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# Trial by Fire

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BOOK ONE OF THE WORLDWALKER TRILOGY

# TRIAL BY FIRE

JOSEPHINE ANGELINI

MACMILLAN

# CHAPTER 1

Lily Proctor ducked into the girls' room, already yanking back her rebellious hair. Aiming for the toilet through a blur of tears, she vomited until her knees shook.

Lily had been symptomatic all day, but she knew she'd rather eat her own foot than get sent home. Tristan would never take her to the party that night if he knew she was having another one of her epic reactions, and Lily couldn't afford to miss this party. Not now. Not when things between her and Tristan had so recently—and so wonderfully—changed.

Tristan Corey had been Lily's best friend all her life. They'd grown up together, building tent cities out of his mother's clean sheets and space stations out of sofa cushions. Most kids drift apart when they start to grow up—Lily knew that. Some figure out the trick of being cool, and others stay runny-nosed geeks for the rest of high school. But to Tristan's credit, no matter how popular he got over the years, or how isolated Lily became as her allergies intensified and embarrassing rumors about her mother spread, he never once backed away from their pinky-swear promise to be best friends

forever. He never tried to hide how close they were or pretended not to care about her because other kids thought she was strange. The only reason he rarely let her go to parties with him was because lots of kids smoked at them, and Lily's lungs couldn't handle smoke.

Or at least, that's what Tristan said. Since Lily had never been to one of these parties herself she couldn't know for sure, but she had a sneaking suspicion that Tristan didn't bring her with him because he was usually going to hook up with a girl. Or several girls.

Everyone in their graduating class knew that Tristan was the biggest player in Salem, Massachusetts. Sophomore year, he'd come back from summer baseball camp a foot taller and achieved legendary status by dating a senior. Ever since then the girls—and women—of Salem had passed him around like a pair of traveling pants. Unfortunately for Lily, she'd had a crush on Tristan since she first realized that there was a difference between boys and girls—way before he rode the testosterone rocket to studliness. And she'd suffered for it.

For years, she'd had to pretend that she was okay with being his girl Friday. They'd run everyday errands together—driver's ed, shopping for cleats, studying—and then, inevitably, some girl would call and he'd leave. Lily never told him how much it killed her to see the excited flush grazing his cheekbones or the hungry shine in his blue eyes when he'd give her a distracted hug good-bye and dart off to meet his latest conquest. Tristan had never looked at Lily like that. And as she heaved monstrously into the toilet, Lily had to admit she couldn't blame him for taking so long to finally kiss her.

The kiss had come out of the blue. They'd been hanging out, watching TV, and Lily had fallen asleep on his leg like she'd done a thousand times before. When she opened her eyes, he was staring down at her with a stunned look on his face. Then he'd kissed her.

That was three days ago. Even thinking about it still made Lily

shake. One second she'd been asleep, and the next Tristan was on top of her—kissing her, touching her, and slowly moving against her. Then he'd suddenly pulled away and tried to apologize. But Lily wasn't sorry at all, and she didn't want him to be, either.

They hadn't talked about it, but the next morning he'd held her hand at school. He'd even given her a sweet little kiss in front of his jock friends right before practice. Lily had never dated anyone and didn't really know how these things worked, but she was pretty sure that by taking her to the party tonight he would be announcing to everyone that they were officially together. So Lily didn't care if she coughed up her spleen or sneezed out an artery. She was going to that party if it killed her.

When she was finally done vomiting up the leaves, twigs, and roots that made up her vegan lunch, Lily staggered over to the sinks to mop her face.

She moaned when she looked in the mirror. It was worse than she'd expected. Her alabaster-white skin was flushed such a bright red it looked like someone had slapped her across the face. Crimson hives were rising like whip marks across her wing-like collarbones and her green eyes were glassy with fever. Quickly recounting everything she'd eaten that day, she couldn't think of what could have caused such a runaway reaction. Her allergy must have been caused by something she couldn't see, like the chemicals they used to clean the school, but she couldn't really be sure of that.

Lily twisted her slippery strawberry-colored curls up close to her scalp and stabbed the thick mass into a messy French twist with a pencil. She took off her SAVE THE WALES T-shirt and bent over a sink in her bra, trying to coax colder water out of the lukewarm tap by batting it with her fingertips. She splashed the not-quite-cool-enough water over the angry rash that was rising like a hot tide up her hyperreactive body.

