



DREAMER

L. E. DELANO

Swoon
READS

Swoon Reads | NEW YORK

A SWOON READS BOOK
An Imprint of Feiwel and Friends and Macmillan Publishing Group, LLC
175 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10010

DREAMER. Copyright © 2018 by L. E. DeLano.
Excerpt from TRAVELER copyright © 2017 by L. E. DeLano.
All rights reserved. Printed in the United States of America.

Our books may be purchased in bulk for promotional, educational,
or business use. Please contact your local bookseller or the Macmillan
Corporate and Premium Sales Department at (800) 221-7945 ext. 5442
or by e-mail at MacmillanSpecialMarkets@macmillan.com.

Library of Congress Control Number: 2017944695
ISBN 978-1-250-10042-9 (trade paperback) / ISBN 978-1-250-10043-6 (ebook)

First Edition—2018

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

swoonreads.com

This one is dedicated to my readers.
I couldn't have written this book without your
excellent feedback and your unflagging support.
I owe you, every one of you. Thanks so much!

Prologue

HE RAN FOR THE TREES AS HARD AS HE COULD, PANTING with the effort as he pushed his screaming muscles into overdrive. He could hear his pursuers, but he didn't waste time with a backward glance.

A shot ricocheted off a nearby tree, and he dodged right, then left, zigzagging as he ran. Not much farther now—but they were gaining on him. He could hear the barking of dogs, which meant they had a full squad in pursuit.

It was going to be close. He sucked in air like a starving man, feeling the burn in his legs and chest as he swung his arms harder, propelling himself forward.

"There he is!" he heard one shout. "There! In the trees!"

"Stop him before he makes the edge!" barked another.

"Yes, sir!" A chorus of voices this time.

Another shot hit a large boulder, sending shards of blasted rock into his shin as he passed by. He stumbled a bit but kept on going, feeling the sharp sting of the rock as it dug into his flesh, the trickle of blood as it ran down his leg. He knew he had to be close.

Suddenly, a break in the trees. He heard them shouting to one another as he moved out of the protection of the trunks and boughs, into the open. He didn't pause to gather himself, he just kept on running right off the edge, feeling his stomach lurch as the world dropped out from beneath him.

The fall down to the water took far longer than he expected, and he hit with tremendous force. In the fuzzy aftermath, he reasoned that the fall was probably a good thing—he'd be harder to shoot from far away. He kicked his legs and pushed hard for the surface, lungs feeling like they were exploding after the oxygen starvation brought on by his frantic run.

His head broke the water and he risked a glance up. He'd been right—a full squad of soldiers was assembled on the ridge, and he heard the whiz of a bullet striking the water a few yards away. He dove under again, swimming for the cliff wall, spying a small overhang where he could shelter for a moment and catch his breath.

He surfaced out of sight, panting and treading water, taking measure of his surroundings. They'd be expecting him to run for home, most likely. Or find his way up the far slope of the cliff. He pushed closer to the lip of the overhang, noting only one soldier now—presumably to stand watch—and pulled himself back under. If he could follow the riverbank down three miles to the tributary—that would take him to the freight depot. From there, a train. It was a solid plan.

He pushed out from under the overhang on the far side, ducking under and swimming as far as he could, surfaced for an instant, and went under again. He kept it up, scoping out a spot close to the trees on the opposite side. A swift glance showed no one watching, and he burst from the water, slapping at it as he waded quickly toward the bank. Once there, he gave one more look around before he squatted

down. He dug quickly into the dirt at the water's edge, forming a small pool of still water. He shifted his body so that his shadow didn't cloud it over, letting the sun shine on it in full force.

"Sorry, mate," he said to his reflection. "Didn't mean to leave it this way, but I really do have somewhere else to be."

And with a jaunty salute, he touched his fingers to the reflection, and he was through.

A decorative arc of grey dots of varying sizes, with a larger dot at the top center and smaller dots tapering off towards the left and right edges, framing the chapter number.

1

Needless Jeopardy

I'M STARING AT THE BARREL OF A GUN. IT'S BLACK AND there are grooves on the handle. A finger is on the trigger and I feel my whole body begin to shake.

I know what guns do, and it hasn't been long enough since I've seen one pointed at another person. My hands curl into fists as I feel the helpless rage rush through me. I need to do something. I glance left, then right, then back at the gun. There's still time—I can run for help, if I can just get to the door before I'm seen.

If I was anywhere but where I was, I would have made it.

I step back into the aisle of the convenience store, behind a display of sunglasses, and as I pass a display for beef jerky, the edge of my hoodie catches on one of the hooks and the whole thing tilts over with a screech of metal. The man whirls instantly, turning the gun on me, and I freeze, putting my hands up, still staring at that gun.

Crap.

Here's where I get yelled at.

“Shall we go on?” Mario asks sharply as he gestures to the scene appearing on the whiteboard behind him—a replay of my last assignment.

