

the dream war saga

# deadly sweet lies

Erica Cameron

# DEADLY SWEET LIES

THE DREAM WAR SAGA

Erica Cameron



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Human lie-detector Nadette is on the run from the Balasura, dream demons  
intent on acquiring her, when she meets master-of-deception Julian, who  
must gain her trust through lying if he wants to have a chance at saving her.

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*For Danielle Ellison and Patricia Riley, who asked the right questions, looked under the right rocks, and helped me create two extraordinary characters who could not have existed without their guidance.*

“The truth is rarely pure  
and never simple.”

–Oscar Wilde, *The Importance  
of Being Earnest*

“The truth is not always beautiful,  
no beautiful words the truth.”

–Lao Tzu, *Tao Te Ching*





# One

## Julian

**Thursday, September 11 – 5:53 PM PDT**

The clink of the poker chips against the green felt table sounds a lot like the ice hitting the side of my opponent's whiskey tumbler. He takes a sip and smiles at me over the rim of the glass, the indulgent smile an uncle might give his favorite nephew. I'm not his nephew, though. He doesn't have any nephews.

I've been playing against John Owens for years, long enough to know his tells by heart. Right now, with the glint in his eyes, the way his thumb caresses his tumbler when he sets it down on the table, and the careful distance he keeps from the cards sitting face down in front of him, I know he has a solid hand. Full house or better.

Hopefully my four queens will be enough.

"How's your mother, Julian?" John asks as he tosses a few chips into the pile, seeing the \$500 already in play and raising the hand \$50.

I shrug and call, adding another \$550 to the pot. "Lynn's good." If you call falling fast into the well of debt, drinking, and decay "good." "She's working at Flash still." At least, she was yesterday.

"Same old Jacquelyn then, huh, kiddo?" Brandon folded early this round and now he's lounging in the armchair like it's a couch.

They've known her too long (she stopped introducing herself as Jacquelyn when she turned thirty) to think she's going to grow up now. They don't know the worst of it, though. To them she's a free spirit, but a good mother. I barely keep from rolling my eyes.

"Always a child at heart," I say, forcing a laugh even though my chest tightens. I really wish she'd grow up.

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"I forget." Bai Chang rubs his thumb along his wrinkled cheek, his dark eyes narrow. "How old were you the first time you snuck up here? I fold, by the way."

He places his cards facedown and sits back. I smile. Years ago I distracted the Bellagio's concierge long enough to swipe a master keycard and sneak up the elevator on a night I knew John was hosting a private poker game. Friendly, but not exactly playing for chump change. The guys had been regulars at the hotel long enough that Linnie knew them and I knew I could get them to give me a chance.

"I was ten."

"Couldn't believe it when you begged us to teach you to play," Brandon says, laughing. "Little imp. Jacquelyn was mad as fire when she figured out you'd found your way up here."

Yeah. Mad because I hadn't brought her with me.

"Gentlemen," John smirks and winks at me, "and Julian, I think this round might be mine."

I stare at the cards he reveals. A straight flush. "Oh Sinatra bless it."

The guys laugh. That stupid phrase I picked up from Linnie always makes them laugh; it's pretty much the only reason I made it a habitual thing. I flick my useless hand onto the table and smile ruefully at them, pretending to laugh with them, but in my head I quickly calculate the remaining chips in front of me and the odds of convincing them to play another hand. Normally it wouldn't be a problem, but John's granddaughter is in Vegas for the week (a combination trip to visit family and celebrate her best friend's eighteenth birthday in style, apparently) and there's no way I'm talking him into being late to dinner with her.

Only \$2,500 tonight. The cards just weren't with me. If I hadn't bluffed my way through most of the hands, I wouldn't have even made this much. It isn't enough. This will cover a payment on Linnie's more pressing debts, but I'm going to have to find another game this weekend to make rent. Forget food or electricity. That might not happen.

Taking a deep breath, I shake that train of thought off the tracks and refocus. My fault. I skipped two games this month because of the marketing internship I'd been working. Thought it'd be okay, but Linnie's losses outpaced my gains. By a lot.

John stands, buttoning his suit jacket as he does. That's the signal. It's time to go.

"A pleasure, as always, my friends," John says as everyone cashes out their winnings and pays up any losses. "Same time next week?"

Smiles, nods, jokes, and handshakes follow as Brandon, Bai, and I head for the elevator. Halfway there, John taps my shoulder and holds me back, his brown eyes scanning my face.

"Things really okay, kid?"