The bell rang, signaling the end of her lunch period, and Lily had no choice but to reach into her bag for one of her many emergency kits. She dug past a bottle of quick-dissolve steroid pills and her inhaler, and went straight for the Epipen. She took the green cap off the tube of sterile plastic and jabbed the tip through the jeans covering her thigh, gritting her teeth against the painful stab.

Technically, she wasn't supposed to use her Epipen except in a life-threatening situation, but since she had no idea what was causing such a violent reaction, she figured it was better to be safe than sorry. As the medicine cocktail from the Epipen flooded her system, Lily's symptoms began to diminish. Her eyes stopped watering and her vision cleared. She shivered violently as the adrenaline from the shot rushed through her system, then realized that her entire upper body was wet. Hands shaking with the jitters, she dabbed at herself with some paper towels and put on her T-shirt as the bell rang a second time, signaling the start of the next class.

Lily ran out of the girls' room, up the stairs, and thundered down the nearly empty hallway to Mr. Carnello's classroom just before he closed the door.

"Sorry, Mr. Carn." She panted as she ducked past him.

"Are you alright?" Mr. Carnello asked her, glancing down at Lily's top and then quickly away.

"Sure. I just had a . . . thing," she mumbled distractedly, and darted into the room.

Tristan looked up from his spot at their lab table and narrowed his eyes at her as she made her way over to him. She noticed a couple of people looking at her strangely as she sat down. She tried to smile back at them in friendly way, but they all looked away from her without making eye contact.

"Lily," Tristan hissed at her.

"What?" she hissed back.

"Why are your boobs wet?"

"My what?" Lily looked down at her T-shirt and saw that the white material was completely transparent where her soggy bra had soaked through. Mortified, she crossed her arms over her chest. She could hear a few guys snickering in the corner and saw Tristan's head spin around, silencing them with a look.

"Do you need a moment to collect yourself, Miss Proctor?" Mr. Carnello asked kindly.

"No. We're good," Tristan answered for Lily as he quickly pulled his sweater over his head.

The shirt he was wearing underneath hiked up accidentally as he did so, and a few girls whispered excitedly at the glimpse of rippling muscles and velvety skin. Tristan helped Lily into his sweater as if he didn't even hear them. Considering the fact that he just had to walk past most girls to make them groan out loud, he probably didn't. But Lily heard them, and felt herself flush with even more heat as she resisted the urge to strangle them.

"Do you have a fever?" he asked.

"I always have a fever," Lily replied grumpily, which they both knew was true.

Lily's body ran hot—about 102 degrees on a normal day. On a bad day, her fever could shoot up as high as 111 degrees. The doctors had no idea how she'd survived some of her worst attacks, but then again, they had no idea about a lot of things where Lily was concerned.

"I'm serious," replied Tristan, pointing accusingly at the spot of blood on her jeans where she'd impaled herself with the Epipen. "Do you need me to take you home? Or the hospital?"

"I'm *fine*," she replied emphatically. "Really. I feel great." She paused and smiled ruefully. "Well, apart from the whole wet-boobs-in-class thing."

Lily gave him a saucy look and nudged his arm, brushing the whole thing off. After everything that people had said about her and her family, a wet T-shirt was the least of Lily's problems. Tristan's big blue eyes sparkled and his light-brown hair fell across his forehead as he ducked his head with quiet laughter. He had a million little gestures like this that left her star struck. He was almost too pretty to look at sometimes, and Lily couldn't believe how lucky she was that he was finally hers.

"Pay attention to Mr. Carn," she chastised, like Tristan had been the one to disrupt class. He nudged her back and they focused on the lecture.

"If any symbol fits the universe better than this one"—Mr. Carnello spun to his projector and drew the sideways figure eight that represented infinity—"it would be this one." He drew an equal sign. "Newton proved that if you hit a ball with a known amount of force, that force doesn't disappear. It's turned into kinetic energy, and the ball flies a distance that you can measure with accuracy. Why? Because energy in"—he tapped one side of the equal sign—"is equal to the energy out." He finished by tapping the other side of the equal sign. "So. Energy changes. Matter can even change into energy—we'll get to Einstein's E equals mc squared later—but you can't make something out of nothing. This is the first law of thermodynamics. Now! *Thermo*, which is Greek for 'heat,' and *dynamics*, from the Greek *dynamikos,* which means 'power.' Heat and power are two halves of the same whole."