For the last six weeks these assignments have been my life. I’ve been out every day shifting into other realities, making corrections and living other versions of my life. I was grateful for the distraction at first, and it’s always interesting to see who I could have been if fate had sent things another way, but lately it’s been dragging me down, making all these little changes in somebody else’s world.

We’re sent to the other realities because we’re too invested in our own. We’d want to check up on the changes we made, or put our own spin on them based on our familiarity with the world we’re in. But I’ve learned that it’s not always so easy to stay out of someone else’s business—especially when someone else is still you. There are so many variables.

Mario keeps track of all that—that’s what Dreamers do. They guide Travelers as they make the tiny changes in other realities that end up rippling into bigger changes somewhere down the line. We meet up here, in this white classroom with its vivid red door—which is not really reality but a construct I go to when I dream. Here I get my assignments, and here I get debriefed. Or yelled at.

“I remembered to ask the guy at the counter for directions,” I say, wincing.

Mario gives me a stony look. “Let’s rewind and see how we got here, shall we?”

He passes a hand in front of the whiteboard and the scene devolves, coalescing into a shot of the convenience store and me

walking in. I spot my target right away and head straight to the counter, asking him for directions to Stilton Street. He draws me a map on the back of a napkin, I thank the counter guy for his help, and then—I break protocol.

The magazines here all have holographic covers, and it throws me. I'm fascinated by the 3-D effect, and I pause instead of moving on.

I take my time looking at each one before I turn to leave, but I'm interrupted by the front door slamming open so hard it nearly shatters the glass. A man with a gun in his hand heads straight for the counter as I stare, wide-eyed and openmouthed.

"Open the register," he says, pointing the gun right in the clerk's face.

I realize this isn't the best place to be right now, so I start slowly backing down the aisle—and then accidentally snag on the beef jerky display, which rocks and then topples to the ground.

The robber pivots, leveling the gun on me.

Suddenly, the counter guy springs into action. He leaps over the counter and slams into the robber, throwing him to the ground. The gun goes off, hitting the soda machine, which lets out a loud hiss. Another clerk runs out from the back, shrieks, and then presses the alarm button, setting off a claxon that can surely be heard on the street. I leap back as the two men struggle before me.

Then I notice the gun—it must've fallen from the robber's hand when he hit the ground. I start to reach for it, and then I stop myself. Then I reach for it again, and I'm hyperventilating.

I've never held a gun in my life.

But *this* me has.

I pick up the gun—it's a semiautomatic handgun—a Taurus

PT 111. Somehow, I know that. I quickly use my thumb to press in on the magazine release. I toss the magazine into a trash can nearby, and I slide the gun across the floor under the displays, as far away as I can.

A moment later, sirens cut the air, and the robber is on his feet, looking around frantically for his gun. He locks eyes with me, and for a moment, I wonder if he's going to come after me, but I suppose he decides he's better off running. He's out the door in a flash.

"You okay?" I ask the clerk. He gives me a nod, holding a napkin to his bleeding mouth, and I head for the door. "His gun is under the candy display, over there," I say. "I'm going to go get some air."

I can hear him calling after me as I run for the door, and I keep on running, slowing down a few blocks away and putting my fingers to the window of an empty storefront in order to transfer myself back to my reality.

My mother had been more than a little shocked to see me shaking and panting as I stood in front of the microwave with my hand on the door, but I imagine my counterpart was equally surprised to be waiting for popcorn one minute and hyped up on adrenaline and dripping sweat in the next.

"So . . .," Mario says, turning away from the dimming scene on the whiteboard. "How do you think that went?"

I wince. "You mean my nearly getting killed?"

He stares at me stonily. "You were supposed to get in there and then get out. Leave the store, head to the laundromat next door, transfer back from the bathroom."

"It all came out okay," I defend myself weakly. Honestly,

seeing it all happen again is making my palms sweat. I know I'm in the dreamscape, but I wonder if I'll wake up with sweaty palms.

"You didn't complete the assignment," he says. "If you'd gone into the laundromat, a young mother who was there would have seen you and remembered to call her brother's ex-girlfriend because she owns that same shirt. There were big ripples on this one. Big."

"Good to know you're so concerned about me," I grumble.

"You had a job to do and only did part of it," he snaps. "And if you'd left right after you did what you were supposed to do, you wouldn't have been looking down the barrel of a gun."

"You could have told me what was going to happen!"

"It wasn't even a probability at the time I briefed you," Mario said. "There were too many variables that still hadn't fallen into place. Free will changes the way the future unfolds, and that's part of why you're sent to make corrections in the first place."

I straighten my shoulders. "I handled it."

"You shouldn't have had to." Mario runs his hand through his hair so hard, it would have yanked out strands if he were human. "Let's salvage something from this," he finally says, leaning back against his teacher's desk. "How did you know what to do with the gun?"

