

THE DESTINED DIVINES
Book 1 of The Divine Witches Duology

by

J.J. Otis

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For information contact :

<http://www.jjotis.com>

CHAPTER ONE

DANCING IS FREEDOM. Freedom to tell a story the way I want to. Freedom from my anxious mind and all that's going on in the world. Everything melts away when I dance.

It's why I'm standing in the lobby of Allegra's Star Academy of Dance. I'm one of fifty dancers competing for a coveted dance internship. If I do, then next year I'll have no problem getting into one of the best university dance programs in the country.

But if I don't get into Allegra's, my entire plan will crumble, and I'll fail again. The constant thoughts weigh as heavily on me as the guilt of what happened with JD last year. My stomach knots into a pretzel. It's all my fault. If only I'd—

No. Stop. Concentrate. Breathe.

But a bundle of nerves continues to twist inside me, and I tighten my grip on the strap of my tote. Having the jitters before an audition is normal, but for me, it's much more than that. Anxiety suffocates me as though I have heavy stones crushing my chest.

The line moves forward, and a hum of voices surrounds me. Floor-to-ceiling windows behind us allow the summer sunlight to spill over the entire space and sparkle on the gray and white marble tile. Some dancers stretch while they wait in line. Others chatter to their parents and one another. I'm not from Boston, where Allegra's resides, so I don't know any of them. A few days ago, we moved from Michigan to a tiny seaside town called Port Paxton, northeast of the city.

To keep my mind busy, I run through my routine for the thousandth time and tap a finger as I count. But a girl with bright red hair and freckles rushes past me toward the main doors, sobbing. My breath catches and blood thumps faster through my veins. I can't end up like her. I can't mess up this audition. If I do, my harbored dream will fracture into a million pieces, and I lack the strength to pick them all up.

Ugh, stop thinking about it.

Beside me, Uncle Blake studies me with his brown eyes, the wrinkles on his forehead deepening the longer he stares. His lips turn upward into an encouraging smile, but he runs a hand over his receding salt-and-pepper hair. To hide my nerves, I take a slow, deep breath.

It'd help if my anxiety medication would work. Only two more people and I can sign in.

Tapping a finger again, I count to the beat in my head. Yet it doesn't take long for my anxious mind to betray me, and the final moments I had with JD bubble to the surface. Heat washes over me like a wave. Nausea swirls in my stomach and sweat beads on my hands.

Even though the memories are painful, I wish JD were here today. He always told me I could achieve my dream of becoming a dancer when others laughed. Now, without him beside me, I doubt myself more than ever. But my first love is never coming back, because it's my fault he's dead.

I inhale and glide a trembling finger over the June birthstones of the necklace my parents gave me ten years ago on my seventh birthday. First, a tiny pink pearl, then a medium Alexandrite, and finally, the large rainbow moonstone. I'm not sure why, but it's as though the stones give me strength when I need it. They're kind of like a lucky charm. I exhale and roll my shoulders, easing the tension coiled within me.

The girl in front of me flicks her long, dark hair behind her, and I catch the faint scent of coconut. She pulls the thin strands together into a ponytail and secures it into a tight bun. I glide my fingers through my dark auburn hair to ensure that it's secured and some curls frame my face. Satisfied, I smooth out my teal dress, trying to ignore the urge to check my hair again.

Ahead of us, a blond male dancer stands behind the sign-in table and takes names. He points to where people need to go. His phone dings, and as he reads it, I wonder what it says to distract myself. But more restless thoughts push through the serenity, and my mother's voice whispers in my head.

A moonstone can lock away secrets beneath its pearly veil, even our own hidden truths.

It's funny how random memories of her surface from time to time. I can't remember why she said this to me. I glimpse the iridescent glow of the moonstone on my necklace. Could a gemstone hold such knowledge? I wish it could tell me words of wisdom or encouragement from my parents or JD to help me right now. But there's no way a stone can do that. And even if it could, it's not like I can crack it open like an egg and find out.

