

Chapter Three

Cloud Runner

His eyes opened to the all-white Dreamscape. It was as familiar to him as it was new.

“Hey, Mal Winter,” a deep voice called out.

Hearing his name, Mal turned and looked up at the stranger greeting him.

The stranger was more like a giant than a man; his dark skin made him look like a powerful silhouette. His shoulders were broad, his neck thick, and his arms so muscular they looked like they could arm wrestle a bear. Despite his size, the man didn't seem frightening; a cheery grin covered his face, and his brown, friendly eyes smiled down at Mal.

“My name is Mr Blue,” the man said, dropping to one knee. “I was a great friend of your father's. One day I hope to say the same 'bout you and me.”

Mr Blue offered his hand to Mal, who shook it after a moment's hesitation. Mr Blue could easily have crushed Mal's hand without using even an ounce of his strength, but his handshake was gentle.

“Now lil' buddy, I won't even ask you to not be afraid, 'cause...if I was you right now, I'd be quivering like a little girl, scared out of my skirt. So, I'll cut to the point: you're a Cloud Runner.”

“I am?”

“You're potentially a Cloud Runner,” Mr Blue amended. “Your father was, and his father was, and if you are ever blessed with children, I'd drop a buck on a bet that they'll probably be one too.”

“That’s a good thing?” Mal asked.

Mr Blue stood up and, without explanation, turned and walked away. Mal just watched as Mr Blue took a few more steps before turning back to Mal, still on the cold white ground.

“You comin’ kid?” he asked.

Mal jumped to his feet and ran after Mr Blue, barely noticing the white sky, the white ground, and the large cloudy bubbles that surrounded him.

Mr Blue continued once Mal caught up to him. “Simply put, Cloud Runners are the guardians of souls. They’re protectors of the Dreamscape, and, well, just kinda cool.”

“Dreamscape?”

Mr Blue nodded. “Okay, so a person sleeps so their body can recover and, ya know, rejig itself. Yeah?”

“Uh-huh...” Mal answered.

“Well, the soul don’t need that kind of rest, not like the body does. So when your body sleeps, your soul escapes to here: the Dreamscape.” Mr Blue raised his hands and gestured to everything around him, and then he pointed to the seemingly endless, giant bubbles that filled the white world. “And it protects itself by hidin’ in a dream which is made from your subconscious, acting like a suit of armour, to keep it from being infected by other souls.”

“If souls created dreams to protect themselves, what do Cloud Runners actually do?”

Mr Blue looked down to Mal. “Can’t just tell you that, it’ll wreck half the fun.”

Mr Blue smirked from ear to ear then quickened his steps, forcing Mal to do the same.

Every now and then, Mr Blue would stop and crouch down near a dream. He'd run his fingers along it, then sniff them. He would wait, thinking about something, and then head off again, sometimes in a different direction. Mal had no idea where they were going, and he didn't want to ask what Mr Blue was doing, so he just followed silently.

"Wondering what I'm doin'?" Mr Blue asked eventually

"Umm...well, yes," Mal muttered.

"Am I a scary brother? Hell yes, but this is your induction, man, so don't be too afraid to ask questions. Like when you see me running around smellin' dreams."

Mal smiled. "So why are you running around smelling dreams?"

"Good question!" Mr Blue nodded. "I'm hunting."

"By smelling dreams?"

Mr Blue waved Mal over to him. "Like this," Mr Blue brushed his finger along the edge of the dream. "Your turn."

Mal did as Mr Blue had, but instead of the dream feeling soft and fluffy, it was rough like sand. "Whoa..." Mal said, louder than he meant to.

"Now smell" Mr Blue instructed.

He hesitated, but then Mal brought his finger to his nose and sniffed. The flavours exploded in his face: oranges and freshly mowed grass, Christmas candy canes and salty sea breeze, a musky old man's cologne, and honey. Mal pulled his hand away and breathed slowly in.

"What's it smell like?"

"Everything," Mal answered.

Mr Blue chuckled, and gave Mal a gentle pat on the back.

“That’s...that’s just wow.”

Mr Blue hurried through the field of dreams. Mal followed and watched as the large man found another dream and crouched down beside it.

“Again,” Mr Blue instructed.

Mal brushed his finger lightly along the dream and then brought it up to his nose. The foul reek of what Mal could only describe as burning plastic covered in pepper infiltrated his nose and mouth. He hacked and wheezed, but couldn’t get the smell out fast enough.

