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False Hearts

Written by Laura Lam

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FALSE HEARTS



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In memory of my father,

Gary Lyle Richardson (1945–2015).

*You were weird and wonderful, and I'm glad
you were able to read an early draft of this
before you rejoined the Cycle.*

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I did a lot of research for this book. The initial idea came from reading an article about Daisy and Violet Hilton and wondering what it would be like to be connected to someone every minute of every day, and how strange it would be if you found out your literal other half had kept something from you. Alice Domurat Dreger's book, *One of Us: Conjoined Twins and the Future of Normal*, really impacted the twins' view of being conjoined, their relationship to each other, and how they were perceived by the outside world, both within the Hearth and San Francisco. I was also inspired by Lori Lansens' work of fiction *The Girls*. I watched a lot of documentaries and interviews with conjoined twins: *The Twins Who Share a Body*, *Abby & Brittany*, *Two Hearts*, *Bound by Flesh*, *The Twins Who Share a Brain*, and more. I asked a few twins about their relationships and also observed my twin nephews, Ruben and Kade. For cults, *Last Days* by Adam Nevill and *Whit* by Iain Banks were some fictional influences, as was the film *Martha Marcy May Marlene*, and documentaries such as *Jonestown: The Life and Death of Peoples Temple*, *Jesus Camp* and *Cults: Dangerous Devotion* gave me some invaluable insights. I also

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As ever, thank you to the readers who picked up the book and spent some time with Taema and Tila. You're the reason I can keep doing this.

False face must hide what the false heart doth know.

William Shakespeare, *Macbeth*

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PROLOGUE

TAEMA



San Francisco, California

This is the first time I have ever been alone.

The first time that I have ever woken up to silence and emptiness next to me. The only sounds in the room are the beeping of the heart monitor and my own laboured breathing.

It isn't supposed to be like this.

Groggy from the medicine, I raise my hand to hover over the hot wound, throbbing even through the pain of the IV. It is the first time my hand has been able to linger three inches above my own chest. Below my shaking fingers is the deep cut that will heal into a thin seam from just below my collarbone to right above my navel. Beneath the newly grafted skin and reconstructed breasts is a titanium sternum – bulletproof, so they say – and half of my ribs are made of the same substance. Below that metal sternum is my new, false heart. The old heart is gone, cut out and replaced with an upgraded model that will never tire. I can almost imagine I can hear its mechanical ticking.

This is the first time I've ever been lonely.

The doorknob to the recovery room turns. My automated heartbeat doesn't quicken, though the old, fleshy one would

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have. I still feel the thrum of adrenalin. The door opens, and for the first time, I see my own, moving reflection. My full mirror image. The same brown skin, the mane of curly hair. The same long nose and dark eyes, features hollowed in fear and pain. My twin, Tila.

Are my knees that knobby? I ask myself, almost laughing from the ridiculousness of the thought. The drugs still rush through my system, and everything is dreamily gold-tinged.

She's trailing her IV with her. I can barely move, so she shouldn't be up, but Tila doesn't let a small thing like pain stop her. I'm surprised she hasn't triggered the alarms. She probably disabled them – she's always been clever with her hands.

We're not supposed to see each other for a few days, so we grow used to being separate. As usual, she's ignored all the rules and advice and followed her own heart. It is really her *own* heart now. She creeps closer, her bare feet swishing along the floor.

'T?' she whispers.

'T,' I answer. We always call each other T when we are alone. I close my eyes, a tear falling down my cheek. *What have we done?*

Painfully, I move over on the bed as best I can. We haven't just come out of surgery, if the date on the wallscreen is correct. They put us in a medical coma for a few days to speed up healing. I find the fact they can do something like that more than a little frightening. Neither of us has ever been to a hospital before this. There aren't any in Mana-ma's Hearth.

Tila slides into the bed. On her chest, in mirror image of mine, is the same wound that will one day become a scar. Beneath her false sternum is another new, false heart. I wonder if they are set to the same rhythm and even now beat together.

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Gently, we turn onto our sides, pressing our foreheads together. Then and only then can we fall back asleep, in the position we have fallen asleep in for the last sixteen years. Now three inches of emptiness separate us, when before there had been nothing, and our heart had beat as one.

ONE

TAEMA



Ten years later

I'm starting where it all falls apart.

Tila is late for dinner.

We meet twice a week, once at her place and once at mine, though lately it's always been at my apartment in Inner Sunset. She says she's staying late at work, but I never know if that's true. I hate it when she keeps secrets. It used to be that we couldn't.

Outside, fat drops of rain drum against the glass window. The sunset has faded to darkness, a few stars just bright enough to shine through the San Francisco fog. I pace across the living room, peering at the blurred view of the city skyline, the green shimmer of the algae farms in the bay, the lights of the hovercars flying past. I paid a lot extra to have the penthouse for this view, but at the moment it does nothing for me. All I can do is be irritated at my sister.