Mr. Carnello began to scribble furiously as he mumbled to himself. Lily and Tristan looked at each other and grinned. They both loved science. In fact, Tristan had scored higher on his Biology Achievement Test than anyone else in the state that year, and he was seriously thinking about enrolling as a premed student in one of the Ivy League schools that he would apply to this winter. It was only

early November, and seniors still had another month or two to pick colleges, declare their majors, and basically figure out the rest of their lives before they all turned eighteen. Lily was sure Tristan had already decided to be a doctor someday. After spending so much time visiting her at Mass General when she was having one of her more severe attacks, he certainly knew his way around a hospital.

Lily wasn't particularly interested in being a doctor herself, but she studied all the sciences with a passion. She had always been able to understand physics intuitively, and on the days she was feeling particularly put upon, Lily believed this was because her body was a wacky science experiment gone wrong. Every year, Lily's ailments grew worse, and not even the cadre of specialists in Boston she went to see every month knew how to treat her. She'd always dreamed of chaining herself to an endangered redwood tree or participating in a long sit-in to stop animal testing, but the truth was, her body would never let her do those things. She probably wouldn't even be able to live on campus when she went to college next year—if she was healthy enough to attend college at all.

A wave of anxiety overtook her at the thought of Tristan going far away to college. Harvard and Brown were close enough for him to commute easily, but what if he decided to go to Columbia—or worse, Cornell? Ithaca was a six-hour drive from Salem.

As Mr. Carnello delved into the finer points of thermodynamics, the adrenaline from the Epipen shot abandoned Lily all at once, leaving her with a killer headache and a raging case of paranoia about her changing status in Tristan's life. She resisted the urge to rub her temples and beg Tristan to stay in Boston. Every time Tristan looked over at her to see if she was okay, Lily smiled brightly to prove how great she felt. What she really needed was about a gallon of water to wash away the bitter film that was coating the inside of her mouth, but she'd have to wait until after class to go to the bubbler or Tristan

would know she felt sick. Lily nearly sighed with relief when the bell rang.

"Thanks for the loaner." She pulled Tristan's sweater off and handed it to him. "I think my boobs are sufficiently dry now." She fanned her flushed face. "Actually, I think they're cooked. I was roasting all period."

"And I was freezing." Tristan gratefully put his sweater back on with a shiver. "Mr. Carn always keeps his room so damn cold."

"The half-dissected cats like it better that way."

"You're just lucky I love you."

"Yeah, right. You just didn't want me flashing the whole room!" Lily exclaimed a bit too loudly.

She watched Tristan grab his stuff and hurry out of the room, not even thinking twice about his choice of words. He said he loved her every now and again. It didn't mean the same thing to him as is it did to her, and Lily knew it. But she also knew that he did care deeply about her, which made the situation all the more confusing. Since their steamy episode on the couch, Tristan hadn't tried anything sexier than a few chaste kisses and a lot of hand-holding. He loved her—Lily had known that for years—but he just didn't seem to be all the crazy about her body.

Not that she had a bad body, Lily thought as she grabbed a sip from the bubbler and then followed Tristan to their side-by-side lockers. Sure, she had skin that was much too fair for the current style and she was painfully skinny, but even she was aware of the fact that she had a great face. Well, Lily conceded, she had a great face when it wasn't leaking snot or covered in hives, which wasn't very often. And the hair was a problem. Bright red, thicker than polar bear fur and curly as scissor-skinned ribbons on a birthday present, Lily's hair was a force to be reckoned with. She wouldn't be surprised if it could be seen from space, and she spent most of her time

pinning it back, pulling it up, and generally trying to convince it not to eat her face.

Lily hated her hair, probably because it reminded her so much of her mother's. Her big sister, Juliet, had pin-straight locks in a perfectly respectable shade of brown, but not Lily. Oh, no. On top of having to wear a battalion of medic-alert bracelets that proclaimed her freakiness to the world, Lily had also been saddled with her mom's crazy hair.

Lily fervently hoped she hadn't gotten her mom's crazy mind to go with it.

"Are you sure you want to go to your last class?" Tristan asked skeptically as he watched Lily pull her Spanish textbook out of her locker. "I could get a pass and drive you home right now," he offered.

"What for?" Lily said brightly.

