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Firewalker

Written by

Josephine Angelini

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BOOK TWO OF THE WORLDWALKER TRILOGY

WITCHES DO NOT DIE QUIETLY



MACMILLAN



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For Pia

CHAPTER 1

Lily lay floating on a raft of pain. Terror kept her clinging to it. If she slipped off the side, she knew she'd drown in the smothering darkness that swelled like an ocean under the sparking surface of life. She wanted to let go, but fear wouldn't let her. When the pain became too much to bear, she hoped that at least the fear would end so she could allow herself to slip weightlessly into the hushed waters of death.

But the fear didn't end. And Lily knew she couldn't let go. She was a witch. Witches don't die quietly in the cold, muffled silence of water. Witches die screaming in the roaring mouths of fire.

"Open your eyes," Rowan pleaded desperately. Wading her way back to the sound of his voice, Lily forced herself to do as he said. She saw his soot-smeared face, smiling down on hers. "There you are," he whispered.

She tried to smile back at him, but her skin was tight and raw and her face wouldn't move. All she could taste was blood.

"Do you recognize this place?" he asked, looking around anxiously. "I've never seen anything like it." He tilted her up in

his arms so she could glance around.

It was nighttime. Lily felt pavement under her hand and realized they were lying in the middle of the road. She heard a jingling sound when she moved. The shackles and chains from the pyre were still bound to her wrists, the weight of them dragging down her arms. She focused her eyes and looked up the street. It was snowing. The streetlamps were few and far between. Woods surrounded them, but not the impossibly dense, old woods of Rowan's world. These were young woods. Her woods.

The winding road and rolling hills were familiar. Lily knew this place. They were two towns away from Salem in Wenham, Massachusetts. She hadn't realized her pyre had been that far from the walls of Salem. The battlefield in the other Salem must have been enormous, and she had filled it with blood.

"I think we're on Topsfield Road," Lily croaked. "There's a farm up ahead."

"A farm?" Rowan said, squinting his eyes as he tried to peer through the trees. There was a flash of light and Rowan's head snapped around.

"Headlights," Lily rasped, her voice failing. "We have to get out of the road."

"You're badly burned," Rowan began hesitantly.

"Have to. We'll get hit."

Rowan reluctantly starting gathering her up in his arms, but Lily screamed before he could pick her up. It felt like he was tearing off her skin.

The raft of pain rose up again, lifting Lily up and out of herself. The headlights grew closer, blinding her. Tires squealed. Car doors slammed. As she drifted away from it all on her raft, she heard a familiar voice.

"Go help him, Juliet," the voice commanded. "Careful! She's burnt to a cinder."

"Mom?" Lily whispered, and then gave herself to the wet darkness.

Juliet stared at the charred girl lying in the middle of the road, momentarily unable to accept that she was looking at her little sister. The skinny girl was burned and bloody all over, but her raspy voice was unmistakable. It was Lily.

A frantic young man clutched her to his chest. Juliet had never seen anyone quite like him before. His hands and forearms were burned as well, but the rest of his leather-clad body was drenched in blood. Juliet got the sickening feeling that the blood was not his own. He was carrying two gore-tipped short swords strapped across his back and his sooty hands looked as if they knew how to use them. At his waist was what seemed to be a whole kit of silver knives arrayed from his belt and strapped down the side of his right thigh. He looked like an utter savage.

"Go, Juliet!" Samantha ordered.

Her mother's voice, strangely calm and in control for the first time in ages, was what snapped Juliet out of her shock. She strode forward and knelt down next to the stranger and saw a flash of silver around her sister's wrists.

"Why is Lily wearing chains?" she asked accusingly, her voice pitched low to keep it from shaking. When she lifted her eyes to meet the strangers', her gaze was caught by something at his throat. It was a large jewel that seemed to throb with dark light—if there was such a thing as dark light, Juliet thought. She blinked her eyes and looked away, both disturbed and drawn to the odd jewel at the same time.

"Samantha, do you know me?" the savage asked. Juliet stiffened in fear. Who was this guy?

"How do you know my mother's name?" she asked, certain

that it hadn't been said in his presence.

"Yes, I know you, Rowan," Samantha answered, waving an impatient hand in Juliet's direction to keep her quiet. "What do we need to do?"

"We need to get her by a fire so I can start to heal her," Rowan said. He started to lift Lily, and she moaned in pain.

"What? We need to call 911 and get an ambulance," Juliet yelled. She reached out a hand to restrain Rowan from moving her. "You're hurting her!"

