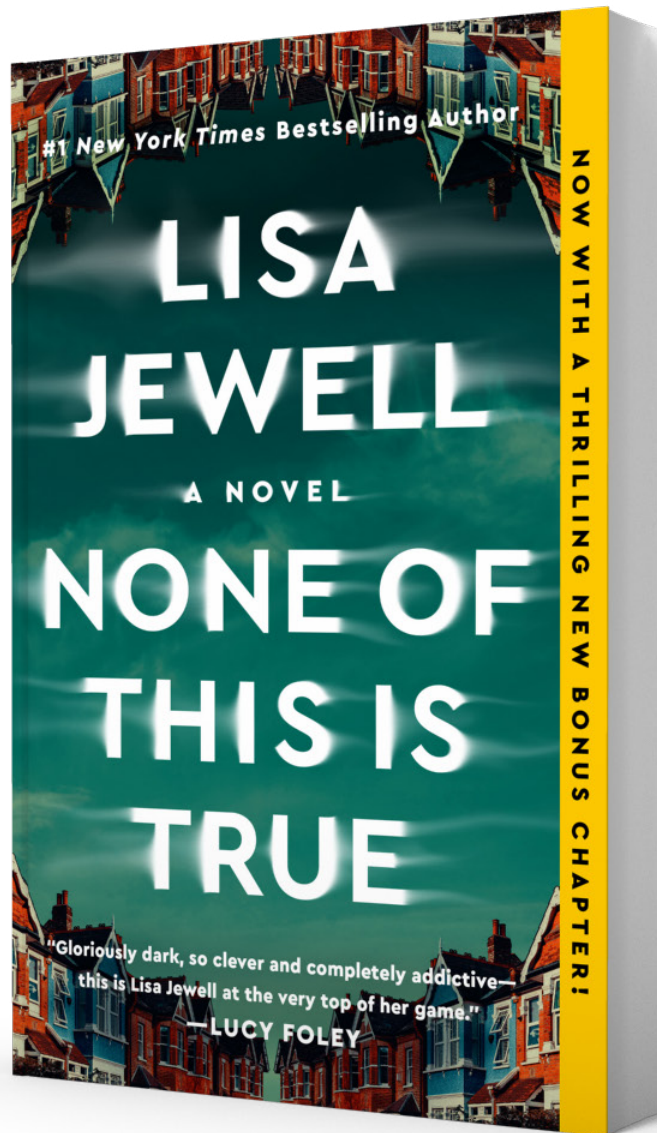




BONUS CHAPTER

ERIN

They have watched all three episodes of Hi! I'm Your Birth- day Twin! back-to-back. The room rings with the closing bars of the theme music as the last of the credits scroll down the screen.

Roxy flicks the TV off with the remote control and growls softly under her breath.

Erin peers at Roxy, furtively. She thinks Roxy might be angry.

"Well," says Roxy, "that seemed OK. Though my fucking hair looked shit. I knew it would. I told that woman to leave it alone."

Erin feels her stomach stir. It is completely empty. She has not eaten since breakfast time, and it is now three o'clock in the afternoon and they haven't eaten because of watching the TV show. Mum never skipped a meal. Not for any reason. Three times a day the food arrived, always at the same time, always what she wanted.

"I'm hungry," she says.

Roxy rolls her eyes. "You're always hungry."

"No, I'm not. I'm hungry because we didn't eat lunch." "Get yourself a bowl of cereal."

That's what Roxy always says when Erin says she's hungry. *Get yourself a bowl of cereal.*

Even the sound of the word cereal makes Erin's body recoil, the associations with dryness and claggyiness and crunchiness.

Erin misses the food her mum used to give her.

Roxy won't let her eat that kind of thing, she says it's sick and weird.

Erin doesn't agree.

Everything feels wrong.

That TV show was all wrong. All of it. It made her feel sick. She looked so weird. She can't believe that they didn't know she was lying, that they were both lying. It was so obvious that they were. So obvious. She feels the early vibrations of it coming now, through the thin walls of this new-build house that Roxy found for them, which she pays for with Erin's money: the vibrations of anger and fury, wrath and rage, when people wake up and realize about all the lies. It will come to them, like molten lava, and it will bury them and kill them.

"I don't want cereal," she says. "I want soup."

She doesn't like soup either. Too many spices and bits. But it's better than cereal.

"There's still half a pan of that carrot soup on the hob. From yesterday," says Roxy, picking up her phone and scrolling urgently through it. "Fuck," she says, scowling. "FUCK. OFF."