"I—the other Jessa, I mean—she knew about guns. My mom is dating a cop in her reality. He takes me out shooting sometimes."

"Exactly. So you searched through your applicable memories and drew on the knowledge that was necessary to work through the situation."

"I—yeah, I guess so."

“Not every job is going to go smoothly. The trick is to keep your wits about you—which is something you did manage to do. I’d still prefer you not take any chances—at least until we get Rudy and Eversor rounded up.”

“It’s been weeks without a sign of either one of them,” I remind him. “Eversor hasn’t tried to finish killing me, and Rudy is stripped of his Dreamer powers somewhere.”

“Somewhere in the vast, undefined boundaries of the dreamscape,” he reminds me. “He’ll have to show himself sooner or later—and knowing how bent he was on his cause, my guess is sooner.”

“That’s what you said last week. And the week before.” I don’t even try to hide my irritation. “You’ve had me traveling out practically every day, and there’s been no sign of him, or of Eversor.”

“We were close last week,” he defends himself. “You just missed her in that reality with the archaeological dig.”

“You think. You don’t *know*.”

“I don’t know what she’s up to yet,” he concedes. “But we’ve got them on the run, and that’s half the battle.”

“Maybe they’ve given up. They can’t beat us.”

He makes a slashing motion with his hand in refusal. “We can’t afford to think that way. That may be just what they want—to lull us into dropping our guard. We have to stay vigilant—and *careful*.”

“What do you think they could do that we wouldn’t see coming?” I ask in exasperation.

“That’s a good question,” Mario snaps back. “And a rather frightening one, don’t you think?” He turns back to the whiteboard, drumming his fingers against his chin as he studies it.

"I've got another assignment," he says. "It's short. Shouldn't take you more than fifteen minutes. I'll send you somewhere you've been before, so there won't be any surprises."

The scene comes to life behind him.

"Is that . . . Philadelphia?" I tilt my head, remembering the train station.

"Yes. You'll come through here at eight thirty," Mario tells me. "Buy a pack of Juicy Fruit gum. Then head down to platform four, get on the eight forty-five train. Take a seat at first, close to the door. You'll see a teenage girl with red hair—offer her a stick of gum. Once she gets off the train, stand up, grab one of the metal poles, and transfer back when you see yourself in it. It'll be good practice—using a bended reflection."

Mario has been adamant that I keep my skills sharp. He's right, of course. I need to stay in practice. And considering I haven't had much practice to begin with, I suppose I can't afford to slack off. I don't want to be cornered somewhere just because I'm not practiced enough to get myself out of there.

I shudder at the memory of how I nearly came to an end once just because I couldn't travel through water in dim light. That's not going to happen again. I even sleep with my compact mirror under my pillow now.

"Let's keep it simple," he tells me. "I've pushed you into all this far too quickly, and without the benefit of a mentor these last weeks."

That sentence hangs in the air between us, and the pain starts squeezing my belly, radiating up into my chest. Finn was my mentor. And Finn is gone.

“Fine.” My voice is high and tight. I stride to the door and reach for the knob.

“I’m sorry, Jessa,” Mario says quietly from behind me.

I step through without looking back and wake in my bed in the dark of my room, rubbing my chest as though I can make the pain go away. It doesn’t work.

A decorative arc of grey dots of varying sizes curves across the top of the page, framing the chapter number.

2

Escape

“JESSA KICKED HERSELF IN THE FACE!”

My brother is exuberant, bursting with this tidbit as I slide into my place at the dinner table. My mother’s eyebrows go up and she shoots me a look.

“I didn’t kick my face,” I explain. “It was just a high kick.”

“You could break your nose!” he countered. “You could have a bloody nose!”

“I don’t, Danny,” I say, turning to show him. “Look.”

“Was it bloody before?” he asks. “When you kicked it?”

I try not to roll my eyes. Danny means well, and he certainly can’t help it when his autism makes him dwell on something. But it does get tiring sometimes.

“Danny, enough. I’m fine, okay?”

“You shouldn’t kick your face, Jessa,” he admonishes again.

“So I’m guessing rehearsal went well today?” Mom asks as she passes me a bowl of green beans.

“It was all right. Saturday is dress rehearsal—costumes and on the stage.”

“I can’t wait to see it. You’ve been so secretive about it all, not letting me watch. You’re not doing a striptease or anything, are you?” she quips.

“At a retirement home?”

“Just making sure.”

“Don’t kick anybody,” Danny warns.

“I’ll do my best,” I promise, stretching my legs out in front of me and reaching down to rub my knee. My muscles feel a little sore; maybe I—or should I say, “she”—did overdo the kicks a little.

Six weeks ago, I traveled through a mirror and discovered yet another of the many selves I inhabit, in a multitude of alternate realities. This particular Jessa is a dancer, and in her reality, our mother is dead. I’m helping her out by swapping places two nights a week so she can perform for Mom. So, a week after my first transfer with her, I started taking dance.