"I know that," he shouted back, his expression desperate. "But we have to move her. I can't heal her here."

"Mom!" Juliet screamed. "For all we know, he *did* this to her."

"No, he didn't. Listen to him, Juliet. He's the only one who can help her now," Samantha said sternly.

Juliet searched for any sign in her mother's eyes that she had lost it, but all she saw was cold, hard sanity—something Juliet hadn't seen in her mother in a long time.

Samantha knew exactly what was going on, even if Juliet didn't, and it was Samantha who had said she knew where to find Lily and she'd forced Juliet to take her to this stretch of road in the middle of the night. Juliet had no idea how her mother could know where to find Lily after three months of her being missing, but right now there were more pressing matters, like saving Lily's life. And at the moment that seemed doubtful. Juliet had candy-striped in hospitals and trained as an EMT. She was going to med school at Boston University and she'd seen enough to know when someone was dying. Although Juliet said under her breath that they should be taking Lily to an emergency room, she knew it would make no difference at this point. Her little sister was going to die whether they got her to an ICU or not.

Rowan kept Lily on his lap in the backseat of the car while Juliet

drove as quickly as she dared through the falling snow. She gripped the wheel as if she were trying to wring it dry in order to keep her hands from shaking. Her sister, missing and thought to be dead, was back. And she was dying in the backseat of Juliet's car.

Juliet's eyes kept bouncing up to the rearview mirror as she drove. She watched this Rowan character cradling Lily in his lap, trying to soothe her. He spoke to her gently to keep her conscious, saying anything that popped into his head—outrageous things, like how Lily wouldn't dare leave him alone. How he needed her. How lost he would be without her. But Juliet's suspicion was not as easily quenched as her mother's. Lily had been kidnapped three months ago, and Rowan must have had some part in it, no matter how tenderly he seemed to hold her and speak to her.

Lily was delirious by the time they got her home, humming and whispering to herself in a singsong way as if she were soothing a child. Rowan carried her inside and laid her in front of the fireplace.

"Fill a cauldron with water and bring it to me," he ordered as he unstrapped his weapons and started laying his knives out on the floor around Lily. Juliet stared at him, rooted to the spot. "Move, Juliet," he barked.

Spurred into action, Juliet began opening up cabinets even though she was quite sure they were fresh out of cauldrons. She ended up grabbing her mom's biggest copper-bottomed stockpot and filling it while Rowan listed more things he needed to Samantha. It was mostly herbs. Juliet hauled the pot of water into the living room where Rowan had a small fire going in the fireplace. He glanced at the pot dubiously.

"It's all we have," Juliet said with a defensive shrug.

"Then it'll have to do. Put it on the fire and open all the windows," he directed, scowling, as he stripped off his blood-soaked shirt.

"This is insane," Juliet said, but did as he instructed. As she pushed

open the last window, Juliet saw an eerie pulse of light swell inside the room like an expanding bubble and turned to face the source of the light. Her skin tingled as it passed over her, membrane-like, and all sound in the room was muffled as if someone had stuffed cotton in her ears. At the center of the bubble was Rowan's odd amulet. Juliet looked down and saw three jewels like Rowan's winking at her sister's throat.

"She's so weak," Rowan whispered. He knelt down beside Lily and began cutting away what was left of her clothes. "Samantha, burn the sage and walk around the room counterclockwise," he said. "Juliet, start rubbing this salve on some of the lesser blisters. See if it helps."

Rowan took a tiny glass jar of greenish salve out of a pouch on his belt and put it into Juliet's hands. She started dabbing the stuff hopelessly on her sister's skin.

"This isn't going to—" she began, and stopped. She sat back on her heels. "Impossible," she breathed. Where Juliet had put the salve, Lily's blisters had shrunk away to nothing. Before her eyes, the broken skin was healed. Juliet looked up at Rowan, her mouth hanging open.

"It won't do anything for the really bad burns, but it will soothe some of the pain," he explained.

"How did you—?"

"Magic," Rowan answered automatically. "We need to make a tent. Lily's lungs are scalded raw and they're filling with blood. She'll drown if we don't stop it. Do you have large sheets and a way to prop them over her?"

"Yes," Juliet replied, and stumbled out of the room to the linen closet, dumbfounded by what she had just seen. No medicine worked that fast. Burned skin did not heal in a few seconds—if it ever really healed at all.

Juliet returned with the sheets, and saw Rowan leaning over Lily.

