

BOUND BY STARS

Never let go...

E. L. STARLING

Dear Reader,

Please note that this Advance Reading Copy is not a finished book.

That's right. Because we want to give you a special, early sneak peek of this incredible story, you're holding the first stage of printer's proofs, which has not yet been corrected by the author, publisher, or printer.

The design, artwork, page length, and format may change before publication, and typographical errors will be corrected during the course of production.

If you quote from this ARC, please note that your review is based on uncorrected text.

Happy reading!

Entangled Publishing

BOUND BY STARS

E. L. STARLING

ADVANCE READER COPY
UNCORRECTED PROOF
NOT FOR SALE OR REDISTRIBUTION

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

Copyright © 2025 by E.L. Starling. All rights reserved, including the right to reproduce, distribute, or transmit in any form or by any means. For information regarding subsidiary rights, please contact the Publisher.

Please note that no part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner for the purpose of training artificial intelligence technologies or systems.

Entangled Publishing, LLC
644 Shrewsbury Commons Ave.
STE 181
Shrewsbury, PA 17361
rights@entangledpublishing.com

Entangled Teen is an imprint of Entangled Publishing, LLC.

Visit our website at www.entangledpublishing.com.

Edited by Madison Pelletier and Justine Bylo
Cover design by Elizabeth Turner Stokes
Cover images by Vector Street/Shutterstock
Interior design by Britt Marczak

Paperback ISBN 978-1-64937-840-8
Ebook ISBN 978-1-64937-821-7

Manufactured in the United States of America

First Edition July 2025

1 0 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

 **entangled teen**
an imprint of Entangled Publishing LLC

*For the boy from Art class who swore he'd follow me to hell
when we were only eighteen.*

Bound by Stars is an adventurous, heartfelt romance that blends history and fiction to create a new love story for the ages. However, this book contains elements that may not be suitable for all readers. Recurring themes of classism as well as brief instances of climate disaster, parental betrayal, acts of terror, blood and gore, attempted drowning, and death by fire, suffocation, and impalement are all discussed. Readers who may be sensitive to these elements, please take note and prepare to board the *Boundless*.

Chapter One

WESLIE

Twelve minutes to departure

I push my legs to move faster against the burn of acid in my muscles, past another wall of posters. They've been plastered all over the city for weeks. *Unmatched luxury. Indestructible design. Unparalleled speed. The fastest ship in the universe!* The ship I'm going to miss. I sprint harder, my duffel bag bouncing against my hip.

"Protocol requires that you notify your guardian before leaving the planet. Send notification now?" ILSA restates the question I didn't answer the other five times since we snuck out of the house.

If she weren't the whole reason I had won the ticket, I would leave the insistent bot on Earth.

"I'm seventeen. Old enough to travel alone. I'll send a message from the ship," I say more to myself than her. If I let

Mom know I'm leaving, she'll try to keep me here again. She lost the right to a goodbye when she hid my notification letter.

This experience could change my life—both of our lives—and she was just going to throw it away without giving me a choice. What the hell else has she kept from me?

Her words repeat in my head again. *I know you don't understand, but it's too big a risk, Wesi.*

When I round the last building, the transport station comes into view. Draped above the arched entrance, a banner flaps in the wind. THE *BOUNDLESS*: FIRST VOYAGE TO MARS DEPARTING APRIL 10, 2212. Today. Now.

I'm almost there. Don't leave without me.

"Protocol requires that you notify your guar—"

"ILSA! Transport status!" I'd put her in silent mode if she weren't the only one who could access the station updates. I push my legs to move faster.

"Still boarding. Protocol requires that you notify your guardian before leaving the planet. Send notification now?"

"No!" Inside the station gates, I desperately search for where to go. A huge sign above the far end of the platform reads EARTHER BOARDING. The line is short. The last two people are about to scan their tickets.

I take off again, too focused on where I'm going to notice before I slam into a passing shoulder. Papers fly and a thick book smacks the ground, encircled in a cloud of dust.

My knees hit the dirt. I scramble to collect the loose pages. My attention shifts frantically back and forth between the ground and the platform.

The porter crosses his arms, waiting as the second-to-last person in line searches their bag.

I snatch up another paper. A hand-drawn map of the city and the trees that obscure my house. I think maybe the artist

included the pitch of our roof.