Tristan straightened to his full height of six foot two and turned toward her. He reached out with one of his long, supple arms and boxed her in against the wall of lockers. She went still and looked up at him. Tristan was one of those rare guys whose skin always managed to look dewy and fresh, like every inch of him was utterly kissable.

"No jokes. No acting tough," he said, easing closer to her until his thighs rested on hers. Tristan brushed her cheek with the backs of his fingers. "You don't have to come with me to the party tonight."

Lily frowned. If he thought she was so sick, why would he go the party without her? She was about to ask him when a shrill voice interrupted them.

"Are you *serious*?"

Lily and Tristan broke apart and turned to see Miranda Clark staring at them, her hands planted on her shapely hips and an exaggerated look of disgust on her spray-tanned face. Half the

hallway full of students slowed to gawk.

"What, Miranda? You got something to say?" Tristan said rudely.

"Yeah, I got something to say," Miranda retorted, her lower lip trembling.

Lily felt bad for her. Under all that lip gloss and chemically treated blonde hair, it was easy to see that she was hurt. Tristan didn't talk about his love life with Lily, but she was pretty sure that Miranda and he had been involved a few weeks back. Lily wasn't sure exactly when they'd stopped seeing each other, but from the stunned look on Miranda's face, Lily guessed that it had been recently. Maybe too recently.

"This should be great," Tristan said, crossing his arms and smirking. "Remember to use your big-girl words, Miranda."

Lily gaped at Tristan, surprised at how cruel he was being. True, Miranda Clark wasn't the smartest girl in school, but she was two years younger than they were. Of course her vocabulary wouldn't be on the same level as theirs. What was he doing hooking up with a fifteen-year-old to begin with? The whole episode was leaving a bad taste in Lily's mouth.

"Miranda. I'm sorry you're upset, but maybe we should talk about this later?" Lily said. Miranda didn't appreciate Lily's peace offering. In fact, she looked like she was just about to pounce on Lily and beat the crap out of her.

"This isn't your mess, Lily," Tristan said tiredly. "Go to Spanish. I'll handle her."

"Mess?" Miranda said, focusing her rage on him. "You think I'm a *mess*?" she repeated, her tone sliding up an octave.

The bell rang, breaking up the knot of bystanders, but Miranda didn't move. She waited, eyes bright with furious tears, for Tristan to deal with her.

"Go," Tristan repeated to Lily. "I got this."

Lily turned and went to her class. Behind her, she could hear the two of them arguing. The volume rose steadily until Lily could catch the last retort from all the way down the hall.

"Whatever, Miranda," Tristan said. "I honestly don't care about what you think." Then Lily—and half the student body—heard Miranda slap Tristan across the face.

Lily ducked into her classroom rather than go back and defend Tristan as she might have a few days ago. This wasn't the first time a girl had slapped her best friend, but it was the first time Lily believed he'd really deserved it.

After school, Lily felt a bit strange getting a ride home from Tristan as she usually did. Having no other option, she waited in the parking lot by his car and grimaced when she saw the hassled look on his face as he came toward to her.

"I could have my mom . . ." Lily began halfheartedly.

"Your mom? Driving? Like I want innocent blood on my hands," he said, raising an eyebrow.

"She'd never make it out of the driveway, anyways," Lily said dryly. "The garage confuses her."

Tristan unlocked the doors on the Chevy Volt that he kept immaculate for Lily, and they both got in.

"Sorry about today," he said sincerely. "I didn't mean to drag you into it."

"That was some slap. How's your face?"

He sighed dramatically. "Unfortunately, the nurse said that slap was loaded with cooties."

Lily sucked in a pained breath. "Cooties. You know what that means?"

"They'll have to amputate."

"Girls across the tri-state area will be inconsolable. A national day of mourning is sure to follow."

He smiled at her lazily, his mouth inches away, eyes locked with hers. Lily desperately wanted to forget the whole thing and kiss his cootie-infested face, but something held her back.

"How's Miranda?" Lily asked, looking down at her hands.

"How should I know?" Tristan turned back to the steering wheel and started the car. His coldness toward Miranda disturbed her. Was this how Tristan treated every girl he was finished with?

"Do you want me to talk to her?" Lily offered. "I can tell her it was unexpected. That she's got the wrong idea about us and what happened."