Tendrils of reddish-purple light emanated from the dark jewel at his throat and danced across Lily's face. One of the tendrils snaked down Lily's throat, and she gasped and sputtered. Rowan turned her head to the side and blood oozed out of Lily's mouth. Juliet took a step forward to stop him. When he looked up at her his face was pale and strained with effort and his eyes were so frantic that Juliet checked herself.

"Hold that sheet over us. Keep the steam in," he said weakly.

Juliet's arms shook with fear, and the hair on her arms stood up at an uncanny frisson when she came near Rowan's strange bubble of dark light. She threw the sheet over the three of them, including an edge of the now-steaming pot as she wrestled with herself. Juliet was a rational, sensible woman. She knew there was no such thing as magic—except she also *knew*, on some deep level, that what she was witnessing had no other explanation.

"Magic," Juliet muttered, half out of her wits with anxiety and disbelief.

"Yes," Rowan replied. "I've got to ease the blood out of her lungs before I mend the damaged tissue, but if I do it too quickly I could choke her." He suddenly leaned forward, tilting his ear close to Lily's mouth. "What? What are you saying?" Rowan whispered to Lily.

"Water, water everywhere . . . ," she replied, and then her eyes relaxed, half open and half closed, and her body went slack.

"Lily? Lily!" Juliet gasped, her voice quickly rising in panic.

"She's not dead," Rowan said. "She's spirit walking. We can't reach her now."

Juliet saw Lily's lips moving slightly. "Who is she talking to?"

"I don't know," Rowan replied. "Whoever it is, I hope they give her some comfort." He sat up and took a shuddering breath, his fierce gaze meeting Juliet's. "Now we really get to work. I know you don't

have a weak stomach, so I'm going to count on you, Juliet. This won't be easy or pretty."

"Don't worry about me," Juliet replied. He looked at her like he knew her. It puzzled Juliet because something in her whispered that she *did* know this young man, even though she'd never laid eyes on him before. "Just tell me what to do."

Lily saw her sister and her mother. She saw Rowan. She saw her home. All of the things she loved were inches away from her, but they drifted by like hawks soaring on an updraft. They kept falling away from her until all she saw was mist.

She was floating on a misty ocean. Across from her was herself. Lily and Lillian sat across from each other in identical poses—their legs drawn up close, chins resting on their knees, arms wrapped around their shins. Lily spoke first, and Lillian answered. Mindspeak was all they needed here on the raft.

"Water, water, everywhere,
And all the boards did shrink;
Water, water, everywhere,
Nor any drop to drink."

That's quite fitting, Lily. I'm so thirsty.

Are you burned, too, Lillian?

Of course. You and I are in the same boat—or raft, as you imagine it. The pyre gives more than it takes, but it always seems to take more than you can bear.

Where are we?

I call it the Mist. It's neither here nor there, neither living nor dead. Can you remember the rest of that poem, Lily?

No. I read it before I had a willstone. My memory wasn't perfect then like it is now—unfortunately, because I wish I could forget this. I know I won't, though. I remember every second of my life now that I have a willstone.

I've had a willstone since I was six and haven't forgotten anything since. There are things I would give anything to forget. But I can't.

I saw Rowan reading an old math textbook once. Tristan told me Rowan had to relearn nearly everything because he smashed his first willstone and those memories were no longer stored for him. I wonder how many memories Rowan entrusted to his first willstone that are lost to him now.

He's lucky, actually. I remember every second he and I spent together and it kills me.

I don't want to pity you, Lillian.

Then don't. All I'm asking is for you to let me show you some of my memories. We're both unconscious and barely alive. There's no easier time to communicate across the worlds than now. I thought you might like to know more about me. And maybe I want one person to understand me in case I die.

Okay, Lillian, but only because I need someone, too. Pain is lonely, isn't it?

It is, Lily. It really is. But fear is even lonelier.

Show me your fear then, Lillian, and let's be lonely together.

Lily was no longer on the raft. Nor was she herself. In joining Lillian's memory she became Lillian. She wasn't simply recalling what had happened to Lillian, she was reliving it. The first thing she felt was terror . . .

. . . The air is wrong. It's choking me and burning the back of my throat. Ash is floating fat as snowflakes. Did I even worldjump?

I had Captain Leto's men build my pyre far from the walls of Salem. In the world I am trying to get to there is no need for the wall anymore, and from my spirit walks with the shaman I have seen this other Salem is substantially different from the one I live in. I've learned that when I worldjump I end up in the exact location I left—only in a different universe—and if I were to worldjump from the top of the wall or from the fireplace in my rooms at the Citadel, I might appear inside a piece of furniture or forty feet in the air. The only safe place to worldjump is from the ground, and even then it's still dangerous.