I know it’s been a real challenge for her, whipping my non-dancer body into shape in such a short period of time. Five weeks of dance classes normally wouldn’t be enough to bring me up to her level of expertise, but when my body is just a vehicle being driven by a girl who’s had dance classes for a couple of years, muscle memory is really the only hurdle. She put some definite memory into my muscles today.

“Sore?” Mom asks, watching me knead my calf.

“A little.”

“You’re really pushing yourself with this dance stuff.”

“I know. I like it.”

“You don’t need to be so driven about it,” she says. I see her eyes slide in my direction again, with that same worried look she’s been wearing for more than a month now. I sigh inwardly, waiting for the other shoe to drop.

“You know, Jessa . . .”

Ugh. Here it comes.

“Maybe you should relax after the recital is over. Take some time off. I was talking to Mrs. Lampert about your schedule—”

My head snaps up. “Mrs. Lampert? When were you talking to my school counselor?”

“I e-mailed her last week and we were going back and forth—”

“Wait.” I hold up a hand. “Why are you ‘going back and forth’ with Mrs. Lampert? I’m doing fine. My grades are good.”

“This is about more than grades,” Mom says. “She has some concerns, after all that’s happened. And so do I.”

I want to groan out loud. In the weeks that followed Finn’s death—and Ms. Eversor’s disappearance—all hell broke loose around here.

My former creative writing teacher, Ms. Eversor, apparently tendered her resignation at the high school the morning of our confrontation at the old Greaver mine. She left at lunchtime and never came back. That was only half of the scandal. She disappeared on the same day as another student—who happened to be male and more than a little good-looking. The last anyone heard, she had booked a flight to Mexico, probably to avoid prosecution. The speculation was that I’d lost my boyfriend to a predatory teacher. The looks I was and still am getting, the

whispers, the talk that stops as soon as I come into a room (or worse, *doesn't* stop) are now finally dying down, but that doesn't make it any more bearable when it happens.

I was questioned in my mother's presence by an officer from the local police department regarding the incident, but since Finn was recorded as being just over eighteen, and the teacher had already resigned (and no one could find either one of them) the incident wasn't pursued further.

This, of course, led to a full-on sit-down talking-to from both of my parents, who could see how devastated I was over all this. They had no idea, of course, that I was being hunted by a reality-shifting teacher working on behalf of an immortal being who wants to wipe out most of the universe.

Add into all this the stress of college applications, facing the last semester of my senior year . . . and Finn's death. Let's just say it's a lot to deal with.

"I'm fine," I say tightly. "Everything is fine."

"You've been pushing yourself too hard," Mom says. "First with this dance thing and then with school. You spend all your free time up in your room studying and doing homework. It's like we never see you anymore. And when we do see you—well, you're different. Changed."

"That's because she kicked herself in the face," Danny interjects.

Mom lets out a long breath. "Now really isn't the time to have this conversation," she says.

"No, it's not," I snap. "We don't need to have it at all."

"Honey, what is *wrong* with you?" she asks. "Honestly, it's like you're a different person lately. You're so preoccupied."

It's been like this for weeks—she's always nudging, prodding me, trying to figure out why I've changed so much. I can't tell her what I've been through. I can't tell her that I'm different because I'm not always the Jessa she knows.

"I'm just stressed. I have a big assignment due," I grit out. I do have an assignment due, in creative writing.

"Well, if it's got you that wound up, you should work on it and get it out of the way. When is it due?"

"Tomorrow."

Her eyebrows go up. "Then you'd better get started."

"Yes, ma'am," I say, giving her a salute. My sarcasm goes over badly. I push away from the table and stomp up the stairs to my room.

"Jessa—"

"Don't kick yourself!" Danny calls after me.

I sink down onto my bed, wishing it could be that easy. If only I could kick myself in the head and forget all this.

I yank my messenger bag up onto the bed beside me and pull out my journal, tossing it aside. Then I reach for some loose-leaf paper and lay my binder on my lap like a desk as I stare at the blank sheets. I pick up my pen, tapping it impatiently on the edge of my binder, willing something—anything—to come to my mind.

It doesn't.

I throw the binder and papers to the floor, and then for good measure I hurl my journal at the wall. Between the chaos in my mind and the chaos downstairs, it's impossible to focus. Just impossible.

I stare at the mirror longingly. God, do I need to get away.

The traveling I did earlier today was to facilitate my newfound love of dance. That's strictly for me. And for my counterpart.

This next travel is a job, and unfortunately, I have more than an hour to kill until I need to step into another reality and become a different me.

I make a grumpy face at myself in the mirror, going over my assignment again in my mind.

I can hear Mom and Danny downstairs, and I know she's not through lecturing me. As soon as she clears the table, she'll come upstairs and I'll probably have to talk to her again.