"What?"

"Twats on Twitter. Saying we look dodgy."

"We did though, Rox. We did look dodgy."

"We fucking didn't. And whatever—Mum's a killer. She killed that man. She literally killed him. So who gives a fuck about us? We were victims too."

Erin bites her lip and tugs at a strand of hair. She twists it into a thin cord and then lets it unravel again. Her stomach gurgles. "I'm so hungry, Rox."

"Urgh." Roxy gets to her feet and stomps into the kitchen. Erin hears the beep of the hob coming on, the sound of a drawer being opened and closed.

She will be eating yesterday's carrot soup, but that's OK. It's better than cereal.

She picks up her phone and looks at her message stream, from her followers.

You were awesome, Erin!!

Go Erased. You did it for Pops.

Fuck girl, you were lit.

They gonna find your mom's ass now for sure.

At this last message Erin scowls slightly and blinks hard.

It had been so weird seeing all those photos of her mum, little snatches of film footage added to the documentary, mostly contributed by Roxy, though some of the older footage had come from Grandma Pat. It had made Erin sad seeing Mum looking happy and young in those bits; she was always trying her best, but it was hard having to deal with Roxy and her outbursts all the time, all the hitting and biting, screaming and throwing things. They were all scared of her, even Dad, who was closer to Roxy than anyone. But Mum was always trying; she wasn't great at it, but she tried.

The pink chair looked so horrible in the documentary, like something out of a horror film, but really it had been the only way to control Roxy sometimes. *If you don't calm down, you'll be going on the pink chair.* It wasn't scary. Although, it had felt scary when Mum had strapped Erin onto it that night, whispering hard in her ear, "I'll be back. I'll be back. I just can't take you with me. I'm sorry."

She'd left Erin in her bedroom that first night, tied to the pink chair. She'd come back the next day and untied her, given her food and water, combed her hair. It was the first time Erin had sat in a room with her mum for years. It was weird.

"Where's Dad?" she'd whispered at her mum.

"I put him in the bath."

"Why?"

"I don't know. I just didn't know what else to do with him. It's cooler in there. You know?"

Erin had nodded. She knew what her mum was trying to say. "Why did you let him die?"

"Because I couldn't think of any good reason to let him live."

"But he was my dad."

Her mum had sighed, stopped combing her hair briefly. “Yes,” she said eventually. “I know. I’m sorry. I know you were very close. But that ticker of his was always going to get him one day. He was an old man.”

“Seventy-two isn’t old!”

“No, but old enough. He would have got sick; I’d have had to care for him. I didn’t want to care for him. I’ve got a life to live, Erin. I’ve had enough of caring for people.”

“But what about me? Who’ll look after me if you don’t?”

Her mum had sighed and stroked her hair.

“We need to tell someone. About Dad?”

“Yes. I will. I just need to . . . there are other things. Things I need to sort out. There’s a woman who can help me. I’m staying with her. I just need to . . . get my head straight. Work it all out. Because my head feels very wobbly. I’m processing, as they say. I’m processing a lot of things.”

Mum came back the next day and the next day, and each day the time she stayed was shorter and shorter. And then one day she picked Erin up on the chair and put her in the storage cupboard.

“What are you doing?”

“I don’t want people looking in windows. I’ll be back in two days. Three, max.”

“Where are you going?”

“Just up north.”

“But how will I eat?”

“Look, you barely eat anyway. I just can’t come and see you, OK? But you’ll be fine.”

She’d thought, then, that her mother was mad, properly mad. Not mad like she’d always been mad, with her little obsessions, her fixa- tions, her controlling ways. And then she’d gone and the four walls of the tiny room had closed in around her, the click of the front door behind her mother sounding like some kind of death knell.

Because Erin knew that she would die in there, in that tiny, hot, hot room. She knew she would. And she nearly did.

And when she came alive again, there was Roxy.

Erin thought she had died, and that Roxy was a ghost, a spirit.

Her little sister who she hadn’t seen for six years.

Her little sister who scared her and hurt her.

Her little sister who had gone into a blue-red rage that night six years ago, seeing Brooke in her prom dress.

“You said you wouldn’t go without me. You said you wouldn’t go. You look like a stupid fucking whore. Look at you. Just fucking *look at you*.”

It was the worst thing that ever happened. Seen through the crack in Erin’s bedroom door. That lovely girl. Brooke was so lovely. Their weird life had been ten times better since Brooke came into it. And there she was. On the floor, in the hallway, all dead. Cold. Gone. Beautiful Brooke.