You never really know what dangers await when you cross the worldfoam.

Leto had been reluctant to set my pyre so far outside of Salem. He worried about the Woven, but what I couldn't tell him is that where I was going, there would be no Woven in the woods to fear. I didn't want to promise too much in case the shaman was wrong. Leto and his soldiers are from Walltop. From their vantage, they've seen more of the evils of the Woven than have any other citizens of the Thirteen Cities and have more reason to want them eradicated. More reason to fear them.

I sit up. There's no flame under me. That means I'm not on the pyre anymore. I look around. There's nothing but charred ground and blasted trees as far as I can see into the murky distance. The air isn't just acrid. On the elemental level it roils with huge particles. Damaging ones. They tear through my cells, wreaking havoc.

I'm in the wrong world. One of the cinder worlds. I knew it would be dangerous to worldjump without a lighthouse, but I did it anyway. Rowan says I never listen to anyone, but what choice did I have?

I don't have time to panic. I stand up and run to the trees. I need to build another pyre to fuel a worldjump and get myself out of this dead place. When my hand touches the trunk of the first tree, the bark crumbles in my hand and falls through my fingers like the dried-out walls of an old sand castle. The next tree is the same. And the next. What caused this? The huge particles I see on the elemental level, destroying the life-helix? If so, what caused *them*? It's almost as if the surface of the sun had reached across the void of space and grazed this planet, scouring it of life.

I scan the horizon for Salem. I see the walls, but they aren't the right shape. There must be something wrong with my vision. I squint, trying to understand what I see before me. The walls are not in

the process of being pulled down because they are no longer needed, like I saw on the world that got rid of the Woven. Here, the wall is just a useless tumble of rocks and judging from the angle of the stones, it looks as if they'd been blown down by a fearsome wind. No greentowers soar behind the walls nor can I see the spires of the Citadel. I look at where they should be, but they're simply *not there*. I stagger closer, unable to take my eyes off the ruin that was my city. It's nothing but rubble and ash. No hurricane, no matter how great, could have done this and there's no explosion I know of big enough to cause such total destruction.

Except—no, it can't be. Who would be insane enough to use elemental energy—the energy of the stars—as a weapon? But the shards of elements, crashing through all organic life in this world, are huge cell killers. They are the product of this kind of energy, and no other. You can't see the elemental shards in a spirit walk, but now I understand. That's what makes a cinder world. That's what destroys what life remains on those worlds after the initial firestorm has cooled. I never understood until I came and saw the cause with my witch's eyes.

I have to find unburned wood or I will be stuck here until I die of thirst. Or worse. I could be found by someone ruthless enough to survive in this place for however long it's been since the holocaust. The longer it's been, the more animalistic the people here will have become. I've seen things on my spirit walks, even though the shaman told me not to dwell on the cinder worlds or wonder what caused them. I've seen what the survivors do to one another in the years of never-ending winter that follow the great burning.

Enough.

Stop crying.

Pull yourself together and find fuel for your pyre, Lillian . . .

Lily felt herself being evicted from Lillian's memory, despite

wanting to see more. Whatever happened next, Lillian either didn't want to share with Lily or didn't want to relive herself. Lily looked across the raft at Lillian.

What happened, Lillian? How did you find enough fuel in that cinder world to build a pyre?

The answer to that is what made me who I am now. You think I'm a monster, but I think if you could see what made me who I am, you'd agree that my choices, as ruthless as they seem, are justified. The only question is, are you sure you really want to understand me?

Curiosity dug at Lily, but so did distrust. There was a reason Lillian had only showed her a fragment of a memory, and a half-truth could be more manipulative than any lie. Lily knew this, but she still couldn't say no outright because to understand Lillian's story would be to understand something huge inside herself. They were, after all, the same.

I honestly don't know, Lillian.

Juliet turned her head to the side, gagging.

"Easy," Rowan said in his low, steady voice. He reached out to brace Juliet by her elbow and stopped. His hands were covered in the charred skin he had just peeled off Lily. "Do you need to go outside and get some air?" he asked kindly. Not that there was any difference between the outside air and the air inside the living room at this point. Rowan had insisted they keep all the windows open and it was colder than a meat locker in there.

"No," Juliet said, shaking it off. "I got this."

Rowan narrowed his eyes for a moment, weighing Juliet's resolve, and must have seen more strength in her than she was feeling because he nodded once and bent his head over Lily.