I am in no mood for this. I need to escape, and today's assignment is exactly where I need to go. It's not really breaking the rules if I show up a little early, is it?

Part of me knows Mario might get irked, but I've been to this reality before. It's as safe as safe can be, and I really need to be there right now.

I move to the mirror over my dresser, laying my palm to the glass, concentrating on my other self.

Do me a favor, I mouth. I stare back at myself curiously at first, and then, to my surprise, I break into a wide grin and give myself a nod. I don't even pause to question my good fortune. One solid push and I am out of here.

A decorative arc of grey dots of varying sizes, arranged in a semi-circle at the top of the page.

3

Unexpected

I TAKE A MOMENT TO ADJUST TO WHAT I'M SEEING.

I am brilliant platinum bleach-blonde, and I am wearing entirely too much eyeliner. The first time I came here, I started to wipe it all off, but then I forced myself to leave it alone. I know how irked I get when the other Jessas screw with my face or my stuff while I'm gone. I still haven't grown out the bangs I got when one of the other Jessas hacked my hair off. I'm not a fan of this look, but I'm not going to screw with it.

Right now, I'm in a bathroom at what I think is a pizza place, judging by the pictures of pizza slices and Italian food framed on the walls, so I step away from the mirror and reach for the door. It opens forcefully from the other side at the same time, and before I can let out a squeak of surprise, my arm is being yanked and I am half tripping, half running along behind a familiar head of long, dark spiraled hair.

This is Olivia, and she is talking a thousand words a minute.

“They called your name! Come on! OhmyGod, Jessa, come on! You’re not backing out of this! Come on!”

I let her pull me along as I chuckle at her over-the-top enthusiasm. Olivia is almost unbearably perky but not in an annoying way. She’s crazy optimistic—which is very much unlike me over here.

This is only my second visit to this reality, and Olivia was an instant friend. No. More than a friend—a sister. Liv and I have been stepsisters for nearly four years, since Dad married Shanice—that’s Olivia’s mother. And I’m in Philadelphia, where Liv and I attend a private school.

“I don’t know what you thought you were doing in there, but you are not getting out of this one! Come on!” She tugs me forward again.

“I was going to the bathroom!” I protest.

“Well, you were taking forever, and now it’s time to pay the piper!”

She finally releases her death grip on my hand and gives me an enormous shove from behind as an older guy hands me a microphone. A spotlight hits me right in the face and I squint as my eyes adjust. I finally notice the crowd, and they’re all staring at me.

The pieces begin to fall into place.

Oh my God. I’m singing karaoke. In front of people. A lot of people.

I don’t sing.

I mean, I really, *really* don’t sing.

My panicked eyes find Olivia, and she’s doubled over, laughing, the traitor. I narrow my eyes back at her as the memory trickles in.

She bet me that I wouldn't score as high as her on my pre-collegiate interviews today. She was right. I didn't even come close, and I'm really perturbed about it, too.

And now I have to sing here at Martinetti's open mic karaoke night, as my loser's price.

"Liv . . .," I mouth pleadingly.

"Sing!" she shouts back, and the crowd—many of whom go to school with us—echoes loudly behind her.

I let out a groan as the music comes blaring over the speakers.

My eyes widen and I give her a searing look.

"Oh, you did *not* do this to me . . .," I grumble under my breath.

I am in no way, shape, or form qualified to sing "Somebody to Love" by Queen. Or anything, for that matter. But a bet is a bet, and my memories assure me that Olivia will never speak to me again if I don't honor our agreement. Dammit.

I open my mouth to sing, and nothing comes out. I swallow and try again. Something comes out this time, and I focus on the words scrolling on the video prompter in front of me. *Hey, I'm doing this! I'm singing!*

Then I look out at the crowd, most of whom are staring at me like I'm up here strangling a frog. Because that's what my voice sounds like. Like I'm strangling a frog. Oh God.

I shoot another panicked look at Olivia, and she's smiling and shaking her head as if to say, *You're not getting out of this.*

I go back to looking at the prompter, and the irony of singing about dying a little when you wake up each morning isn't lost on me, the girl who's been murdered in more realities than I can count.

And with that thought, the tears rush to my eyes, and I blink them back furiously as I stare at a spot on the floor and try to pull myself together. My voice falters, and I'm really not sure I'm going to make it through this. My eyes swing back to Olivia again, but she's not there.

Instead, I feel her arm come around my shoulders from behind, and her hand wraps around mine on the mic as she starts to sing with me, and wow, can she wail. Her voice is amazing, and the crowd is singing along. So am I, for that matter, and I don't need my memories to tell me why I adore this girl. We end to thunderous applause as we join hands and take a bow. Then I hand the mic off and walk right out of the restaurant.

The cold hits me in the face, and a moment later, a blast of warm air as Olivia comes through the door, carrying my coat and my backpack.