Someone grabs hold of the edge of the drawing. “Do you mind? You’re crinkling them.”

I look up, following a slender arm to wide shoulders, a long neck, and dark eyes, inches away. Deep brown with bursts of gold in the center surrounded by long, pale lashes. The sack slung from his body is all Earther, but his clothes scream Elysian. I’m lucky he’s not having me detained.

“Last call for Earther boarding!” The porter is roping off the entrance.

My gaze flicks down to the mess around me, pages dusted with copper slowly shifting away in the breeze, then back to the entrance.

The porter turns away, climbing the steps.

I shove the pages toward the long-limbed boy. “I’m really sorry.” I release them before he has a grip and run without looking back to see them fall to the ground again. “Wait!”

The porter pauses and squints at us from midway up the steps.

ILSA keeps pace with me. “Protocol requires—”

“Relax, ILSA!”

“Yes, Weslie.”

The sound of her powering down stops me in my tracks. “You have to be kidding me!”

I race back, manually switching her on and waiting the four painful seconds it takes for her to reboot. Mental note: make important commands less casual.

The porter slides one of the massive doors closed and then ambles across the platform to the other, glaring at me pointedly. He’s taking his time, but he’s not going to wait.

“If I miss the last flight to the ship, I’m going to dismantle you,” I say under my breath right before she comes to life again.

“Platform. Maximum speed, ILSA.”

She zooms to the base of the stairs, and I sprint after her, blinded by the dust cloud trailing her.

The porter smirks. “You have a ticket?”

I flash him the solid black tab with the ship’s name in elegant script I’d found folded into my notification letter. Hot rage expands in my chest, but I push it down.

He walks back down to let me in and then nods to the half-open door. “Hurry to the scanning bays.”

ILSA and I are split up. I’m ushered into a pod that conducts a full-body scan, checking for weapons and signs of disease. The space is tight. The air feels thin. I clamp my eyes shut and follow the prompts, counting my breaths. The doors slide open, and relief washes over me.

Exiting through a wind tunnel that fluffs my hair and nearly takes my sweater off, I look back at the intrusive machine. Anger turns to shame when I realize it’s clearing the dust.

“Step into the next chamber, please.” Another porter, short and stocky, leads me on with a hand at my back.

I suck air into the depths of my lungs before I’m pushed through the next set of doors.

“*Hello, Boundless traveler.*” An overly cheery robotic voice fills the small space, coming from every direction. Two bright blue footprints glow in the center of the floor. Instructed by the robotic voice, I line up my feet and stretch my arms wide. The walls slowly move in around me.

No, it’s just in my head.

“*Please line your hand up with the outline to your right and insert your ticket to complete identification profile.*”

Chest heaving with shallow breaths, I comply.

Two quick tones, one high, one low, and the doors part in front of me. My ticket is released.

“You are ready to board your expedition to Mars. Thank you for traveling with White Star Line. Please continu—”

“On the transport or we’re leaving without you,” an attendant in a gray jumpsuit calls over the roar of engines, glaring at me from the open door of the capsule where all the other passengers are strapped into their seats.

We hurry inside. ILSA immediately parks next to the luggage rack, settling low and engaging her magnetic stabilizer for the ride, and I claim one of the four remaining seats and buckle in.

The doors slide closed. A layer of sweat sheens my face. My pulse races. It’s too small. No windows. The doors seal. Airtight. What if we run out of oxygen? Don’t think about it. Breathe.

“Weslie,” ILSA announces loudly from the end of the aisle.

Half the passengers turn their heads toward her.

“Your heart rate has increased exponentially. Elevated heart rate can be brought on by exertion, fear, stress—”

“Silent mode, ILSA!” I call out, squeezing my eyes closed against the inevitable stares.

Someone tugs on my straps, and my eyes fly open.

The attendant twists her lips and raises her eyebrows like she’s silently telling me it’ll get scarier before this is over.

The fear must be written across my face. I’ve never left the ground, let alone Earth.

When she’s pulled on every set of restraints, the attendant takes her seat in the small cabin at the front, next to the pilot. “Preparing for departure.”

The engine noise grows louder and stronger, vibrating my bones.