The jewel at his throat throbbed with that eerie dark light and he went back to his task. He directed a tendril of light under a small

patch of necrotic skin and even though his burned hands were bandaged, he used the *light* to ease Lily's skin away with a precision that no scalpel could ever match. She barely even bled.

It had been a full day since they'd brought Lily back home, and Juliet had seen Rowan do amazing things. Things Juliet could not explain in a rational way. All she knew was that these things Rowan was doing were keeping Lily alive.

"Spray the tincture here," he directed.

Juliet misted Lily's exposed muscle and sinew with the combination antibiotic and analgesic potion they had made that morning in Samantha's second-best copper-bottomed pot.

"Good," Rowan mumbled as Juliet sprayed the proper amount of tincture, and then stood back to survey the gruesome landscape of Lily's body. He went to the fire, over which hung Samantha's best copper-bottomed pot, and deftly lifted out a strip of something that looked like a thin film of gauze about three inches square with the flat of one of his silver knives. This was not the first time Rowan had done this kind of surgery, of that Juliet was quite certain.

"Is that really Lily's skin?" Juliet asked. She was fascinated now, rather than disgusted. She watched his stone's mercurial light dance around the edges of the skin graft as he eased it down over Lily's raw bones with infinite care.

"Yes," Rowan mumbled, finally answering Juliet's question after a long pause. "It's not hard to grow from a culture—not even in inferior conditions." Rowan paused to shoot Samantha's pots a resentful glare. The cast-iron cauldron he insisted on hadn't arrived yet, and Juliet had endured a full five minutes of his swearing before they went ahead and began the skin-growing ritual in one of Samantha's "inferior" pots a few hours ago. "But skin patches are hard to align," he continued, still focused on his task, "every border cell must link to its neighbor seamlessly, or it will leave a scar." He

leaned back again to inspect his work and smiled.

"Will this?" Juliet asked anxiously, looking at his injured hands. "Scar, I mean."

Rowan shot Juliet a cocky look as if to express how beneath him the notion was, even with his hands burned and bandaged. She almost laughed. He had a way about him that inspired confidence despite the desperate situation they were in, but before Juliet gave over to a moment of levity she stopped herself.

She didn't know what to feel about Rowan. She was starting to trust him, but how could she trust someone with such an outlandish story about where Lily had been for the past three months? He claimed that Lily had been in a parallel universe, and that she had been burned in a battle against an evil witch. Juliet looked down at her sister's three strange stones—willstones as Rowan called them—and grew even more confused. They winked and roiled with a light that looked almost alive. Seeing them and the eerie way they sparkled even in the dark told Juliet that something otherworldly had happened to her sister. And Rowan was undoubtedly using magic to save Lily's life when not even the best medical attention in the world could have done so, whether Juliet wanted to believe it or not.

But what Juliet really needed to know had nothing to do with magic or willstones. She needed to know whether or not Rowan had any part in what had happened to Lily. But little things he said, and the way he seemed to feel so responsible for Lily, made Juliet suspect that Rowan had had a hand in burning Lily.

Rowan and Juliet worked straight on through the night, with Rowan peeling off and replacing Lily's skin in three-inch squares, and Juliet spraying and dabbing and keeping everything Rowan needed within his reach. By dawn Juliet could hardly see straight.

"You should sleep," Rowan said as he stood, appraising the last patch of newly applied skin.

"So should you," Juliet said through a yawn.

"I'm still breathing for her," Rowan said, fingering the stone at the base of his throat. She watched the light in his willstone subtly rising and falling in tandem with the rise and fall of Lily's chest. She didn't know how he was doing it, but Juliet could see that somehow Rowan was putting air in her lungs, and drawing it out again in a long, steady rhythm.

"Are you sure?" she asked. She hadn't seen Rowan eat or sleep since he'd gotten here.

"Yes. Rest, Juliet." He sank onto the floor next to Lily, never once taking his gaze from her. Juliet didn't know what was holding him together, but she was too tired to try to argue with him about who needed to rest more.

"Wake me if you have to," she said, too tired to think about it anymore. She pulled a quilt over her against the freezing cold and collapsed onto the couch.

She shut her eyes and, unfortunately, it seemed as if only seconds had passed before she felt Rowan shaking her arm.

"I need your help," he said. Juliet sat up, still dragging her brain out of sleep. Rowan looked terrible. His eyes were sunken and his cheeks were tinged with green. "We need to wrap her before your mother comes downstairs," he said.