Mr Blue let out a boisterous laugh as Mal fell onto the white ground, coughing and moaning.

“So – what. Every dream smells different?” Mal asked with a raspy voice.

Mr Blue shrugged. “Most dreams smell just like everything inside, and sometimes they collect other smells along the way. Strong smells from other nearby dreams and the likes. What you just smelt was somethin’ different.”

“What are you hunting?” Mal looked up at Mr Blue. “You never said what you were hunting...”

“Nightmares,” Mr Blue whispered, his gaze locked in the distance.

Mal slowly turned around and saw what Mr Blue was looking at: a giant black scorpion. Black, oily goo dripped from every inch of its body, leaving a trail behind it that stained the white ground as it scurried towards a dream. It didn’t even notice Mal or Mr Blue.

“Afraid?” Mr Blue whispered.

Mal shook his head. He wasn't scared. He knew he probably should be, but he just wasn't.

"Nightmares are the demons of the Dreamscape, and they got one purpose: to feed."

"On what?" Mal whispered back.

"Souls."

The scorpion let out a shrilling scream and threw itself into a dream.

"And it's hungry..." Mr Blue sneered as he rushed towards the dream the Nightmare had entered.

"I've seen it...before..." Mal hurried after Mr Blue.

"Nightmares take the forms of things people fear: wolves, bears, clowns, spiders...hell, even old ladies sometimes. Always twisted and always dark. They are vicious, dangerous creatures, and we put them down before they feed." As Mr Blue reached the dream, Mal noticed the clouds inside were a dark, murky grey.

"Two things," Mr Blue said, turning around to Mal. "If the dream starts shaking like an earthquake, run. You run as fast as you can. Second, stay away from the red cord. Don't touch it." Mr Blue said nothing else and followed the Nightmare into the dream.

He watched the dark clouds swirling inside the dream, but Mal wasn't afraid. He was surprised by how familiar it all felt. As Mal took in the white world of the Dreamscape, he wondered why none of it seemed new.

Mal suddenly, and utterly, felt hollow; he had no idea who he was. He knew some things: his name was Mal Winter, he was fourteen years old, he lived at 5 Hill Street – but everything else was foggy. He had friends, he definitely did, but he couldn't name them. Mal had parents too, but he couldn't remember what they looked like. His mind was

empty...except for sadness. There was a lingering, hollow pain. Something he couldn't quite put his finger on. Mal tried to piece together the loose thoughts and feelings in his head.

Mr Blue's head poked out from the dream. "Coming?" the big man asked, raising an eyebrow.

"Why can't I remember anything?" Mal asked bluntly.

"Your mind ain't here, you're on subconscious autopilot. All you'll know are a few key things; your name, age probably, favourite colour or birth date. That's normal."

"I'm not coming with you," Mal said, taking a step back. "I don't know you."

"Lil' buddy, I'm your friend, okay? I'm here to wake you up and give you control. But you gotta see something; first, you have to understand. Because if you don't, if we bestow you control without direction, you will crash 'n' burn."

"That doesn't even make sense!" Mal argued.

"It will," Mr Blue promised. "I can't make you do nothing, but you need to know that coming with me right now is the only way this can start to make sense. I'm your friend." Mr Blue extended his arm from the dream.

Mal looked into the stranger's eyes. They seemed honest and trustworthy.

"Okay," Mal said, grabbing hold of Mr Blue's hand.

Mr Blue smiled and pulled Mal into the dream.

It felt like a sun shower: small, warm droplets splashing onto him. Then it was like he was being pulled through a sheet of fine sand.

Mal crashed headfirst into a patch of grass where the warmth of a summer sun tickled the back of his neck.

Mal sat up and admired the thick grass and the perfect blue sky.

“Where are we?” Mal wondered aloud.

“Someone’s dream.”

The grass felt real in Mal's hand as he plucked a handful. He felt the goosebumps on the blades and watched the dirt from the roots sprinkle onto the ground.

“Follow,” Mr Blue ordered as he headed deeper into the dream.

Mal followed Mr Blue over the hilly grasslands. All he could hear were crashing waves and crying seagulls. At the top of the final hill, Mr Blue and Mal looked down at a picturesque beach. The sands were white, the waves were heavy enough to have fun in but soft enough not to drown you under the water, which glistened like diamonds.

On a bright pink towel in the middle of the beach, a woman was sunbathing. A man to her left was giving her a back massage and another to her right was cooling her with a giant fan.