Uncle Blake clears his throat and brings me back to the reality of standing in line at Allegra's. He's my rock. Uncle Blake always keeps me grounded. I wish he'd allow himself to live life more, but he's such a homebody. He never complains about his lack of social life either. Whenever I try to get him to go out, Uncle Blake says he'd rather spend time with me. It's nice when he's home, but I feel guilty sometimes, and at other times, like I'm a burden to him. Especially this past year after the accident with JD. It cost us both.

At last, the line moves, and we step forward. A sharp pain radiates through the knee I injured in the car accident. I hold my breath so Uncle Blake doesn't notice.

But he reaches out and holds my hand. "Meg, sweetheart. Are you sure you're ready?"

Dang it, he always knows.

"Of course," I say in the calmest tone I can muster.

His eyes narrow, but he doesn't call my bluff.

God, it sucks how he always knows when I'm lying. Why does he have to be such a talented detective?

He lowers his head and says. "Don't feel like you have to do this. I don't care about the cost. Your health and well-being are what matter to me."

Maybe I should leave. The physical therapist said my knee isn't strong enough yet, and I should wait to audition. I could fail and blow everything. My hands shake more, so I tighten the grip on my tote even more.

"Do you think I should wait?"

"I know dancing has helped you through so much. But, sweetheart, I'll understand if you want to wait and not go here yet."

I nod, and a stray piece of my hair falls into my face, so I brush the curl away. I open my mouth to respond, but he continues.

"Going to Allegra's is a huge commitment, and things are different now. Over the past year, you've been through so much. I'll support you in any decision you make. But I want you to be sure you're ready for all of this."

I stare at the sign-in table. A voice inside me screams to sprint to the truck and go home. It nags at me, saying I don't deserve to dance again or to go to Allegra's. But JD's words of encouragement return to me . . . *No matter what, don't give up.* His support has always kept me going, and I won't let him down now.

"I know," I tell Uncle Blake. "But I need to at least try, or I'll never know."

He pats my shoulder and smiles. "Stubborn and determined, just like your mom. I'm proud of you, and so are your parents. I'm sure they're watching over you . . . and so is JD."

At his words, I grasp my necklace again, and tears brim my eyes. He's right. My parents aren't here, but they're always with me. I force a smile in appreciation.

My turn comes, and I move forward. The guy working to keep everyone organized holds a clipboard and clicks the pen impatiently. Up close, he reminds me of a dancer in Michigan who

had a scar under his left eye because a dog bit him when he was a kid. But this dancer has an arrogance about him, and he wrinkles his nose as he glares at me.

“Meghan Daly.”

He scans the list and marks a check on the page. “Here’s your number. Some time slots have changed because of no-shows, and . . .” He reads his phone again. “They just moved yours up, so you’d better hurry. Go down the hall, and someone will escort you backstage.” He writes a number on a sticker and hands it to me. I peel it off and place it on the left side of my chest, just below my collarbone.

“Thanks.” I hurry to a red padded bench to sit down. Uncle Blake trails behind me but remains standing as I open my bag and pull out my foot paws. Once I kick my sneakers off, I slip my toes through the holes of the fabric, and I pull the rest of it over the ball of my foot, leaving my heel bare. I always have a tingle of excitement when I put them on, but now the nerves inside me don’t let it last long. Only perfection is acceptable today.

“All set?” Uncle Blake takes my shoes and bag.

“I think so.”

He hugs me tight. The woody notes of his cologne are soothing, as always. “Dance your heart out, sweetie.”

I grin at him and rush down the hallway to the door of a warm-up room. A girl exits from it and stops.

She glances at my number tag. “There you are.” She motions for me to follow her. “You need to get backstage.”

She’s much taller than I am, and her bright hazel eyes remind me of JD. To escape the thoughts of him, I build a vault in my mind to keep them locked away. The vault doesn’t always work, but it helps to keep them at bay for a while. I jog to keep up with her. At last, she stops by a doorway and gestures for me to enter, then hurries down the hall to the dancers waiting in the warm-up room.