Juliet followed him back to Lily's body and understood. The patchwork of new skin was livid and swollen. Lily looked like some hellish ghoul straight out of a slasher movie. They went to work wrapping Lily up mummy-style before Samantha could see her like that. While they worked, Juliet heard the phone ring and heard her mother answer the call upstairs. Samantha's tone became increasingly agitated as the conversation dragged on. A few moments later, she joined them in the living room as Rowan hurriedly passed at least one layer of gauze over Lily's injuries.

"That was your father," Samantha said. She was pacing and wringing her hands. "We have to tell him."

"Tell him what?" Juliet asked carefully.

"About your sister. That she's back. The nosy FBI agent won't leave him alone. She really thinks your father might be involved with Lily's disappearance."

"Mom, we can't," Juliet replied incredulously. She gestured to the living room. There were basins of bloody water and buckets of discarded skin on the floor. "We can't let anyone see this."

"He's worried about her, Juliet, and I feel awful letting him think she's still missing. Maybe dead." Samantha gave her daughter one of those disturbingly sane looks. "You don't know what it is to be a parent. He loves you girls, even though he's not the fathering type."

Juliet shot Rowan a look, and saw that he was as against involving their father as she was.

"That's understandable, Samantha," Rowan said equitably. "But right now our main concern has to be Lily, not James. If he knows she's alive he'll want to see her and she's too weak to be exposed to another person and risk infection."

Juliet shook herself and stifled her question. No one had told Rowan her father's first name, and she already knew that if she asked him, Rowan would say that he knew James from this parallel world he claimed to come from.

"You're right, Rowan. Of course you're right," Samantha said. She reached out and put her hand on Rowan's shoulder, taking comfort. "I'm so glad you're here."

The phone rang again. "That's probably that FBI agent," Samantha said. The hassled look on her face started to cloud with confusion as she went to answer it. She was losing it.

"Mom can't handle this," Juliet said under her breath.

"I know," Rowan replied. He looked just as worried about

Samantha as Juliet was. There was true concern on his face, and it irritated Juliet.

"Who are you, really?" she asked, her chin tilted down and her eyes narrowed in distrust.

Rowan sighed. "I don't blame you for not believing me." He smiled suddenly, as if remembering something bittersweet. "When I first saw Lily I couldn't believe it either, and she has a double in my world, another version of her named Lillian. I've known Lillian my whole life, and I could sense that Lily wasn't her, but I just couldn't accept it. Not for a long time. So I don't blame you for not believing me. Actually I consider myself lucky that you're helping me instead of turning me over to your city guards."

He sounded so genuine. Juliet wanted to believe him, but how could she? Samantha believed him without question, but Samantha's illness was tailor-made to believe in parallel worlds. In fact, Samantha seemed to *live* in a parallel world most of the time.

"I'm trying to understand all this in a rational way," Juliet said, spreading her arms wide to include the silver knives, the salt and vinegar, and the strange symbols Rowan had painted on a square of black silk. "I've seen magic work, and I'm trying to make sense of it, but I can't shake the feeling that you're involved. Rowan—were you the one who burned my sister?"

Rowan looked down, a pained expression on his face. "I was a part of it, yes. I shackled her to the pyre. But, Juliet—you don't understand."

Juliet backed away from him and he grabbed her arm, stopping her. She hadn't feared Rowan until this moment, but now that she did she couldn't help but notice how strong he was and how quickly he could move. She straightened her back to look up in his eyes.

"What was it? Some kind of Satan worshipping?" she asked breathlessly. Surprisingly, he laughed and let go of her arm immediately.

"Magic has nothing to do with any of that nonsense. It's about power, and fire is how your sister gains power. I burned Lily because she asked me to," he said simply.

Juliet stared at him, trying to find a lie in his eyes, but she couldn't. "I don't know what to believe, Rowan." She suddenly smiled, all the tension and fear gone, and shook her head. "Sometimes it feels like I know you."

"There's a version of you who does," he said, and went back to Lily's side, leaving her to mull over the disturbing notion that there were other Juliets out there somewhere.

Lily smelled snow and cedar smoke. She heard logs popping in a fire. She opened her eyes. She was lying on the floor in her living room, back in Salem, Massachusetts. All the windows were open and a fire was going in the hearth. Rowan sat beside a huge cast-iron cauldron that was suspended over the flames. The soot and blood that had covered him had been washed away—soot and blood from the battle against Lillian, Lily remembered. Lily hoped that her army had fled and that Alaric, Tristan, and Caleb had gotten safely away with the scientists.