"Miranda has so many wrong ideas in her head I don't see how setting her straight about one of them will make any difference. She's not the sharpest tool in the shed, Lily." Tristan glanced at the look on Lily's face while he drove out of the parking lot and knew what she was thinking. "I know, I know," he said with exasperation. "If I think she's an idiot, I probably shouldn't have fooled around with her in the first place, right?"

"She's a lot younger than us, Tristan. Two years is a big deal," Lily objected gently.

"I guess." He sighed. "But trust me, Lily. Miranda's not some innocent little girl. I didn't, you know, ruin her or anything."

"Ruin her? What century is this?" Lily chuckled. Tristan's lips turned up in a tiny smile. Lily took a second to steel herself for the next question. "Were you still involved with Miranda the other night?"

He rolled his eyes. "She wasn't my girlfriend. I never made any promises to her, and it was idiotic of her to think we were going to be a couple."

They drove in silence for a bit.

"Just out of curiosity, how would a girl know if you *were* going to be a couple?" Lily was reaching—fishing for a commitment from

him like she was one of his desperate admirers. She disliked herself for it, and as the silence stretched out, her question hanging like a bad smell in the air, she started to dislike him for not answering her. They pulled into Lily's driveway, Tristan's face never even twitching to show that he'd registered what she'd said.

"I'll pick you up at seven for the party," he said, then drove off.

Lily stood outside in the cold sea air after Tristan left. She liked the cold. She especially liked the clean, salty air that blew in off the Atlantic Ocean, which was pounding away at the rocky shore just a few blocks from her house. Cold, damp air cleared her head and soothed her skin. Luckily for Lily, growing up in Salem meant that there had always been plenty of blustery winds off the water.

When she was comfortable and cool, Lily turned and went inside the ancient Colonial house that had been in her family since the Pilgrims had landed. Literally. Lily's parents, Samantha and James Proctor, could trace their families back to the *Mayflower*, and both of them had family members who had either lived in Salem or the surrounding Essex County since there was such as thing as an Essex County on this continent. Sometimes Lily wondered if her raging allergies were from inbreeding, but her sister told her that was ridiculous. Tristan's family, the Coreys, had been in Salem just as long as the Proctors had, and there was certainly nothing inbred about Tristan.

Lily put her stuff down on the kitchen table and listened to the house for a moment. "Mom?" she called, when she decided it sounded empty.

"Is that you, Lillian?" Only Samantha, Lily's mom, called her by her full name.

"Yeah, it's me. Where are you?" Lily wandered toward her mother's voice, confused. It sounded like she was out in the garage.

"Ah, Mom. Look at this mess," Lily exclaimed when she saw

what her mother was up to out there.

Samantha sat at her old potter's wheel, her curly red hair sticking out wildly, throwing clay in her pajamas and robe. She was in the spot where Lily's dad parked his car, but she hadn't put a tarp down underneath her. The floor was covered in drippings that were already beginning to harden. They'd have to be chipped off, but that was only half the problem. In the parking spot next to that, her mom's old Jeep Grand Cherokee was splattered with clay. Lily dug her hands into her hair, surveying the disaster.

"There she is—no bumps or bruises! I almost came to get you at school," Samantha said in chipper way. She only garbled her words a little, and that concerned Lily. The meds made her slur, and the slightly clearer speech could mean that she hadn't taken all of them today. "But when I didn't get the phone call from your principal, I knew that my Lillian wasn't the one that trashy girl had attacked in the hallway. See? That's how I knew the difference between what happened *here* and what happened *elsewhere*."

Lily tried and failed to work out her mom's logic.

"And then I saw my wheel!" Samantha continued happily. "And I wondered, why did I ever stop throwing pots?"

Lily looked at the watered-down lump of poorly mixed clay in her mother's shaky hands and couldn't think of a way to say the phrase *you lost your mind and the meds destroyed your talent* so it didn't sound cruel.

It hadn't escaped Lily's notice that before she'd gone to Spanish, Miranda had looked like she'd wanted to attack her but had settled for Tristan instead. Yet, according to her mother, the fight *had* happened. Elsewhere. The new medication obviously wasn't strong enough. If her mother was underdosed, things could get ugly. She'd need help.

"Hey, Mom? Aren't you cold?" she asked brightly. Samantha

nodded, like it had just occurred to her that she was. "Why don't you go inside, and I'll finish up out here for you."