Across from me, a man pinches his eyes shut, mouthing something that looks like a prayer. His lips move faster and faster

like he's trying to get out as many words as he can before he dies, while the woman to his left is slumped in her restraints, already peacefully asleep.

You're more likely to die in a factory accident than a departure.

All the facts stored in my brain can't stop my hands from shaking or my heart from pounding against my rib cage. I grip the straps at my chest and squeeze my eyes shut.

The aircraft lifts, leaving my stomach on solid ground. Noise presses against my ears, like hands clamping tighter and tighter around my head. The whirl of the engines shifts into higher pitches. Taking off one by one. Our transport lurches forward. Accelerating. Up, up, up.

My stomach drops again, pinned to the bottom of the aircraft, as we hurl faster and faster through the air. It feels too uncontrolled. Like we won't stop until we crash into another ship and plummet back down to Earth. But then we slow all at once. The sensation is gentle, like being softly lobbed into the air in slow motion. I open my eyes.

Across the pod, the sleeping woman's limbs float weightlessly around her.

We're outside of the atmosphere.

The clank of metal on metal sends my heart into my throat, and my nails dig into my armrests. The attendant, strapped to her seat, wears a placid expression. Everything is normal. Everything is fine.

As we wait, my mind shifts through images from the space travel documentaries they showed us in school, trying to piece together what could be on the other side of the door. Boxy gray halls, low ceilings, ladders, and small round windows in each cell.

The pilot and attendant are silent. The other passengers don't speak. We wait.

The sleeping woman's limbs settle.

I feel solid. Grounded by artificial gravity. But my insides flutter like I'm still floating.

All our restraints automatically release, and the door opens.

A slight man in a navy-blue cap and matching vest steps through, flashing a toothy grin. "Good evening, folks. Welcome aboard the *Boundless*."



Chapter Two

WESLIE

Thirty-six days to Mars

I step into the docking bay with ILSA by my side. It's almost what I envisioned. White walls instead of gray. Low ceiling. More people unload into the same space. Too little space.

My chest tightens, and I mindlessly tap my index and middle finger against my thumb in an accelerating pattern following my breaths.

One, two, one, two. Slow down. Control it. Count with intention.

Armed with my breathing exercise and ILSA, who's packing enough oxygen to get me to safety, I can do this. Small spaces were always part of the deal, but theory is simpler than reality.

"All boarding Earthers, please stay within the lit pathway and close to the person in front of you," the man who greeted us

shouts over the chaos of excited voices.

I take a step left with the other passengers. We're crammed tight, shoulder to shoulder, nose to back. Six people across, the wide line ahead doesn't seem to have an end.

One. Two. One. Two.

Even on my toes, I can't see the front.

"Keep it moving, keep it moving!" A woman passes in the same uniform, light glinting off the emblem pinned to her vest, a brass-edged, five-pointed white star.

The release of the departing transport sends a vibration through the floor.

That's it. No turning back now.

We're herded, shuffling through the hall until the line files through a passage and into another hall, just as white, but with a higher ceiling. Enough to feel like there's sufficient oxygen for all the people in it. At a split, we're sorted left and right at random. No questions.

"Have your tickets ready for scanning!" another vested crewmember shouts from down the hall.

I reach into my pocket, wrap my hand around the rigid plastic, and pull my bag strap higher on my shoulder. Walking in half steps, the herd around me moves painfully slow. An electric pulse builds inside of me, twisting through my organs and pushing me to break away, take a full step, a long stride, run.

Ahead, porters sort the slow-moving crowd of Earthers. Tickets are scanned and people climb ladders or duck low into sleeping pods. Pods.

Why hadn't I considered pods? It makes perfect sense. I know the specs. The ship holds 2,240 people. How else would we all fit?

One, two. One, two. My mental chant turns to panicked chaos. I need to get out of here.

ILSA places a curved hand on my shoulder.

I glance back to see the cloud icon on her face screen. Sky. Air. Exhaling slowly, I nod.

The praying man from my transport climbs into the middle row of pods, opening the door as we pass. Inside it's small, but there's light, a mirrored wall. Is that an air vent? Of course. They aren't locking us in airless boxes. I picture myself pressing my face up close to it, imagine the brush of air against my cheeks, and tap my fingers to my thumb. One. Two. One. Two.

It's only for sleeping. I can do this.