Looking up at him, I know I could play this a few different ways. If I laugh and show off the bullet-hole dimple in my cheek, tell him about the (nonexistent) regular who tips Lynn timer well, and ask him about his granddaughter, he'll go off thinking everything really is fine. If I hint that Lynn timer might be on the verge of losing her crappy job at Flash because of her habit of being an hour or more late, he'll probably spend the next week trying to think about if and how he should help. If I smile (without the dimple), shrug, and play the story down the middle, though ...

Smiling, I shrug. "It's been a slow month, but we're good. Really."

John's already thin lips almost disappear as he considers my answer. I hold my breath, waiting. It only takes him a couple of seconds to reach into his pocket for his wallet and pull out a wad of bills. "You're a good kid, Julian."

"John, no." I make my eyes wide and push the bills back into his hand even though I desperately want to shove them in my pocket and run. "I appreciate it like you wouldn't believe, but we'll be fine. Honestly."

He laughs. "That right there proves it. How many fifteen-year-olds would turn down a no-strings-attached wad of cash?" John shakes his head and closes my hand around the bills. The deeply etched lines around his eyes get deeper as he grins.

I force a blush to my cheeks, knowing the freckles across my nose stand out more against the pink and make me look even younger than fifteen. I play it up whenever I need to, because it works. Without looking at the bills, I nod and push them deep into my pocket. "Thank you, John."

He nods, looking pleased with himself and probably feeling both virtuous and generous. Which he is. We leave the suite together and I



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listen to him talk about his granddaughter's insanely high SAT score and her long-term agony over the choice between a West Coast school or one in the Ivy League. I comment whenever necessary (which isn't often) and swallow the resentment building in the pit of my stomach. When we reach the lobby, I repeat my thanks and wave goodbye, heading out the doors and north toward the Stratosphere.

On the three-mile walk home, my mind churns. Take time off to travel after high school or plunge straight into life at a fancy college? Please. I *wish* I had her problems.

Sighing, I stop at the edge of the small parking lot in front of the (motel-look-alike) apartment building hidden behind the Stratosphere complex. The paint is peeling and the slightly angled roof desperately needs a pressure washing. Music blasts from one of the apartments, sirens wail in the distance, and the baby in 1-C is screaming again.

I walk up the steps to the second floor, the hand in my pocket fingering the folded wad of (technically illegally obtained) bills that will get Linnie and me through another month in this disaster of an apartment.

Sinatra save me. What wouldn't I do or give or pay to have *college* be the biggest stressor in my life?



Once upon a midnight more dry than dreary, while I pondered weak and really pissed off with the world in general, a door opened in the wall of my bedroom. I thought I'd fallen asleep somewhere between tearing apart the eviction notice I'd found tacked to the door that afternoon and punching a hole in the cracked drywall, so I stepped through that inviting portal of pale-gold light with only a few seconds of hesitation. Inside, I found a world as different from the deserts of Nevada as possible.

The rocky shoreline stretched for over a mile in a soft crescent shape, outcroppings of rock on either end creating a natural barrier and quieting the waves before they entered the bay. Massive trees (sequoias, I guessed from pictures I'd seen) grew above the rocks, their branches swaying in the cool breeze that blew off the water. Standing

in the center of it all was a guy who looked like he was maybe in his twenties. He had an angular face framed by long auburn hair, violet eyes, and a surprisingly soft voice. He introduced himself as Orane.

I've been back to his world (which I sometimes jokingly call Narnia) every night at midnight for the past two years, and Orane has earned my respect, becoming something between a much older brother and a mentor. I trust him with all the grime and secrets in my life and he does whatever he can to help me. I trust him. I do. But oh, by Sinatra's last cigar do I wish I hadn't agreed to this particular adventure.

"Are you sure about this?" I ask Orane as he edges closer to the door. Through the small window inset in the white-painted panel, all I see is pale blue.

He was way more serious than I thought about grinding my fear of heights into dust. Each night it's been a different challenge, and each one has knocked my fear down another notch, but hiking the Rockies or standing on the glass floor of the Willis Tower overlooking Chicago is really not (at all) the same thing as what he has planned tonight. There's facing your fear and then there's insanity.

Skydiving is freaking insane.

"The last test," Orane says with a grin. "If you can face this tonight, no height will ever challenge you."

He opens the door of the plane and the wind whips into the cabin, pushing me back against the opposite wall. The last lingering bubble of fear swells in my chest. I cling to the strap hanging from the ceiling and shake my head. What about that scratch on my cheek I brought back from the dream world last week? Injuries here matter. I may be asleep, but hitting the ground at terminal velocity will still kill me.