I wish I had more time to prepare, but maybe it’s a good thing they’re rushing me to the stage. The more time I have, the more my anxiety will increase. And right now, I can’t afford that. I need to focus.

I take a deep breath as I enter the sweltering backstage area. Another hopeful dancer stretches and ignores my presence. An older man with white hair and black-rimmed glasses stands near the red velvet curtain and peeks out at the stage. Strips of lights along the ceiling shine like bright stars on the walnut wood floor. I find a spot near the wall, and my heart thumps so loud, I hope they

can't hear it. As I warm up, I roll my shoulders back, and then forward. In an instant, sweat beads on my forehead, and I wave my hand in front of my face to cool off.

It's almost August. Can't anyone turn on the AC in here?

A lanky brunette girl sprints off stage with tears streaming down her puffy red face. I meet the gaze of the other dancer, who has stopped rehearsing. She tilts her head and gives me a tight half-smile as if to say, *poor thing*. My chest tightens, and I pray I don't have the same result. The other dancer straightens her shoulders with determination, waiting for her turn. Her muscular build makes her appear more like a gymnast than a dancer.

I force myself to continue stretching, but my restless thoughts interrupt my concentration. *That could be me. I could mess up.* Nausea twirls in my stomach like a distraught ballerina and all I want to do is to curl up in a ball. To subdue it, I instead inhale, then slowly release the air. *Focus.* My finger glides over the moonstone pendant again. A minute later, I'm relaxed and centered. After tucking the necklace into my bra, I pull my foot up to stretch my quad muscles.

I will make them proud today. Dancing is what I'm supposed to do. I can do this.

The man standing at the curtain calls out a number and waits as the other girl approaches him. He whispers something to her, and motions for her to go. She steps onto the stage, looking like a dazed bird that hit a window. I can't help but wonder if I look like that before I audition.

I hope not. Deep breath. I'm next.

Over the next few minutes, I continue to do a few moves of my routine to prepare. Soon, the girl dashes off stage with a giant grin on her face. The man calls number twelve thirty-one and sweat runs down my neck.

This is it. I approach the edge of the stage, and he gives me a reassuring smile.

"Your turn, miss. Break a leg," the man whispers.

Every muscle in my body tightens at his words. I hate that saying. It dredges up memories of firefighters telling me to stay awake and keep calm while they worked to get my trapped leg free.

He motions for me to go ahead, and I put my mask of happiness on as I step onto the stage.

My heart flutters and a storm of nerves bursts like fireworks inside me as I walk to center stage. Gentle air from the fan high above cools and soothes me. I lock my trembling hands together in front of my waist and broaden my smile, hoping it doesn't appear as fake as it feels. The blazing spotlight ignites a spark of exhilaration inside me and obstructs the sea of crimson seats ahead.

"Name," an icy female voice says from the black hole in front of the stage.

"Meghan Daly," I say as loud as I can without yelling.

“When you’re ready, Miss Daly,” orders a gruff male voice.

I gesture for my music selection. The instant the rhythmic piano notes begin to rise and fall, the song steers my movements. I glide across the stage, generating the illusion of my feet not touching it. Pulsing drums join in and the music pumps through me. Nothing exists but my body and the beat.

I’ve chosen to combine different dance styles to demonstrate my abilities. Part way into the routine, I do a calypso leap with my left leg straight forward while the right is bent backward with my foot almost touching my head. The tension in the pit of my stomach disappears, and I’m free. I bend so my head is near my knee and pivot myself into a side aerial. Once I land, I add some hip-hop attitude with a toss of my hair and a few old-school moves.

Less than a minute and my routine is over, so it’s time to show what I can do. A surge of adrenaline provides me with the power I need to do the Matrix move. Balancing on the balls of my feet, I bend my knees and drop backward. I’m horizontally inches from the floor, yet neither my body nor hands make contact with it. With graceful strength, I rise and launch into the last twenty seconds. But the music fades away as if someone is taking the stereo out of the theatre, and the spotlight spins like a pinwheel, blinding me. I lose my bearings and struggle to stay on my feet. When the light stops moving, an image snaps into my mind.