"Ticket?" The crew member glares at me like this isn't the first time she's had to ask.

"Oh, sorry." I fumble with the thick black tag in my pocket and finally manage to pull it out to show her.

She takes it from me, scanning the embossed code. Pinching her eyebrows together, she looks me over, stained shoes to knotted hair. "You aren't supposed to be here."

My heart sinks. If I could have just finished reading the damn letter. Will they send me back? Arrest me?

She waves another crew member over, and I brace myself for detainment, the imminent firm grip on my upper arm or bonds clamping around my wrists.

"Follow me, please. Your accommodations are in another area." She moves quickly, not waiting for questions.

My stomach pitches. My face goes cold. Oh god. There are even smaller pods.

She leads me up a sloped walkway that opens to a circular room with a high ceiling, semicircle mezzanine, and flat wall with a projection of an infographic with the ship's name in the same long script as my ticket.

"The porter checked my ticket at the gate. Is there something wrong..."

I tear my eyes away from the room and our guide is already gone.

ILSA and I follow the sound of clanking footsteps into a cold, echoey stairwell and spot her a flight above. Three levels up, we finally catch her, staying a couple steps behind as we exit.

The plain white floor becomes shiny black with a repeating pattern of small golden galaxies. An ornate banister winds upward, its swoop of polished wood reflecting the glittering chandelier above. An ancient-looking clock is mounted to the wall midway up the stairs.

Now I know I'm in the wrong place.

Below, the ship's interior looked like what I'd expected of an interplanetary voyage, plain and minimalist. Function over frill. But up here, it's like something out of a history book. Every inch needlessly adorned, pointlessly luxurious.

Opposite the staircase, a blond porter stands behind a solid wood podium sliding her finger over the top, tapping commands. Behind her, a set of ornate double doors carved with swirling patterns and five-pointed stars swing open. They're not like the rest of the doors we've passed, unremarkable ports sliding in and out of the walls. A man with a thin mustache and the same navy vest steps out. I catch a flash of tables draped with ivory linens before the doors swing shut again.

The blond porter looks up from the podium to the mustached man. "The countdown clock isn't running."

"It'll start any second. We're behind schedule." The man gives her a sideways glance, whispering a little too loudly as I pass. "A Big Six family made a scene about private transport, so we're a few minutes behind."

"Just a little farther this way," our guide calls from the landing halfway up the grand staircase.

I walk faster, like I wasn't shamelessly eavesdropping, and silently eye ILSA beside me. We ascend the steps together as the minute hand of the old clock ticks to the right. Under the hands keeping the time in our designated port city, my home, a set of blank plates rotate to display the days and hours remaining until we reach our destination: *Thirty-six days, seven hours*. About five weeks to Mars.

The woman leading us disappears onto the next level.

"Look, if there's something wrong, I can..."

I can what? Find my own way back to Earth? The transport that brought me here already departed.

Either she's hauling ass or I'm too distracted to keep up. Maybe both.

When we reach the top step, she's midway down the hall, beckoning us to follow before taking the next turn.

Another uniformed porter with short black hair, olive skin, and a pile of towels balanced in his arms hurries past the crossed hallways.

My heart swells. And his name slips between my lips in a whisper. "Reve."

I break into a run, but by the time I reach it, the hall he passed into is empty.

"Come along!" Our guide impatiently waves us on in the opposite direction.

I glance back once more. For a second, I could swear...but no. No way. I'm imagining things. My lifelong best friend could not be on this ship. Reve works at the transport depot, repairing and prepping ships. He doesn't deliver fresh linens. And he wouldn't be caught dead in a uniform.

ILSA keeps pace as I jog to catch up past evenly spaced, numbered doors. Three turns later, the porter leading us finally slows and stops, waving my ticket next to a door marked with brass numbers: *101*.

As it slides open, I hold my breath. Split on expectations, I'm prepared for another slender hall with sleeping pods like rows of coffins or an even more official-looking crew member waiting to arrest me for being a stowaway and take me back to Earth.

But there are no pods. No one is waiting. It's a bedroom. Twice the size of my room at home. The walls are lined with heavy emerald fabric, built-in cabinets, and drawers with brass knobs.

"Whoa." This has to be a mistake.

The porter waves me inside, drawing a paper-thin tablet from her vest pocket. "Standard single room secured for the Interplanetary Alliance Life Support Bot competition winner."