She took a deep breath in and let a deep breath out. Steam billowed from between her lips. The room was sub-zero. Rowan's head spun around at the sound, and he scooted across the floor toward her when he saw that she was awake. She reached out to him and saw that her hands and arms were wound in bandages. A square of black silk was stretched out beneath her and strange symbols, drawn in salt, surrounded her. Silver knives were arrayed around her in a pattern—their lustrous blades flashing brightly in the firelight.

No, don't move! Your skin is too fragile, Rowan said in mindspeak.

He was wearing a thick wool sweater against the cold. Peeking out from the bottom of the sleeves and above the cowl neck were

bandages. Lily could see the thin pink color of watery blood starting to seep through the wrappings on his hands.

You're hurt . . .

I'm getting better. So are you. Rest now, Lily.

Lily let her eyes close and kept them closed. Maybe a second, maybe forever passed as she floated on her raft of pain. She heard arguments swirling above her like a cloud. People danced in and out of her fever dreams. More often than not, she felt Lillian joining her on the raft—but only when Rowan left her side. Lily could feel Lillian waiting for Rowan to go and then she'd move closer to Lily through the Mist, asking for shelter on her raft. Lily let her come. She needed someone there with her in the dark.

Time passed. The pain started to itch around the edges. Lily heard her father's voice. Demanding. Impatient. She heard her mother's voice. Pleading. Desperate.

"James, I told you because I believe you have the right to know that your daughter is alive," Samantha was saying in a shaky voice, "but I only let you come and see her on the condition that you allow me to care for her as I see fit."

"You *let* me come and see her?" James sputtered. "Have you lost your mind completely? I may not be around much, but I still own this house and I have every right to see my daughter—who's been *missing* for three months—whether I agree to your psychotic conditions or not!" He made a strangled sound in the back of his throat as he paced around Lily's prone body. "I've been *questioned* by the police and the FBI since she disappeared, Samantha. We all have. If she dies on our living room floor because I didn't make you take her to a hospital, we're going to be charged with her death. You understand that, don't you?"

"Stop fighting," Lily said. Her voice was weak, and the effort to speak left her lightheaded. She heard Rowan in her head.

I'm sorry, Lily. Your mother thought it was cruel to keep your father in the dark, but he wants to take you to a hospital and I can't let him. They have no idea how to heal you. Your mother understands, but your father is difficult.

"You're taking her to the hospital this instant, and I'm calling Special Agent Simms tonight. I'm not going to jail because you're insane, Samantha," James said with finality. "And *you*, Juliet. How could you—"

Let me handle him, Rowan.

Lily sat up in one lurching motion and looked directly at her father. He was red-faced and the lines on his forehead were etched deep from anger. As soon as he noticed her, his words died in the back of his throat. Lily had never initiated mindspeak with him before, but she knew it was possible because, despite their many differences, he was still her father.

Dad. You're meddling in things you don't understand. Stop pretending you're in charge here. Do as you're told or get out.

His red face blanched and his jaw dropped. "Did you hear that?" he asked Juliet.

"She didn't. That was just for you, Dad," Lily replied in a papery voice that broke twice before she could finish.

"Lie back, Lily," Rowan whispered urgently in her ear. "Your skin is splitting apart. You need to be still."

Lily refused and stayed staring at her father. Her left eye went cloudy and started stinging as blood oozed into it, but she didn't blink. Lily waited until she was sure her father's will had faltered before she continued.

"We're going to take care of this privately. Is that understood?" she whispered. Her father nodded slowly. He was terrified of her. "Good."

Lily allowed Rowan to ease her back down.

That was harsh, Lily.

Did it work?

Yeah. He's leaving.

His favorite trick.

Rowan's breath brushed over her collarbones as he gave a bitter laugh. The feel of him near her was soothing. Lily shut her eyes and climbed back onto her raft, the pain bearing her up and over the dark water. She looked across the raft and saw Lillian sitting opposite her.

My version of James wasn't much of a father, either.

Wasn't? Is he dead, Lillian?

No. He lives in Richmond. I pay him well to keep him there and out of politics.

He's not a bad person. Just—

Spineless.

Yeah. I wish he could have been something more than that.

We have high standards when it comes to men, Lily. Nothing less than Rowan will do for either of us.

You still love him.

Of course.

Then why did you hurt him so terribly, Lillian? Why did you hang Rowan's father?

Do you really want to know? In order for it to make any sense, I have to show you more of my story, and it isn't pretty. It's going to hurt you, Lily.

I want to know—even if I also know you're only showing me the bits and pieces that will justify what you have done.