"Hey," she says. "You did better than I thought you would."

"That's because I had you."

She bumps my shoulder with hers. "You've always got me. But damn, you really *can't* sing."

I roll my eyes at her. "I know. That was the whole point, right?"

"The point was to get your mind off today. You didn't do that bad, you know. Your score was still in the upper twenty-fifth percentile." She pulls me along as we head toward the train station. "Come on," she says. "We'll get coffee on the way."

As we walk and sip coffee, I use the time to catch myself up on my memories over here, because things here are more than a little different.

We've just completed three weeks of intensive testing through

the school and after school as well. The school conducts practice sessions before we do the formal interview with our career actuaries, who will let us know what collegiate or technical school courses we'll be approved for. We had a set of preliminary interviews today and I lost points for being *too insubordinate and combative*.

"Dad and Shanice are going to kill me," I say matter-of-factly. "So is my mom, for that matter."

"So?" Olivia shrugs. "It's not like you can't leave it all behind anytime you want to."

I'm startled for a moment, and then I remember that Olivia knows everything. She knows I'm a Traveler. I told her more than a year ago, and so far, she's kept the secret.

"This is home, Liv. That means something. Even when I have the power to go anywhere, it still means something."

"I hear you. But things are what they are here, and it works—for most of us."

"We don't have a choice," I point out, ticking things off on my fingers. "Our aptitude and skills are tracked from preschool. We're sorted into classrooms by peer group. Once we finish our selected college and become established in our selected careers, we find a relationship actuary to determine our potential romantic interests. It's nuts!"

"That's not a requirement by law," she counters.

"It's practically unheard of to date someone who isn't actuary-selected."

"And again, you don't have to settle for that if you don't want to," Olivia says. She stops in her tracks and steps in front of me to

look me dead-on. “Maybe you aren’t meant to be stuck here. People like you—the system doesn’t work for them. You’re too—”

“Insubordinate and combative?”

“You laughed through the introductory interview,” she reminds me.

I search back through my memories and I chuckle. “I couldn’t help it. Mrs. Braden has ugly bug-brows. But I did answer all their questions.”

“I feel like I babbled a lot.” Olivia groans as she starts walking again. “And why did I wear this stupid dress? It’s like wearing a corset, it’s so tight.”

I glance over at her and then realize with a start that I’ve met her before, at a grand ball in a steampunk reality, right before I went out to the garden to see . . .

I can’t help but smile a little at the memory of a certain flirty pirate, even though the memory is followed up by a shaft of pain. I barely knew Olivia over there.

“You wanted to make a good impression,” I remind her.

“And you wanted to buck the system,” she says smartly. “Jeans? Really?”

“Maybe the system needs a good bucking.”

She sighs. “Fine. I’m just saying . . . play their game until you’re old enough to be on your own, and then you’ve got no limits. Except for singing.”

“Thanks,” I say awkwardly. I should probably tell her I’m not her Jessa, but that would create a whole world of trouble for my counterpart if Liv thinks she welched on a bet.

That thought snaps me back to reality. I have a job to do and

I forgot about it. I check the time and I'm relieved to see I have twenty minutes left.

"I'm not going back to the dorm," I tell her.

"What?"

"I have to catch a different train."

"Where are you going? We have a test in biology tomorrow to study for."

"I know," I say apologetically. "I won't be gone long. I just have something to do."

"Something—" she starts to protest and then her eyes go wide with realization. "Oh. You better be back by ten."

"I will."

She gives me an impulsive hug. "I'm sorry I put you through that tonight. I should have chosen a different song."

"It's okay." I shift uncomfortably and glance up at the clock on the platform.

"All this stuff will fall into place, Jessa," she says. "We just gotta have a little faith in the system. Who knows." She shrugs. "Maybe they'll find your soul mate someday."

"Right." I give her a nod, even though I think what she's saying is total bunk. She gives me a wave as she boards her train, and then she's gone.

I can hear the announcements for the various trains coming over the loudspeaker, and I have ten minutes until my train leaves.

I take the escalator up so I can change platforms and I wander around the newsstand for a few minutes, killing time. I'm just about to head down again when I remember with a jolt that I'm supposed to buy a pack of Juicy Fruit gum. Crap!

I dig out the money and slap the gum down on the counter, drumming my fingers as the clerk rings me up. Finally he gives me my change, I swipe the gum up, shoving it into the front pocket of my hoodie, and race for the platform. I'm almost there when the gum slips out and hits the ground.

I hesitate. Mario told me specifically to buy it, so I could offer it to the girl in the seat next to me. He wouldn't have mentioned it if it weren't an important detail. I need to get it, and I need to get that train. I start to bend down, when a hand appears, grabbing the pack of gum and holding it out to me.