Back in the kitchen, I push the curls from my face. I use my auditory implants to ping Tila, but there's no response. I turn on the wallscreen, but the moving images and sounds irritate me, and I shut them off. The scar on my chest twinges. It's psychosomatic. There's no way it could actually hurt, not

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after so many years. I rest my fingertip on the top of the rough line of healed skin. It's been almost a decade to the day since the surgery.

I sigh and set out the food, the time flashing in the corner of my ocular implants until I send it away. Her shift at Zenith supposedly ended over an hour ago. She works at the hostess club at the top of the TransAm Pyramid. Not a bad gig, but not for me. I don't think I'd be as good at pretending.

I've made Tila her favourite curry, adapted from a recipe from the Hearth. I could have ordered it from the replicator in the corner of the kitchen, but I needed the distraction of doing something with my hands. It's time to tell her I quit my job this afternoon, and I accepted a new job offer I couldn't refuse – in China. I don't know if Tila will want to come with me.

Or if she should.

The doorknob turns. I stand and rub my palms along my skirt. Tila flies in, dishevelled and wild-eyed. Her short, teal hair is wet and plastered to her skull, contrasting with my brown curls. Her clothes are flashy where mine are plain. Her face is different than mine now too, from trips to the flesh parlours. They're not drastic changes, but we no longer look identical.

It isn't until she rushes to me and clutches the front of my shirt, on either side of my scar, that I realize she's covered in blood. She's wearing a man's coat I don't recognize, and it gapes open, dripping onto the floor. Her light blue dress is splattered red, the rain smearing it into a garish watercolour.

My mind takes a beat to process it. 'Are – are you hurt?' I ask, trying to pull back to go for the first aid kit. But if it's that much blood, she might need more than bandages. Fear rushes through me, and I can't seem to catch my breath.

She doesn't answer right away. Her mouth flaps open, and

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then shuts. She lets go of me, backing away from the door. ‘Not my blood. You have to help me, T. Oh God, you *have* to help me.’

I tense. *Not my blood*. ‘If it’s not your blood, whose is it?’ My breath comes faster, hitching on the inhale. My sister feeds off my fear, grabbing my shirt so hard the fabric rips. ‘What the hell is going on, Tila?’ I ask.

Expressions of fear and guilt flit across her face like shadows. ‘Please, Taema. Please. I have to get out of the city right now. Both of us do. Hide out somewhere. The Sierras? If only Mana’s Hearth would let us claim sanctuary.’

Mana’s Hearth is exempt from Pacifica jurisdiction. That she would mention *going back*, despite everything that happened ten years ago, and that she wants to bring me too, is what tells me just how serious this is. ‘Tila, slow down. What have you done?’

‘I haven’t done anything, Taema. It didn’t happen the way they’ll say.’ I can see the whites of her eyes, the tension lines around her mouth. Despite her surgery, her face reminds me too much of that last day in Mana’s Hearth when we thought we would die in that redwood forest.

The tips of my hands tingle and my vision swims. ‘OK. OK.’ I force myself to try and calm down. ‘What *haven’t* you done?’

Sirens sound outside the high-rise apartment. I startle – you hardly *ever* hear them in San Francisco any more. They’re growing louder.

Tila presses against me. ‘Oh God, they’ve found me. Must have tracked my VeriChip. I knew I should have torn it out. Can I hide? There must be somewhere I can hide!’

Her panic is infectious, but I have to be the pragmatic twin she expects. The twin she needs. ‘No point. All the police will

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have infrared sensors. If you didn't do this, then it'll be fine, right? They'll take you in for questioning and then let you go.' I don't want to be the calm twin. I want to grab her, shake her, demand she tell me what has happened and whose blood she's wearing.

Tila only sobs, resting her hand just below my collarbone, right on my scar. I rest my hand on hers. I can feel the mechanical beating of her heart. Despite our obvious terror, our hearts beat at their same, steady pace.

'It'll be all right, T,' I say. 'I promise.'

She looks at me, dangerous and untamed. I barely recognize her. 'You can't promise that, T. You can't promise that at all.'

Red and blue lights flash outside the window. A police hovercar floats outside the balcony, rain falling off its sides. The search light illuminates the room, paralyzing us in the bright beams. Three police jump down onto the tiny balcony, their boots splashing in the puddles on the concrete. Tila's shaking, burrowing close to my side. I wrap my arm around her, but I'm shivering just as badly.

They open the sliding glass door, but too hard. The glass shatters. Fragments spill into my living room, as if the rain outside has crystallized.

'SFPD!'