"That's me." First place. It still feels completely unreal. But I earned it. ILSA had to be the only entry from Earth that can transform into a full life support system for up to fifteen hours with a tracking beacon, GPS, transport capabilities, plus environment detection and health scanning. On top of being a conversational companion capable of learning to read physical changes and detect emotional and medical distress. She is everything they asked for and more.

Even though I hadn't responded to a message from him in months, Reve was the one who sent me the flyer. The Interplanetary Alliance, made up of the six heads of the most powerful companies in the galaxy, was running a competition for young engineers. I'd just made the cutoff on the lower end of the seventeen to twenty-three age range, but I knew immediately I'd get here. No doubt in my mind. Still, it's impossible to align the dream with this reality.

I stare at the porter, unable to change my face, which must look like ILSA's—utterly blank.

She presses my ticket against her tablet until it emits a sharp beep and then holds the screen out toward me. "Left hand here, please."

I lay my palm on the cool surface. Another beep.

“You’ll be able to access your room and all other first-class amenities now.” She smiles and checks her screen again, quickly scanning the information. “Your award includes full, first-class passage to and from Mars. Appropriate attire for your stay on the *Boundless* and your presentation on Mars has been provided.” She gestures to the other side of the room.

Next to the closet is another open door with deep green tiled walls inside.

“I have my own bathroom?” There is no way this is real.

“Of course.” She presses a panel on the wall behind her. Another closet. How many compartments does this one room have? The door pops open.

“In here is your emergency cryo-pod. Its operation is basic, but they’ll go over the training at passenger orientation.” She presses a button, and the front pops open. The interior padding doesn’t make it look any more appealing. She points out the activation pad on the inside and steps back as it closes, sealing shut. Air locked.

My reflection in the small window of the coffin-like tube says everything. The only way I’ll be using it is if my lifeless body is shoved inside.

“A formal dinner is served promptly at seven every evening. Lunch is available from eleven to three p.m. Breakfast is served from six to eight every morning. Class begins tomorrow for all passengers of basic level age.”

“I have to go to school on the ship? In space?”

“Space travel is taxing on the human psyche. Best to keep your mind engaged. Intellectual and physical activity is required of all passengers on the *Boundless*. The fitness facility will be open daily, but you’ll be assigned gym time with your classmates. Feel free to explore the ship in the meantime. You’ll find we have

an extensive library, several game rooms, and ample sensory spaces, such as our award-winning arboretum at the heart of the ship.”

“This place is unreal,” I say to myself, petting the silky silver bedding and lowering to sit on the pillowy mattress. It’s almost too much to process. Hours ago, I was stuck on Earth, out of chances. Now I’m here. In a different world. A shiny, perfect, new world.

“In five days, we’ll enter the communication dead zone between planets, and we won’t have contact again until we’re within five days of Mars.”

Twenty-six days without contact with anyone on solid ground. I swallow back the hollow fear rising in my throat. Space travel has never scared me, but floating in space without contact with Earth? If something happened to the ship, would anyone ever know about it? Or would we just blink out of existence without explanation? Our route between planets is only a blip in the vastness of space.

“If you don’t have any questions, I’ll leave you to settle in. If you need assistance at any time, the call button is on the wall here with the other room controls.” She touches one of the brass buttons and the emerald fabric next to the bed parts to reveal a huge circular window at least as tall as I am, displaying a swirl of clouds, continents, and oceans. So far away, but closer than I’ll be for a long time.

My mom’s expression flashes across my memory, so full of concern as she’d stopped working and pushed back her face shield. I didn’t understand until I noticed the broken seal. She’d intercepted the letter. She’d hidden it from me.

“Congratulations, Ms. Fleet.” The porter smiles, inclining her head. The door closes behind her with the soft sound of compressed air before I can thank her.

I turn back to the window. Heat expands in my chest, up my neck, prickling at my eyes. Has Mom realized I'm gone? How angry is she going to be?

When I'd uncovered the ivory envelope with my name in elegant script under the mess on her worktable, her tone had been cautious, like she'd done something wrong. And she knew it. "It's too dangerous up there."

"Are you kidding me? Have you seen the Elysians? They have it made on Mars!"