Mr Blue strolled down the hill towards the beach. As he reached the last palm tree before the sand, Mr Blue hid behind it and watched the woman with a deep intensity.

“Who is she?” Mal asked.

“That’s not important.”

“Then what is?”

“Look closely at her back...” Mr Blue instructed.

Mal focussed on the woman and saw a glowing red cord stretching from the middle of her back down into the sand.

“What is that?” Mal asked gobsmacked.

“It’s her soul line. It’s connecting her soul to her sleeping body, so when she wakes, her soul can be pulled back home.” Mr Blue picked up a small stone and threw it towards the lady. It hit the head of the massaging man and dropped on the woman’s back. “Watch closely,” Mr Blue instructed.

As the woman sat up, Mal saw a red glow in the middle of her chest. “And that...” Mr Blue said, still hidden behind the tree, “...is her soul. That body that you’re seein’ is just her lovely little shell.”

The waves smashed against the beach harder and heavier, and the sand tossed slightly in the wind.

“The Nightmares want the glowy heart thing, then?” Mal asked as the sand brushed against his face and rustled through his thick head of hair.

“Exactly,” Mr Blue answered.

The sunny day started to wash away as the sky darkened into a deeper blue and clouds slowly began to form.

“What’s happening?”

Mr Blue ignored the question, and started lecturing Mal again, his voice raised to match the crashing waves and sandy gusts. “Nightmares attack the shell, and they usually rip it apart to get to the soul.”

The woman tried to stand up, but the men that had been serving her held her down. “A Nightmare is much more formidable in a dream than out in the ‘Scape because in here a dream folds to its dark will. In here, it controls everythin’, and every element the dreamer created works for the Nightmare. At this point, when the Nightmare has overrun the dream and captured the shell, few dreamers escape alive. We call this moment the choke point.”

A loud clap of thunder echoed deafeningly over the beach as the waves crashed at the woman's feet.

"We have to save her," Mal said, stepping out from behind the tree, but Mr Blue grabbed him by his shirt and pulled him back.

From beneath the waves came the scorpion-like Nightmare. The woman didn't notice it at first, but when she saw the demon, she screamed and thrashed around. The two men kept her held down against the sand. Mal couldn't hear her over the rain and waves, but she was screaming for her life.

"There is no way to sever the link between soul and body, so even after the Nightmare has devoured the soul, the connection to the body is still alive. When the dreamer wakes back up, there is a monster where their soul once was. The worst part is that, even though the Nightmare is pulled back to the waking world, it leaves two pieces of itself behind, which will grow into two more Nightmares. Every time a Nightmare is successful, two more replace it."

"What happens to the dreamer then?" Mal asked, looking up at Mr Blue.

"You don't wanna know."

"You can't bring me here and show me this and still keep things from me!"

"When a Nightmare is pulled into a dreamer...well, let's just say that all the horror monsters you've ever heard about, all the things that go bump in the night, the ideas for vampires and werewolves and zombies – all of 'em came from Nightmares cracking into the 'awake' world. But you know what? The real thing, a Nightmare in the real world, is scarier and deadlier than anything you could imagine."

Mal gulped. "I really didn't wanna know."

"Told ya."

“It’s going to eat her!” Mal shouted as he turned back to the Nightmare and the woman.

“At the choke point, the Nightmares are at their weakest, because they’re focussed on just one thing: the soul in front of them.” Even though he was shouting, Mal could barely hear Mr Blue over the storm.

“Save her!” Mal shouted.

Mr Blue was already stepping towards the woman, and two giant axes formed in his hands, both glowing bright blue. Each axe seemed like it would be impossible to use even with two hands, but Mr Blue had no trouble as he spun each of them around playfully.

“Wait here!” Mr Blue shouted as he ran to the woman and sliced through both the men holding her down. They exploded into sand and crumbled onto the beach like they were never there. The Nightmare didn’t even notice Mr Blue until both blue axes were in the red crystal on its head.

The Nightmare froze on the woman, and within seconds it dried out and hardened. It exploded into a cloud of black ash that drizzled down onto the woman and Mr Blue.

His axes vanished into thin air, as quickly as they had appeared, and Mr Blue knelt beside the woman who was shivering in fear. Even though the storm was subsiding, Mal couldn’t hear what Mr Blue was saying to the woman, but she stopped shaking and lay back down on her bright pink towel.