"This isn't about heights! It's about not dying!" I shout at him.

"Death is an inevitable part of life. If your fear keeps you from living, you might as well let death claim you now."

Orane holds out his hand. He's barely recognizable in his jumpsuit, helmet, and goggles. His grin is the same, though, and I never have been able to turn down a challenge he's thrown at me. However much I may want to.

Grabbing his hand, I let him pull me across the plane until I'm standing in front of the open door. Ahead I see nothing but cloudless sky. Gulping a breath, I look down and know what a satellite feels like.

## Erica Cameron

I think I'd rather be in space. Maybe we can do that instead. I start to turn to ask Orane, but then his head is next to mine and he's speaking into my ear.

"Pull the red cord first." Orane yanks my hand off the doorframe and shoves me out of the plane.

I can't help it. I scream. I scream like a five-year-old as the wind pushes against me but does nothing to slow me down. I'm freefalling. My heart is pounding. All I can hear is the wind. Only fear is keeping me warm against the bite of the air. My hands search for the cord. I can't remember where it is. This feels like a cord. Or is that the strap holding my backpack in place? What if I pull the wrong thing and lose the chute?

*Holy Frank Sinatra, I'm going to die.*

But not for a while, apparently.

We jumped from miles above the land, much higher than would be possible on Earth without an oxygen mask. But that means I have way too much time to process what's happening. Lynn timer went skydiving once and spent the whole next day complaining it was over too fast. I can't say the same thing. It seems like I've been falling for five minutes and the ground isn't getting any closer.

Something shoots past me like a torpedo. I flinch away, the motion sending me spinning through the air. When I finally stabilize, I spot Orane careening toward the ground. His arms and legs are locked together and he's rocketing down even faster than I am.

He's insane! I'm not doing that! I don't even know why I'm doing *this*.

*Why not go for it?* a small voice in the back of my head asks. *Would Orane really let you get hurt?*

The bubble of fear pops, adrenaline and curiosity rushing in. What must it be like to plummet toward the earth like that? Can I handle it? Am I strong enough? Orane seems to think I am, or he never would have taken me up here.

It's like someone has reached into my mind and cleared away the cobwebs. Or maybe like the last bit of a complicated knot has finally come undone. I feel unburdened. Free. Brave. Sucking in a lungful of chilly air, I fight against the wind, lock my legs together and glue my arms to my sides.

Pointing my head toward the ground, I pick up more speed. I have no idea how fast I'm going. It doesn't matter. I scream again, but this time it's fueled by excitement. Exhilaration.

Experimenting with the currents of air, I spin and dive, tumbling through the sky with no restrictions and no limitations. I see Orane's body jerk as his chute opens and slows his descent to a crawl. But I'm not ready to let go of this freefall yet.

I tumble faster and faster, spinning through the air so quickly I start getting nauseous. The ground is coming into focus at an alarming speed, but the freedom is addicting and I don't want it to end. *Wait*, I tell myself. *Wait, wait, wait*. Only when I realize I can see the spots on a deer running through the enormous clearing do I give in and tug the red cord.

My head jerks forward as the parachute pulls me higher. Or maybe it just seems like I'm going higher. It's hard to tell. And then, suddenly, it doesn't matter.

I've gone from falling to floating. The adrenaline begins to fade and I'm left with a softer sort of excitement. Closer to the wonder I felt when I was a kid before I learned to be constantly on guard.

Wait. The ground is coming closer a lot faster than I thought.

"Oh, crap!" I scream just before my feet hit.

Momentum pushes me forward and I roll, ending up on my back tangled in the lines of the parachute. My face is covered, but before I can attempt to unravel the mess I'm in, a shadow falls over my eyes.

"Except for the landing, I would say you did quite well, Julian."

"Help me get out of here so we can go again!"

Orane laughs and the parachute vanishes, lines and all. He's standing over me with his hand outstretched, offering to help me to my feet. I knew Orane wouldn't let me die. A scratch is one thing, but he always watches out for me.

"So? Can we do it again?"

"I was right, then?" Orane takes his helmet off and tosses it into the air. It disappears before it hits the ground. "Your fear of heights has been vanquished?"

"I don't know. Maybe we should test it and see." I can definitely see now why some people become adrenaline junkies. That was insanely awesome. "Can we do it again?"