"It only seems that way because you've only ever lived here."

"So have you!" My voice had grown louder, angrier with every word, as the weight of her betrayal settled on my shoulders. "They have everything! They live in a protected atmosphere where they don't have to scrape by and work in shitty factories and get dust lung and—"

She snatched the paper out of my hand. "You aren't going."

"Like hell, I'm not!" I grabbed for the letter, but she held it out of reach.

She sucked in a shaky breath. "I wish I didn't have to say no, but it's too big a risk."

"It's not your choice!"

"You don't... If they... Weslie, it's my job to protect you. I'm not changing my mind." She petted my hair with her free hand, staring straight into my face.

"I'm not like him, you know. Dad. I wouldn't leave you here."

Pinching her eyes closed, she took a slow step back toward her worktable.

I pushed away the guilt. She couldn't hold me captive because *he* abandoned her.

"Can you please trust me on this one?"

"Trust you?" I narrowed my eyes to slits, pointedly trained on the stolen letter in her hand.

“I’m sorry, Wes.” She clicked on the torch.

The edge of the paper curled and disintegrated in the flames licking over the pristine lettering.

“*Attention, Boundless passengers.*” The gentle, robotic voice cuts through the memory. “*Welcome aboard. All passengers have been accounted for, and we have officially departed on our journey to Mars station. Estimated arrival in thirty-six days, six hours, thirty-five minutes. Thank you for traveling with White Star Line.*”

I take a steadying breath and blink away hot, stinging tears, still staring down at Earth. Home. Outside the atmosphere, my fresh anger feels weakened. I already made it. I’m on the ship. On my way. There’s nothing Mom can do now. And she’s alone down there. A microscopic speck on a blue planet.

She’ll understand after I present ILSA to the company heads on Mars. When they give me the internship, ask me to stay. Unlike my dad, I’ll send for her to join me. And she won’t have to work in a factory anymore. She won’t start coughing one day and never stop. She won’t have to waste her talent on minor repairs. And we won’t have to worry about surviving all the time.

“ILSA, end silent mode.”

She comes back to life. “Yes, Weslie.”

“I’m ready to send that message to Mom now.”

Chapter Three

JUPITER

Thirty-five days to Mars

With my bag slung over my shoulder and my shoes in my hands, I creep across the polished floor of the sitting room illuminated by the glow of artificial crackling flames in the fireplace.

Almost free. With any luck, I'll slip out without having to deal with Gianna, my mother's henchwoman.

As I step into the foyer, the overhead light clicks on. I jerk to a stop five feet from the front door, clenching my jaw and pinching my eyes shut. Please, please be Gianna. I may never get out of here if it's Mom.

My mother's full daytime volume shatters the morning quiet. "Don't disappear this evening, Jupiter. It's important you're at dinner with us."

One of the largest suites on the ship, and still, it's impossible to avoid her. I turn to her and nod, fully aware that not looking her in the eye will lead to a lecture. "Noted."

My mother glides across the sitting room with her eyes locked on me, sweeping around wing chairs and a side table like she's lived here for years. "I mean it, Jupiter. If you wander off like last night, I will have Gianna escort you around the ship for the next five weeks."

I can't stop my eyes from rolling, so I shut them.

"Don't make that face. You're not a child anymore."

"You would think that I wouldn't need a babysitter, then." The words slip treacherously through my teeth.

She locks me in her unrelenting stare and folds her slender arms across her body.

Strange we can look so alike and have so little in common. I'm a few inches taller with a slightly blunter set to my jaw, and the same pale blond hair, dark eyes, and thick lashes. But our similarities are only surface level. She can't wait to get back home to an enclosed habitat. And I would have willingly stayed on Earth forever.

"Have you completed your Earth Experience project yet?"

Shit. Lie. Just lie. "Um...no. Not quite."

I can't be confined to these quarters for the entire trip. Not after spending the majority of the past month locked away in a penthouse while my classmates toured Earth without me. I'm still not entirely convinced my parents accompanied me because they care about being on the inaugural voyage of the fastest ship in the galaxy. But after my sister...I think they just didn't want to let me go alone.

"I will be sure Calypso knows to release you as soon as it's finished. It's imperative we get you in with the tutor full time as soon as your basic level requirements are met."