"Thanks," I mumble, and as we both straighten up, I feel all the air in the universe rush into my lungs, and my heart freezes in my chest. I am immobile, my eyes locked with his.

Finn.

His hair is cut differently—a little spiky, with sideburns that travel a bit farther down his jaw. He has a bump on the bridge of his nose like it's been broken at some point in time. It doesn't look bad, but I fixate on it, because I know if I look at those green, green eyes, I'm going to make a sound no human being should make.

"Hey . . ." He speaks, and the word wraps around me, warm and familiar, the timbre and the slight hesitation as he tries to break the ice. Oh God. The sound of it flows into me like a hot knife in my chest, and before I'm even conscious of it, I turn and run.

I make it through the doors just as they close behind me. The car is very crowded, and I reach for the metal pole to steady myself, not even remembering that's exactly what I'm supposed to do.

As the train pulls away from the platform, I see his face

through the windows, staring in at me, his eyes carrying a question, and I look away. I put a second hand on the pole, aware that I am shaking almost violently.

It takes me nearly ten minutes to be able to focus past the turmoil in my brain, the rocking of the train, the jostling of the people around me, and the curve of the pole, covered in fingerprints. I take a few deep breaths, forcing myself to focus, and then I am back.

But not in my room. This is the bathroom at Mugsy's, and I'm lost.

I throw myself down on the floor in the corner, and the tears come again, tears I've held back for weeks, sobs that rip through me and force me from my formerly peaceful little place of nothingness. I'm holding my knees and I'm rocking.

You will find him again, Mario had warned me once. But so far he's respected my grief and my wishes and limited my dreams to actual memories of Finn—and blessedly few of them. I'd been lulled and let myself believe I could just erase it all somehow by erasing him. As if I could ever erase him.

I get back to my feet, and there on the sink, directly below the mirror, is my journal, opened to a random blank page that isn't so blank anymore. She left me a message:

*Thanks for getting me out of karaoke night.
Sorry you have to walk home but Mario
made me come to Mugsy's to do a correction.
He's pissing me off lately.
I don't think we're making any headway
and I'm so done with this.*

I can feel her anger as she wrote it—not that it’s a stretch, because I feel it, too. Six weeks since Finn died and we’re no closer to knowing where Rudy is or Eversor is, and what’s Mario’s solution? Putting me in a position to come face-to-face with another Finn, without a word of warning. Dammit. I forgot to give the girl her Juicy Fruit gum. If Mario has the balls to confront me about that after what he just put me through . . .

I should head for home, but I know I can’t do it. I just can’t pretend I’m okay. I should have stayed where I was, taken another train back. I really need Liv. But I can probably never go back there now—not now that things have been set in motion. That Jessa will find her Finn again, or he’ll find her.

I rub my chest, because I swear to God, it feels like there’s a knife in there right now. I can’t sit here in Mugsy’s all night, but the thought of walking home alone in the dark, sobbing, just adds to my misery.

I reach for my phone, punching in a number, and within seconds, the voice on the other end answers.

“St. Clair?”

“I need a friend.” It rushes out and I don’t care how it sounds. I need a shoulder. I need my friend.

Ben picks up on the tone of my tear-clogged voice immediately. “You at home?”

“Mugsy’s.” I can barely get the word out.

“I’ll be right over. Hang tight.”

“Thanks.”

I put the phone back in my pocket and I realize my hand is

shaking. My mind plays over the scene again, the train platform, the sound of Finn's voice, the look in those green eyes as the train pulled away. . . .

I look over at my reflection in the mirror, and I wonder how much time she'll have with him.

4

Betrayed

MARIO IS WAITING FOR ME, AND HE DUCKS HIS HEAD IN a guilty gesture that makes me want to punch him. As it is, I stare at him soundlessly, with my hand curling into a fist.

“Jessa.”

“So you’re actually going to face me?”

“I’m the Dreamer who sent you there, and I’ll take full responsibility for it. I’m sure you realize it wasn’t an accident.”

“An accident?” I let out a choked laugh. “There are no ‘accidents’ with you people! You plan and manipulate and arrange everything, don’t you?”

“Jessa—”

“And who’s going to stop you? It’s no big deal, right? It’s just my heart! Just my life!” I turn my back on him, too furious to continue.

“You can’t avoid him forever.”

“Why can’t I? Who’s it hurting for me to avoid him?”

Mario folds his arms across his chest. “It’s hurting you,” he tells me, “though you probably can’t see it that way right now.”

“Oh, ya think?” The sarcasm is dripping off my words, and I lean back against his desk. “I’m tired, Mario. I’m traveling too much, my mom is getting really suspicious, and now you pull *this* on me. This was supposed to be a routine job.”

“You mean the job you didn’t complete? Again?” he asks pointedly.

“Don’t start with me.” My eyes flash a warning that he completely ignores as he studies me for a moment, stroking his chin thoughtfully.