## Erica Cameron

"Perhaps tomorrow." He taps the helmet on my head. It fades away and he nods toward the edge of the field, where a picnic table and a huge buffet of food appeared. "Come. I must speak to you about something."

"Oh, no." I groan even as I follow him toward the food. "What'd I do now?"

"Nothing." Orane grins at me over his shoulder. "You are not usually such a pessimist. We must discuss your next goal."

"Oh. Cool." As I slide onto the bench, I pick up a piece of bread and toss it from hand to hand, trying to get it to cool. It's as hot as if it had just come out of the oven. "I thought we'd covered most of the annoying ones already."

In the two years I've known Orane, he's taught me to handle crowds, to quit smoking, and how to gamble well enough to make sure Linnie and I always have enough to eat. I asked him to help me get rid of my fear of heights. The memory of getting stuck (paralyzed, really) on a stupid class field trip to the Stratosphere Tower makes it worth the trouble. One of the kids noticed and it took every trick I know to play it off as a joke. A prank. Like, "Ooooooh, haha I got you! You thought I was actually scared of that? Please." It worked, but it was a close call. I've worked really hard to keep my weaknesses hidden. The Stratosphere came too close to blowing that out of the water.

To make it worse, I can see the dang thing from our apartment. Every day there's that reminder of my weakness staring at me from 1,149 feet in the air. I smile thinking about it now. I won't ever freeze again. Not after tonight.

Orane takes a grape and pops it into his mouth. "The work we have done for the past two years has only been leading up to the most arduous task. You will not like it, and it will be extremely difficult for you, but I want you to try."

"That sounds ominous. It can't be that bad, can it?" I bite into a piece of bread and raise my eyebrows.

"I suppose you will have to tell me."

Orane arranges two plates of food and passes me one. Grilled sirloin, seasoned French fries, a salad made of greens I can't even identify—it all smells so amazing I can't resist stuffing a huge bite with

a little bit of everything into my mouth. Mmm, it's perfect. But I already knew it would be. Everything here is.

We eat in silence for a few minutes, both of us steadily working our way through first (and then second) helpings. When I fill my plate up for a third time, I finally slow down long enough to ask, "What exactly is this horrible thing I won't want to do?"

"You have a habit of lying, Julian."

"I do no—" His lips press together and I cut myself off. "Okay, fine. Maybe I do. But I've never lied to *you*."

The severity of Orane's expression lessens. He even smiles, but only a little. "True. I am grateful for the trust that represents, but I am the *only* person in your life to whom you have never lied. The only one, Julian. It is not healthy. If you do not learn to speak with honesty, one day your lies will lead you down a path there is no escaping."

I stare at him, waiting for the punch line.

There isn't one.

"*That's* my next goal? Honesty?" I shake my head and push my food around on my plate. "Can't we work on something easier? Like walking on coals or theoretical physics?"

Orane chuckles, but I'm serious.

I don't lie just to lie. I lie to keep myself safe. To protect my life from scrutiny and to keep Lynn timer (who's more immature than me) from being shuttled off to rehab or something. It's not even usually *lying*. It's the truth presented in disguise. A twist in wording that makes people see the information I present the way I want them to. Even though Lynn timer is a 24/7 disaster area, anyone "just trying to be helpful" and "do the right thing" would completely mess up my life. I've heard the horror stories from kids stuck in group homes or foster care. No one adopts a teenage boy. Honesty could destroy everything.

Lynn timer has family, but she's managed to piss every one of them off. There's no guarantee any of them would take me in if the worst happened. Maybe Uncle Frank and Aunt Dana, but they live in New York and they've had more than enough to deal with since their daughter Mariella went mute four years ago. Even if they wanted to, they might not be able to handle me. I think Uncle Frank would try, though. Maybe. If I ever let him know how awful it really is with Lynn timer.



Still ...” I don’t know if I can do that. It’s not that simple.”

“It could be. You have let lying become a *habit*. You do not just lie to keep people from seeing the truth about your life; you lie simply because it is easier and because people will believe you.”

“Not *everyone* believes me,” I mutter. But is that even true? I bite the inside of my cheek remembering how I played John and ended up with an extra \$500. Thinking back further, I can’t remember the last time someone called my bluff when I was manipulating them into something. Some people take more convincing than others, but I usually make them do what I want or believe whatever I say. Or I’m smart enough to know when I can’t get away with it.

Orane must see the realization on my face because he nods. “You see, do you not?”

“Yeah, yeah. I see.” Sighing, I push the plate away and all of the food vanishes, leaving the table clear. “So, that’s it? Just suddenly be all honest all the time?”