I’m standing in a small room. There’s a stained-glass window with diamond-shaped panes and a pyramid ceiling. A guy with dark sapphire eyes and a boyishly handsome face peers down at me. There’s intense devotion in his eyes, then a flash of fear. The scent of sandalwood in his cologne calms me. He caresses my cheeks, leaving smears of a warm liquid on my skin, and presses his lips to mine. A powerful energy draws me to him, and my heart hammers in my chest as I press against him. Scarlet blood covers us both.

He leans his forehead on mine, and whispers, “Help me.”

A black phantom with glowing red orbs for eyes materializes over his shoulder. I sweep one arm to the side as though trying to shove it away while holding tight to him with my other hand. But the room vanishes, and he’s yanked from my grasp.

A piercing scream rattles through my bones and I plummet through the air until I smash against an unforgiving surface. A sharp pain soars through my leg. I stifle a sob that threatens to erupt from my throat.

What happened? I search for the guy who kissed me, but a light blinds me. Where did he go? I’ve never seen him before. Why did he plead for my help? And what was that black thing with red eyes?

My body trembles and throbs as the auditorium comes into focus. I'm still in Allegra's, but I'm no longer on the stage. I lie crumpled on the floor near the front row of seats.

Oh, God, no. How did I fall off the stage? I can't fail.

The carpet is shards of glass, cutting into my hands as I push myself to a sitting position. I take a breath, and an excruciating stab in my side forces me to stop.

"Miss Daly, are you alright?" A woman kneels beside me.

"Her uncle is on his way," another woman's voice says from somewhere behind me. "I had Dan go get him."

"No," I say. Uncle Blake doesn't need to see me like this. I try to get up, but the woman next to me holds me still.

"You should stay put." Her long black braids swing in front of my face as she leans over me. She gives me an apologetic smile, but her smooth brown forehead wrinkles with concern. "I'm Miss Rashleigh. We spoke on the phone a few weeks ago."

I tip my head in acknowledgement, and the motion makes the room spin. Shutting my eyes, I pray it stops.

"It'll be alright. Don't you worry," Miss Rashleigh says in a soothing voice.

My arm aches. I rub it, wondering if I landed on it when I fell. I examine a mark on my inner wrist that looks like a tattoo, and confusion swirls inside me. I don't have tattoos. Uncle Blake doesn't like them and refuses to let me get one. It's a dark-lined circle about the size of a quarter with lines jetting from the center and reminds me of a sun. I trace it with a fingertip, trying to think of a reason for how it got there. It must be dirt or a rug burn from the fall. I cross my arms to hide it because deep in my core, a tiny voice tells me I'm wrong.

"Meg!" Uncle Blake's voice booms as he sprints down the aisle. He drops to his knees beside me. "What happened?"

I shut my eyes to steady my reeling mind. "I don't know."

Miss Rashleigh gets to her feet and pulls him aside to talk. The words *hospital* and *seizure* catch my attention.

Seizure? Tears burn my eyes, and I blink them away. Did I have a seizure? Do people hallucinate during them? If they do, maybe I did have one. What does it mean now? Do I have to go to the hospital?

Miss Rashleigh kneels beside me again. "Get yourself checked out by a doctor, and we'll discuss redoing your audition. Okay?"

"What if the doctor says I can't dance?" I try not to choke on the words.

“If it comes to that, we’ll deal with it,” Uncle Blake tells me.

My heart plummets and my stomach churns with nausea. I’m a failure, as always. Why did I even try?

Uncle Blake moves to help me stand, but I shove his hands away and struggle to my feet. Pain shoots through my side, and I suppress a whimper as I stumble and lean against the side of the stage. The floor sways beneath me like a boat on turbulent water, and a wave of nausea washes over me.

“Let’s get you to a doctor,” Uncle Blake says.

My entire body shudders in agony as he picks me up and carries me out of Allegra’s Star Academy of Dance.