“Come on,” he finally says. “I’ve got something to show you.”

He steps over to the red door and opens it, and I follow him through and into the dreamscape. We’re in someone’s backyard in what looks like an average suburban neighborhood. Mario now looks like a postal worker, complete with a bagful of letters slung over his shoulder.

“The girl you were supposed to offer the gum to was going to be reminded of an old family friend who happened to always carry Juicy Fruit gum,” he tells me, pointing the girl out as she walks past us. She doesn’t notice us because this is just a dream Mario is using to illustrate his point. We’re merely observers as he shows me the future that could have been.

“The friend is like a second mother to her,” he goes on, and the scene changes in front of us. It looks like we’re on a farm or something, and Mario is now in overalls and a John Deere hat.

“She’s going to make a point to visit the friend next month,” he tells me. “While she’s there, she’s going to remark about a suspicious mole on a neighbor’s arm.”

My forehead creases in confusion as I try to follow the chain of events. “She saves somebody from cancer?” I ask.

“No, it’s not just about that,” Mario says, waving a hand to change the scene again—this time to an older man sitting on a hospital bed, with a younger woman and a nurse in attendance.

“The cancer is there,” Mario says, pointing. “But it’s in the early stages. The neighbor will get the treatment he needs, and his daughter will drive him to his doctor appointments. The daughter will get to know the cute radiologist at the hospital, and they’ll begin a relationship. The radiologist has an ex-girlfriend who’ll be heartbroken to see him move on, and she’ll take nearly a year to recover from it. During that time, she starts playing guitar again—just like she needs to.”

“Why?”

“That’s another story that leads to a half dozen others,” Mario tells me, reaching for the knob on the red door that’s in the center of the hospital room wall. He opens it and I follow him back through into the classroom.

“So this guy might die of cancer and his daughter will never find true love because I screwed up—is that what you’re saying?” I wrap my arms around myself again, feeling twice as miserable as I did when I got here.

“I’m reminding you that one little correction can reset the course of dozens, maybe even hundreds of lives. We need you—you need you,” he amends, “to be the absolute best you can be as a Traveler. It’s critical, especially in light of current events. Working around Finn is a handicap we can’t afford you to have.”

“If Rudy was going to come after me, he would have done it already. I haven’t encountered Eversor once—*anywhere*.”

“Yet,” Mario adds.

“At all! And I’m not the only one who’s tired of spinning my wheels with you. The other Jessas are tired of this, too. We’ve been leaving notes for each other complaining about all of this—and you.”

Mario looks surprised. “You’re ganging up on me?”

“We talk. And we’re all in agreement. We think you’re wasting our time.”

He sucks in a breath, as if to draw patience from it, and lets it out slowly. “We’ll talk about this later,” he says. “You need some time after this one. Take the weekend and we’ll revisit this on Sunday night. Besides, I want to hear all about your dance recital.” He gives me a fatherly smile and I curl my hand into a fist once more. I swear, I’m going to hit him right in that smiling mouth of his.

“I meant what I said,” I tell him through gritted teeth. “Either send me places without him, or I’m done traveling.”

Mario shakes his head. “He’s wherever you are in too many places, Jessa. He’s a fact of life—of *your* life. To keep you away from anywhere he might be would severely handicap your scope and definitely limit what I can do with you.”

“And that’s the only consideration, isn’t it?” I snarl. “Can I get the job done? Can I do it even if people are trying to kill me or I’m in the middle of a tsunami or a hurricane or if I see a ghost right in front of my eyes!”

“It’s not the only consideration,” Mario says calmly. “We can’t afford to always take the easy way around. The forecasts predict—”

“Forecasts can be wrong. Want to know how I know that? Because they don’t see everything coming, do they?” I can feel

my temper nearly consuming me, and my next words are a shout.

“How about this? I quit!”

I storm over to the red door and yank it open.

“Good-bye, Mario.”

The words echo in my darkened bedroom, and I punch my pillow, wishing it was a certain Dreamer’s face.



5

Out of Hibernation

“YOU HUNGRY, ST. CLAIR?”

Ben’s voice startles me and I look away from my reflection in the window of the bus. It’s field trip day for the Spanish Club, and Ben is sitting next to me as we pull out of the school parking lot.

“Nah,” I tell him. “I’ll eat later.”

“You sure? I’ve got food in my bag.”

“I’m fine.”

“I have Twix in there,” he says.

“Seriously. I’m not hungry.”

“Who are you? And what have you done with Jessa St. Clair?” he quips. “It’s *Twix*. *Twiiiiix*.” He’s waggling his brows and bug-eyed and it makes me laugh.

“It’s seven o’clock in the morning,” I point out.

“So? Twix is the breakfast of champions. Along with a fresh can of Monster.” He holds the can to his lips, draining it with a loud, gusty sigh of refreshment.

I raise my brows and look at him like the crazy person he is.