And then Mum coming home and all hell had let loose, the calls to Dad, the plastic sheeting, the bathroom window. Erin didn’t know what happened to Brooke after that. She never asked. She just stayed in her room. Stayed there. And stayed there. And Mum was nice to her. But Erin couldn’t be nice to Mum, not after seeing her dragging Brooke like that, wrapped in all that plastic.

Her family scared her, her whole family scared her. Even her dad. She stayed in her room. All the time. Dashed out when she could to use the bathroom, counted to ten, pushed it out, quickly, quickly, dashed back into her room, closed the door, locked the door. What if Roxy came back and tried to strangle her to death, like she had Brooke? What if her mother wrapped Erin in plastic and dropped her out of the bathroom window?

Sometimes the flat was empty and then Erin would have a shower, or a wash. But mostly she stayed in her room, unclean, unkempt, her bed dressed in the same sheets they'd been dressed in the night that Roxy killed Brooke. Her mum left clean sheets outside her room, but Erin didn't want to change them. Her sheets were soft now, so soft, almost like they were a part of her.

Dad was the only person she let into her room. Just to fix her gaming chair at first. She'd stand with her back to the wall while he did it. But then eventually she'd let him stay. Let him watch her gaming. And then slowly they became friends again.

Erased and Pops.

Pops and Erased.

Mum couldn't know, because Mum wouldn't like it.

She liked her family all in separate chunks. She liked to control it all.

And then Mum had said those things to that woman, the woman called Alix Summer. Told her those disgusting lies about her dad. Dis- gusting lies. But Mum wanted the Alix woman to hate Dad. And for the rest of the world to hate him too. Erin flinches at the memory of her mother beating Dad's corpse on the floor in the living room, kicking him and kicking him, and saying, "*I hate you, I hate you, I hate you.*"

"You know I was a child when he met me. I was thirteen, Erin. And he was forty. A married man with children not much younger than I was. He made me believe I wanted him. When I'd barely had a proper period. You and your sister idolize that man, but he's not what you think he is. His first wife was a teenager too when they met. That's not normal, Erin. Your father is not normal."

But then, neither is Erin's mum. Neither is Roxy. Neither, appar- ently, is Erin (though her thirty-eight thousand followers on Glitch think she's just fine the way she is).

But now Erin can't help but be haunted by the thought of Mum out there somewhere, hiding—assuming she's still alive—and people finding her and thinking she killed Brooke, that she abused her children, that she murdered Dad, when she didn't, not really.

Poor Mum, she thinks, poor Mum.

Roxy walks back in with the carrot soup in a bowl, and a yogurt and spoon, all balanced on a tray.

"You know," she says, placing the tray in front of Erin, "you could do this yourself. There's nothing actually wrong with you."

"I just don't like it," Erin says. "Making it."

"I know. But I can't look after you forever, you know. You're going to have to learn how to take care of yourself sooner or later."

Erin nods and bows her head. Roxy is right. She can't live with her forever. She doesn't want to live with her forever. Roxy scares her sometimes. She really does.

"We shouldn't have done the TV show, Rox," says Erin.

Roxy shoots Erin a look. "What?"

“We shouldn’t have done it. It was all over. Nobody was talking about it; nobody was thinking about it. And now everybody is talking about it and thinking about it and people won’t believe us and they’ll start digging and—”

“And *what*, Erin? What will they find?”

“They might find Mum.”

“And?”

“And they might get her to tell them what really happened.”

“And what really happened, Erin? *Nothing*, that’s what. Mum’s a nutter. The whole world knows she’s a nutter now, so who the fuck is going to believe a word she says. Eat your soup.”

“It’s too hot.”

Roxy sighs loudly, then picks up her phone and starts scrolling again.

Erin picks up her phone too. She pulls her feet up under her on the sofa and curls herself into the cushions at her back. With her phone angled away from Roxy, Erin googles Alix Summer. Her heart rate picks up when she sees that Alix has a website with a contact page. She feels Roxy’s eyes on her and quickly shuts the page down, uncurls her legs, leans toward her soup. She blows on it loudly, once, twice, four times, six times, eight times.

Roxy sighs again and then finally she gets up and leaves the room, slamming the door closed behind her.

Erin picks up her phone and scrolls back to Alix’s website.

Dear Alix, she begins.

This is Erin.

You need to make a new show.