'Really, now,' I say, looking at the glass and rain scattered across the living room. Fear shifts to anger. 'Was that necessary?'

The police look between us. They are all wearing bullet-proof Kalar vests over their sleek, dark blue uniforms. Cops almost never wear Kalars, not in this city that prides itself on its lack of crime. The whites of their eyes shimmer in the light with their extra implants.

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An Indian-American woman with curly hair tamed in a knot at the nape of her neck clutches her gun, shifting her stance. The other man, white and brown-haired with a face so generically good-looking I'll forget what he looks like as soon as he leaves the room, begins to make a perimeter of my apartment. Perhaps he thinks extra back-up is hiding behind the couch. The last man, their leader, is black with a gold tattoo I can't make out peeking over the collar of his uniform. He narrows his eyes at us, focusing on Tila and her teal hair: 'Tila Collins?'

She doesn't answer, keeping her head bowed.

He steps forward and grabs her upper arms. For a second, I fear she's going to resist and try to run for it, but then she goes limp.

'What's going on here?' I ask. 'She says she hasn't done it, whatever you're after her for.'

They ignore me. Gold Tattoo says, 'Tila Collins, you are under arrest for murder in the first degree. You have the right to remain silent. Anything you say can and will be used against you.'

When was the last time he had to read anyone their Miranda rights?

Gold Tattoo pulls Tila from my grasp. My hands fall useless at my sides. Tila tilts her head up at him and spits in his face.

Gold Tattoo wipes the spittle away, expressionless.

The wind leaves my lungs as the full implications sink in. Murder. There hasn't been a murder by a civilian in San Francisco in years. Not since Pacifica was formed after the United States fractured forty years ago. Not since VeriChips and implants and cameras on every corner.

'Tila?' I ask as Gold Tattoo marches her back to the hover-car, handing her over to Curly Hair. I sound forlorn, lost.

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She throws a pleading glance over her shoulder as they push her inside. 'Taema!'

Within moments, they are all gone save Gold Tattoo. He towers over me, but he looks so young. He might not be, with flesh parlours everywhere, but it's hard to find him terrifying when it looks like he only learned how to shave yesterday.

A sob lodges in my throat. It's all I can do not to break into pieces in front of this man. One moment, I was annoyed that dinner was growing cold, and now my apartment is a mess and my sister is accused of murder. I can't wrap my head around the word. *Murder*. It's Tila. My sister. I know her better than I know myself.

Don't I?

'Miss Collins?' There might be a hint of concern behind the brusque tone. He's close enough that I can make out his tattoo: a California grizzly bear.

I find my voice. 'My sister's just been taken for murder. How do you think I feel?'

He has no answer to that. Within moments, the sirens blaze again as they take my sister away from me.

'Who's she meant to have murdered?' I ask, my voice tight. That word again. It's ugly.

'A body of a man was found at Zenith under suspicious circumstances. I can't say anything more.'

My hands ball into fists. Gold Tattoo notices the movement, his hand resting on his gun. My lungs burn from holding in the sobs.

He pauses. I realize why he's stayed behind.

'I'm to go in for questioning too? Why didn't you take me with Tila?'

He shifts slightly. 'Yes, Miss Collins. We're to take you in

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as a precaution. You'll be going to the station. Your sister is being taken elsewhere.'

'Where?'

'I'm not at liberty to say.'

I fold over, trying to take in deep breaths but still hyperventilating.

'Miss Collins.'

I hold up a hand. I think of the Hearth, how Mana-ma taught us to control our emotions. *Let the darkness float away. Let in only the light.* I imagine the chapel on the hill at the centre of the town, the five-pointed symbol carved on its side, the bird calls that floated through the open windows on a spring day. Despite my hatred of her, her techniques work.

I stand up, smoothing my features, shaking my head a little from side to side. 'Yes. We have the same DNA. You'll want to make sure *I* didn't do it.'

He says nothing.

'Am I under arrest?'

'No. You're being detained for questioning. Please grab your things, Miss Collins.'

I look around at my apartment. The wet footprints all over the carpet. The shining bits of glass. The food cold on the table, the plates laid out for a meal we will never eat.

I grab my coat and purse.

As he leads me down the stairs, curiosity seems to get the better of him. 'I shouldn't ask, but do you really think she didn't do it?'

I pause. I still think he's been waxworked – he's too highly ranked to be any younger than late thirties – but his eyes aren't quite as jaded as a lot of older people masquerading in younger bodies.

My hand snakes towards my sternum again, pressing

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against the faint seam where they unzipped me and Tila and took us apart a decade ago. Underneath, my mechanical heart beats, beats, beats.

‘I know my twin better than anyone else. If she says she didn’t do it, then she didn’t.’

I’m sure I believe it.

Ninety-nine per cent sure.