"Thank you, dear," Samantha said placidly. She slid out of her dirty Crocs and took off her ruined robe, handing it to Lily.

"I'm going to take you upstairs, tuck you in, and then make a few phone calls, okay?" Lily said carefully. When her mom got confused like this Lily knew the best way to keep her calm was to be as clear as possible.

"Yes, call your sister and tell her exactly what happened," Samantha said. Her face suddenly got serious and she grasped Lily's hands with her clay-covered ones. "There isn't a Juliet who doesn't love you," she said desperately. "Remember that."

"Sure, Mom," Lily said, smiling brightly as she pried her fingers free. "Let's get cleaned up, okay?"

Samantha nodded and shuffled inside. Lily pulled out her cell phone and called her dad, just in case he decided to answer. When she was shunted to voicemail after two rings, Lily didn't even bother to leave a message. He was obviously avoiding the call and probably wouldn't check his inbox for hours. She speed-dialed her big sister, Juliet, instead.

"What's wrong?" came Juliet's immediate response.

"Mom's having a bad day," Lily said, not at all surprised that her sister already knew something was out of place. The two sisters often joked that their phones were so used to making emergency calls that they had somehow learned how to ring more urgently when there was trouble. Lily walked over to the refrigerator and checked her mom's meds.

"Did she get loose again?" Juliet asked.

"No," Lily replied thankfully as she counted her mom's pills. "She just decided to make a few pots. But she neglected to take the car out of the garage first."

"Fantastic." Juliet paused. She and Lily started laughing at the same time. "How bad is it?"

"Oh, it's pretty impressive, Jules." Lily finished counting the pills. "I just checked, and she took all her meds today, so we'll have to talk to the doctors about her dosage again. I can clean up the mess myself, but I'm worried about leaving her alone tonight. And I have this thing."

"A date?" Juliet practically screamed with excitement.

"Sort of." Lily felt her cheeks heat with a blush. "Tristan's taking me to a party."

"A party." Juliet sighed heavily. "Lily, are you sure about that? With all the hair products and perfume that the girls will be wearing, and the alcohol and smoke?"

"Can you come or not?" Lily asked quietly. "It would mean a lot to me."

Juliet paused. "We'll talk about the party when I get there," she said, and ended the call.

Lily decided to start on the Jeep first. Her dad's spot could wait. It wasn't like he'd be coming home that night anyway.

Technically, Lily's parents weren't divorced, but her father had pretty much abandoned the family about the time her mother started wandering around sleepy Salem, screaming at everyone to shut up. James had hung in there for a few years. Lily was in eighth grade when her allergy symptoms started escalating exponentially and, as luck would have it, at around the same time Samantha began accosting people at the grocery store. She'd started walking right up to people, telling them she knew about the affair they were having, the bankruptcy they were hiding, or the Adderall they were stealing from their kids to lose weight.

Sometimes she was right, and sometimes she wasn't. When she was wrong, she simply said that another "version" of the person

she'd accused had done what she'd said. Samantha caused a lot of trouble for some good people, but she'd downright humiliated anyone with the last name Proctor. In a small community like Salem, having a crazy mother was not something that was easily overlooked. By the time Juliet went to college two years ago, it seemed like all of Salem had turned on the Proctor family and wanted to run them out of town.

That's when James stopped coming home most nights. He couldn't take the embarrassment of being married to the town kook, but he knew that if he filed for divorce he'd end up getting burdened with Lily. No court would grant Samantha custody of a minor with as many medical problems as Lily had, and James didn't like sickness, either mental or physical. He didn't file for divorce or involve the legal system in any way because he knew he would end up with more responsibility. Instead, he just stopped showing up.

Lily filled a bucket with soap and water and opened the garage door so she could let out the fumes of the cleaning goop while she scrubbed. Even the non-toxic stuff her mom bought at Whole Foods still irritated Lily if she was around it in its undiluted form for too long. Ten minutes later, her eyes were watering from the chemicals so badly she could barely see. She ignored them. She had a party to go to, damn it, and after everything that had already happened that day, a couple of leaky eyes weren't about to stop her. Another twenty minutes later, she was mostly done with the Jeep, when she heard Juliet's car pull into the driveway and park.

"You know what? The way the clay's all flung out like that, it almost looks festive," her sister said from the garage door.

"I'll be your best friend if you check on Mom," Lily said, wiping her hair off her damp forehead.