I am showing you the truth as I experienced it so that you can understand why I've done what I have. You can't blame me for wanting to show my life to you in a way that I think will have the greatest impact. You're still the one who has to decide whether or not you agree with me.

All right, Lillian. Let me see the truth as you wish to show it to me.

You must promise me one thing first. That you hide everything I show

you. Not to protect me—but to protect Rowan.

I'd never let anything or anyone hurt Rowan. Not even you or me. But you know that, don't you, Lillian?

Yes.

Then show me.

Promise you won't show Rowan what I show you.

That's a lot to ask. I'm not sure I can hide anything from him. I'm not sure I want to.

You've never hidden anything from him?

Once. When I went to the pyre to fight you, he asked me if I was doing it for him.

And you didn't tell him.

I couldn't let him know I was doing it for him or the guilt would have killed him.

That's all I ask of you now—and for exactly the same reason. Think about it and tell me when you're ready.

Juliet heard the knock at the door and left Rowan to fiddle with the computer for a moment on his own. She answered the door, already knowing who was standing on the other side of it and dreading the conversation that was to follow.

"Hi, Tristan," she said heavily.

"How long were you going to wait to tell me she was back, Juliet?" he asked.

"Look, Tristan—" Juliet began, but he cut her off.

"I have to find out from Agent Simms that she's been back a week? A *week*?" he stressed. Juliet had to look away. Poor Tristan had been through a lot since Lily disappeared—more than anyone, probably. "Where is she?" he asked.

Tristan was about to push his way into the house when Rowan appeared at Juliet's shoulder.

"Now's not a good time, Tristan," Rowan said.

"Who the hell are you?" Tristan asked, bewildered and offended that Rowan had used his name so casually. Like he knew him.

"My name is Rowan Fall. I'm here to help Lily manage her condition," he replied calmly.

"Really?" Tristan said. His tone was loaded with sarcasm and more than just a bit of loathing for Rowan.

Juliet could sympathize with Tristan. After James told the FBI that Lily was back, they'd had to come up with a cover story for where Lily had been and why no one could see her. The alibi was still a work in progress, but the one thing they stuck to was that Lily had been getting radical treatment for her allergies and wasn't fit to see anyone yet—not even Tristan or the FBI agent who had taken an alarmingly deep interest in Lily's case.

"Yes. Really," Rowan said, standing his ground. "She'll get in touch with you when she's ready."

Out of nowhere, Tristan took a swing at Rowan. Juliet half gasped, half screamed, but before either she or Tristan could process it, Rowan had blocked the punch and moved Tristan back and out of the doorway.

"That's not going to do anybody any good, Tristan," Rowan said. He wasn't even surprised. Again, Juliet wondered who this guy was and what his life had been like in this other world. He obviously knew how to handle himself in a fight.

Tristan stared at Rowan in disbelief, and then shook him off. "I have a right to see her," he snarled.

"Yeah, I know you do," Rowan replied, running a hand through his hair. "And when she's ready to talk to you, she'll get in touch."

Tristan backed away, still not sure of what to make of Rowan. His confusion and jealousy were apparent, and Juliet couldn't blame him. Rowan wasn't just good-looking, he was downright

devastating, and he appeared to be keeping Lily all to himself. While Tristan had never shown real interest in Lily before, something had changed in him. Juliet supposed that there was nothing like losing a girl to show a guy how much he cares.

"Tell her to call me, Jules," Tristan said before getting in his car and driving off.

Rowan came back inside and shut the door. "That was messy," he said with a sigh. "Guess I should have expected it, though."

"You know him, don't you?" Juliet asked.

"Oh yeah," Rowan said, rolling his eyes. "He's one of my closest friends—more like a brother, really. He always takes everything too far."

"Yeah," Juliet said, half laughing. "Moderation was never his thing."

"No," Rowan agreed. He stood for a moment, watching Juliet.

She knew he was trying to decide if she believed him now or not, but he didn't ask. Good thing, too. Because Juliet didn't know what she believed anymore.

He went back to the kitchen and sat down in front of the computer, gesturing for Juliet to sit next to him. "Now tell me more about this Internet," he said. "Can you really get any information you want from it, simply by asking?"

"Pretty much," Juliet said, shaking herself and sitting next to him. He was a quick learner, but he knew nothing about computers yet and Juliet was tired of ordering rare herbs and random minerals for him online. Rowan was frighteningly intelligent, though, and something told Juliet that in a few days he'd be teaching her things about computers of which she'd never even dreamed.

"Sounds like magic," he replied, looking back at the screen.