“It would be an impressive feat if you could do that,” Orane says with a smile. “But no. I would not ask that of you. Not yet. For now I ask only this—if the lie does not directly pertain to keeping this realm or the deficiencies of your mother a secret, tell the truth.”

“And if I don’t?” I ask. “If I *can’t*?”

“I know you can, but if you choose not to ...” He pauses and holds my eyes as though he wants to make sure I’m paying attention. His violet eyes seem brighter than usual right now, almost glowing. “If you *choose* not to, this place will be close to you.”

My hands drop to the table with a *thud*. “What? Are you serious?”

“Of course I am.” Orane frowns and tucks his shoulder-length auburn hair behind his ear as he leans closer to me, his eyes somber and a little sad. “This place is a gift, one that is meant to be used as a tool on your path to self-fulfillment. If you decline to work toward your potential, the doors to this realm will shut. There is nothing I can do to change this, Julian. It is simply the way my world works.”

Pushing off the bench, I pace, my steps flattening the grass beneath my feet. “So you’re saying if I screw up I can’t ever come back here? How is *that* fair?”

The door to the dream world may only open at midnight, but knowing it’s there is the one thing that gets me through most days. Just

the idea of losing this refuge makes my hands shake and my breath quicken.

Orane steps in front of me and grips my shoulders, leaning down to look into my eyes. “It is not so grim as that. A mistake shall not bar the door. Willfully choosing to ignore the tasks you have been set shall.”

“Oh.” I take a deep breath and exhale slowly. “Really?”

“Yes, really. There will come a time when I shall ask you to vow that you will live your life in honesty—for this is the last and greatest of your tests, Julian—but, until that time, a mistake shall not lock you away from my world.”

My head is spinning. It’s hard to focus. How did everything change so fast? I knew the freedom of Orane’s realm couldn’t last forever, but I never expected the price I might have to pay would be so high.

Closing my eyes, I try to concentrate. Honesty and I are barely on speaking terms. To do as he asks, I’m going to have to pay attention to every single word that leaves my mouth. Geez. What about poker? Does bluffing count as a lie? Or what I said to John this afternoon? Technically, it was true. Mostly. Kind of.

Okay, fine. Barely. It was barely true.

Crap. How black and white is this?

The truth is as variable as the people who speak it. There are so many shades of gray in human interactions and motivations and perceptions that not even a mantis shrimp would be able to distinguish between them all. Just thinking about it gives me a headache.

“Will you do this, Julian? Will you begin to live honestly with yourself and those around you?”

I open my eyes and sigh. “Do I have a choice?”

Orane nods, dropping his hands to his sides. “There are always choices, and there are always consequences. You must decide what you are willing to live with and what you are capable of living through.”

The spot under my ribs pinches and then pulls, like someone hooked a fishing line through my diaphragm and started tugging. I rub the spot, but that doesn’t ease the twinge that always emerges when the doorway back home opens.

“Time is almost gone.” Orane glances over my shoulder, where I know the doorway is waiting, and then back at me. “What is your answer?”

What can I live with and what can I live through? Could I survive two years at a group home if they took Linnie away? Yeah, more than likely. It would suck in ways I probably can't imagine, but I could survive it as long as I had Orane's help. But if I lost this place? I shudder and try not to think about it. If I lost the dream world, I would lose everything.

The tug turns into a sharp pull and I gasp. "Geez. All right, all right. I'm coming."

"Your answer, Julian," Orane says.

"I can do it. Honesty or whatever. I can do it." I say the words with more confidence than I feel. Orane accepts it and smiles as he ruffles my light brown hair and nudges me toward the doorway.

"Then go. I will see you tomorrow night."

Nodding, I turn and walk through the glowing portal that will take me back to the waking world. Everything is black and empty for a split second—neither cold nor hot and I'm somehow weightless and grounded—but then the hazy flow of my dreams overtakes me and I sleep. But not for long.

I wake earlier than usual tonight. It's only two-fifteen when I check the clock, but I don't feel tired or worn out. As soon as my eyes open, I'm alert. Ready to get up and do whatever I have to do today. And do it all with honesty, apparently.

Groaning, I sit up and swing my legs over the side of the bed. I'm about to stand and grab my economics textbook when I notice something shining out of the corner of my eye. I focus on it, but there's nothing there. Maybe it was just an afterimage from Orane's world. No, wait. There is something on my nightstand. That bracelet wasn't there before. Leaning closer, I examine the braided leather bracelet and the clear glass bead dangling from one end.