Mr Blue quickly stood up and ran back towards Mal. “Run!” Mr Blue shouted as he got closer, but Mal didn’t understand. “RUN MAL!” Mr Blue ordered, passing the boy and hurrying up the hill.

Mal chased after Mr Blue as quick as he could, then he stumbled as the ground shook and the hills began to move around him. “What’s happening?” Mal cried out.

Patches of grass began to sink through the ground, and pieces of the sky started collapsing. Mal ran faster. He had no idea what was happening, but running seemed like an excellent idea.

Then he realised he was alone, running through a field falling apart beneath him and a sky coming undone above.

“MR BLUE!” Mal shouted if only to be reassured by the sound of his own voice.

The patch of ground in front of him gave way, and Mal jumped as hard as he could.

Mal smashed through the dream, like he had broken through a wall of snow, and crashed onto the Dreamscape, gasping for breath. He turned back to the dream and saw it slowly shrink into a red orb, no bigger than a tennis ball. Mal knew he was looking at the woman’s soul, and he watched as it was pulled through the ground.

“She woke up,” Mr Blue said as he turned his thick neck from side to side, cracking it.

“She almost died!”

“No. No, she didn’t.”

“You don’t know that!” Mal insisted.

Mr Blue’s lip snarled. “Actually yes I do, but that’s not the point. You needed to see what a Nightmare can do and how vital a Cloud Runner is. We are the only things stopping these demons infiltrating the waking world. If you are awakened in the ‘Scape, if you are given consciousness here and don’t have a drive, you will be corrupted, and destroyed.”

“I don’t understand!” Mal admitted.

“You need to become a Cloud Runner, Mal.”

“And...and if I don’t wanna be one?” Mal asked.

Mr Blue let out a heavy sigh. “Then, you will wake up with nothing but the vaguest hint that you had a bad dream.”

“I don’t know.”

“Whatever you decide, I’ll respect it,” Mr Blue said with a polite bow, before turning and walking from Mal.

“Wait!” Mal shouted, rushing to Mr Blue.

“Yes?”

Mal looked up at Mr Blue. “What if I screw it up? What if...like a Nightmare escapes into a sleeping person because of me?”

Mr Blue knelt beside Mal, placing his giant hand on the boy’s shoulder. “What if, lil’ buddy, you have the potential to save hundreds of souls? What if...what if because of you a whole lot of hell is stopped from breaking loose? Do you want to live with the responsibility that you had the power to be somethin’ great, and chose instead to hide away?”

“Will you help me?”

“Every step,” Mr Blue assured him.

“Okay...”

“Yeah?” Mr Blue asked.

“I’ll do it,” Mal nodded. He had no idea of who he was, or what his life might be, but Mal knew that a hero was a good thing and that being one was always the right choice.

Mr Blue reached into his jacket and pulled out a small, clear crystal. “You’ve been here thousands of times before, buddy. Thousands. Since you could sleep, you’ve been here. But you have been unaware of it, just a hint of your subconscious was present. That’s why

you can't remember anything about who you are; you're just instinct right now, with a dab of personality. So, we need to make you whole. Ready?"

Mal nodded.

"Good. Hold this crystal against your heart."

Mal took the crystal and did as he was told. "And then what?"

"That's it. Just hold it there."

Mal looked up at Mr Blue. "It's not working."

"Let it touch your chest," Mr Blue instructed.

As the crystal touched Mal's shirt, it stabbed into his chest. Mal dropped to his knees, screaming. He felt as though a knife was carving through him. Tears rushed from his eyes, and he felt his insides moving as the crystal became a part of him.

"A Cloud Runner is different from a dreamer; it's why the Nightmares don't target us. Our souls don't come here. Where they should be in our shells is an empty spot. In this spot, we have mind stones instead, which wake us up and give us our full consciousness while we're here."

His mother. Victor and James. Comics. Superheroes. Drawing. His old pet cat. The last movie he saw. School. Homework. Books he never read. His favourite sneakers. His least favourite hat. His desire to kiss a girl.

Mal felt himself fuse into himself, reborn as a dream warrior.

He squirmed on the ground as his entire mind was reformed. He jolted uncontrollably, reliving all his experiences and thoughts.

After a few minutes, the rush to his mind was too much, and it turned off.

Excerpt from Mal Winter and the Cloud Runners

Mal stayed shaking on the ground of the Dreamscape for hours as his whole life was updated into his shell. Mr Blue stood over him the entire time, guarding the boy against any prying eyes, but none came.

As the download finished, Mal fell through the white ground.

Aware.