"Fever?" Juliet crossed the garage to Lily. Her giant brown eyes were rounded with concern. Lily edged away from her sister's

smooth, cool hands before Juliet could touch her face.

"Just warm from all this exercise," Lily said.

Juliet cocked her chin as she judged Lily's health. The gesture accentuated the heart shape of her face, and as she pursed her naturally red lips with worry, Lily thought, as she always did, that Juliet's mouth looked like a heart inside a heart—a small red one inside a larger, pale one. Lily knew most people considered her sister a bit plain. Juliet dressed conservatively and never wore makeup or styled her straight, mousy-brown hair. But to Lily that stuff was irrelevant. She thought her sister was the prettiest girl she'd ever seen.

"Check on Mom. I'm awesome." Lily turned Juliet by the shoulders and gave her a playful kick on the rump to get her to go inside.

When Lily finished, she found her sister sitting in bed with their mom, taking her pulse. At twenty, Juliet was already a registered EMT and moonlighted at a hospital to pay her way through Boston University. Sometimes it seemed like everyone closest to Lily had decided at an early age that it would be a good idea to go into medicine—probably because at some point they'd seen paramedics fighting to keep Lily breathing. That kind of experience tends to leave a lasting impression on a kid.

"How is she?" Lily whispered when her sister looked up. Juliet tilted her head to the side in a noncommittal gesture before easing herself off the bed and taking Lily out to the hall.

"Her pulse is racing. Which is kind of hard to do when you have two hundred milligrams of Thorazine and an Ambien in you."

"Is she alright alone?"

"She's fine for now," Juliet whispered, her big eyes downcast.

"Did she say what's bothering her?" Lily asked. She took Juliet's arm and led her down the hall to her room.

"She's paranoid." Juliet sighed as she sat on Lily's bed. "She said another Lillian was planning on taking *her* Lillian."

"That's—" Lily stopped, overwhelmed.

"—the way she explains her hallucinations to herself," Juliet finished for her. "The hallucinations aren't wrong if they really happen *somewhere*. She isn't crazy if there are multiple versions of people and multiple worlds that only she knows about."

"Yeah." Lily agreed reluctantly. Something about this explanation bothered her. She knew her mom made stuff up, but how had she known about Miranda nearly starting a fight with her in the hallway? It hadn't happened, but it almost had. It certainly could have happened if one or two things had worked out differently. "But it's spooky how close to true her lies sound sometimes."

"Yeah. I know."

"And it keeps getting weirder."

"Schizophrenia is a degenerative disease."

Juliet said things like that sometimes. It wasn't to edify Lily, who already knew the ins and outs of their mom's condition. It was to remind herself that no matter how much of a nightmare all of this seemed, it was still considered normal in some textbook somewhere. Feigning normalcy didn't help Lily much. Cracking a joke usually did, though.

"Ah, schizophrenia. The gift that keeps on giving."

Neither of them laughed, but they both smiled sadly and nodded in unison. It helped to have someone to nod with. That's how Lily and Juliet survived. A textbook answer, a bad joke, and a sister to lean on, and so far they'd managed to keep their dysfunctional little family from going completely down the drain.

"So what's all this about a party?" Juliet asked.

Lily sat down next to her sister. "It's the only one I've been invited to since junior prom. Which I missed because I got sick," Lily said quietly. Juliet wanted to interrupt. Lily took her hand and kept going before her sister could argue. "Look, I know what's happening

to me. I know that soon I won't be able to go to school anymore. I'm out of time, Jules. And it's okay. Well, no, it isn't okay, but I've accepted it at least. I just want to go to one high school party before I'm stuck inside a plastic bubble for the rest of my life."

"So. Tristan's taking you," Juliet began cautiously.

"Yeah." Lily looked down, smiling softly. "And I'm pretty sure we're going as a couple."

"But he doesn't care if you don't go to parties. You know that."

"I also know how long I waited for this. How long I waited for him. I can't miss this party, Jules."

Juliet tilted her head to the side and rested it on Lily's shoulder. They sat together for a while, comforted just to be close to each other.

"Want me to blow out your hair?" Juliet asked after a long silence. She sat up and looked Lily in the eye, smiling.

"Would you?" Lily jumped off the bed and pulled her sister up with her, as if the melancholy exchange they'd just had was miles away already. "I can never get the back."