I swallow a sigh before it escapes my lips. I'll have to get to Calypso before they tell her it's already turned in. My credit is complete. Maybe I can get them to assign me something else to keep my mom at bay for at least the length of the crossing. I nod and step toward the door.

She catches my arm with her cold, bony fingers, pressing hard enough that her nails are like blades threatening my skin, before she grips the strap of my bag. "Leave that hideous sack here."

"It's just a bag, and I—"

"Now."

I bite my lips, lift the strap over my head, pull out my sketchbook and pencil kit, and toss the bag on the small table in the center of the foyer.

My mother snatches it off the polished wood, holding it away from her body. The bag dangles between her pinched fingers. It's a miracle I got it on the ship. Her eyes lock on the sketchbook under my arm. The deep gray graphite smudge on the side of my left hand is almost as insulting to her as cheap fabric. "Gianna!"

The giant woman, at least half a foot taller than me with forearms wider than my neck, appears from the hall like she'd been waiting to be called. "Ms. Dalloway."

"Dispose of this, please." Her manners fall flat. Punctuation on her demand, not gratitude.

Gianna does as she's asked.

My mother's focus on me remains unbroken. She's not finished yet. "You are Jupiter Dalloway, not some scrappy little Earther. Instead of tarnishing that legacy with your adolescent petulance, it's time you took your future seriously."

My jaw tightens. I wish she wouldn't talk like that. Like Earthers are somehow lesser because of where they were born. Especially in front of Gianna. But we've had that argument too many times.

Mashing the door control, I rush out of our quarters. At the end of the hallway, I'm cutting around the corner by the time she peers out the door and calls after me. She's probably noticed that my shirt isn't tucked in at the back or that my hair is damp and wild. I ruffle it with my fingers again. The tiniest rebellion. Watching over my shoulder, I listen for a sign that Gianna is already on my tail.

I slam to a stop, head clunking into another skull. My sketchbook slaps the polished floor as my case explodes, clattering graphite and wood bounce across the floor. The pencils settle and roll in every direction in a gentle chorus of quiet purrs. With my palm to my temple, I squint and reach out to steady the person I collided with.

"Are you okay?" I check behind me again. No one is following me. Yet. "I'm sorry, I wasn't—"

"My readings indicate you have experienced a minor head contusion. Please vocalize any of the following symptoms: nausea, dizziness, double vision—"

"I'm fine, ILSA." The girl groans, holding her head with one hand and raising the other to the bot behind her. The Earther girl from the transport station. She's traded her clay-orange sweater for a more delicate fabric, soft green and untattered.

"You again?" Thanks to her, half of my drawings are wrinkled and smudged with copper dust. I squat down, collecting the strewn pencils. "Going to run off and leave a wake of destruction behind like last time?" I stretch past her for a runaway pencil.

Her foot blocks its path just out of my reach. She drops down to pick it up and offers it to me, narrowing her eyes. "Clearly, you made it on the ship just fine."

"With a lighter sketchbook."

"Something tells me they would have held the transport for you."

She isn't wrong.

"Weslie, I detect a minor contusion on the frontal region of your skull." Hovering a foot away, ILSA, a vaguely humanoid bot, smooth and rounded enough not to look threatening, bows over her. "Expect minor swelling, discoloration, and mild pain. Healing time estimate: three to five days."

"Got it, ILSA."

I reach for the last pencil between us the same time she does. Our hands recoil. I lift my gaze to apologize for almost touching her or taking my anger out on her. Or maybe just for who I am.

There's something familiar about her eyes. Hazel. More green than brown. Beautiful and full of disdain. Long, dark curls fall over her shoulder. She smells like fresh air. It transports me back to my unsanctioned walks on Earth when I'd make it to the trees before Gianna caught up with me. Earthy and musky-sweet, like leaves and grass baking in sunlight.

Drawing back, she pops up on her feet. "All good here, or should I find your butler or nanny or whoever to pick up after you?"

I can't help but smirk. It's fascinating. Refreshing even. Everyone I meet seems to know who I am, who my mom is, my family name, and I'd never know if they hated me or loved me. It's always the same. Fake smiles. Undeserved compliments. Pretending. But this girl doesn't even try to mask her annoyance.

I nod, but she's rushing past with her bot on her heels without waiting for an answer. Something in me wants to follow.