It's weird enough that the bracelet appeared in my room, but it's even weirder that *this* is the source of the light I saw. The whole thing is covered in a thin layer of mist that dances and sparkles like glitter in a snow globe. Wary but curious, I reach out and pick it up.

And almost drop it in shock when Orane's voice fills my head.

*The character within the glass is from an ancient language lost to humanity eons ago. It was a symbol of honesty and truth and trust. For you, let it be a reminder of your promise and what is at stake. Remember what I*

*have taught you and you will succeed in this as you have succeeded in every test I have set until now.*

I shudder and tighten my grip on the bracelet. Orane is obviously powerful (I mean, the guy created an exact replica of the freaking Grand Canyon for me last week), but I had no idea he could reach through the barrier between our worlds and leave things behind. Or attach telepathic messages to them like he's leaving a note. It's awesome. (Also, really weird. But mostly awesome.)

Taking a deep breath to calm my racing pulse, I turn on my lamp and hold the glass bead up to the light. There in the center is a looping design that vaguely reminds me of an Arabic letter.

Grinning, I hook the bracelet in place and take a deep breath. Honesty. I can do this. I have to do this. Losing Orane would be a far worse fate than leaving Linnie.

Since the entire apartment building is usually asleep and quiet at this time of the night, these early-morning hours are when I usually do my homework. It's easier to focus when I don't have to filter out traffic and conversations and TV noise and whatever else is happening. I get through some of the reading and one set of questions for Algebra II when a car door slams in the parking lot.

I can't catch the words, but the tone and the screech is one I know well. Linnie has finally made it home at—I check the clock—3:27 AM.

*Please let them come in and go to sleep,* I beg the universe. The universe is apparently not in a mood to listen.

The front door slams open so hard it rattles my doorknob, reminding me once again why I never bothered hanging up anything in a frame. They're screaming at each other, words so slurred and incoherent that I know they're both riding some sort of chemical wave. Getting up quietly, I lock my door. I'm not worried they'll hurt me, but I am not in the mood for them to forget which bedroom is Linnie's and come stumbling half-naked into mine. Eww.

I shouldn't have worried. This isn't a fight that sounds like it'll end in sex. This one rages on for three hours, dying for short bursts as it fades into something close to a normal conversational tone until one of them says something that fires the whole mess up again. The chaos finally dies just before seven. I'm dressed and ready for school by the time they fall completely silent.

I give it ten minutes before I unlock my door and slide into the hallway. I'm about to step into the kitchen to grab something to eat on my way to the bus when I notice something that shouldn't be there. There's a foot on the floor. A foot connected to the body of Lynn timer's current jerk boyfriend Ed. Beside him is a half-empty bottle of vodka and, not too far away, a bottle of prescription pills spilled across the linoleum. It's hard to tell if he's breathing or not.

Should I leave him? I consider it for a second, but only a second. If he dies, Lynn timer will be a mess and we'll have cops (and maybe social workers) crawling all over our backs. Not worth it.

"Ed?" Nudging him with my foot, I wait for some response. Nothing. I kick him a little harder and talk a little louder. "Ed?"

His leg twitches, but otherwise he doesn't move. Twitching is an okay sign, though. At least he's not dead yet. He's also barely dressed and I really don't want to touch this guy. Looking around, I grab a plastic bag off the counter and wrap my hand in it before crouching down by his side and shaking him.

"Ed, wake up." He snorts and groans, shifting slightly. Snorting means he's breathing, right? And lying on his side is safer than on his back if he starts puking.

Whatever. Good enough for me.

I step over his body and straight into a puddle of vodka. Pulling the leg of my jeans off the floor to keep it dry, I grab my water bottle from the cabinet and refill it in the sink, snagging a granola bar from the mostly empty pantry. On my way out of the room I turn and survey the mess one last time. At least there's no broken glass. I'll clean everything up later. Once there's not a body blocking half the floor.

The sunlight coming through the tiny kitchen window glints off the set of knives in the corner. Two years ago I was so pissed at the world that I would've been inches away from killing this idiot. Orane saved a lot more than my sanity—he saved my life.

In the living room, Lynn timer is sprawled on the couch. Her makeup is smeared and runny, making her look like a clown that got caught in the rain. Her short, dyed-blond e hair sticks out in various directions and she's still wearing her glittery, way-too-short club dress. On the floor, half-underneath the coffee table, Lynn timer's monstrosity of a pink leather purse is on its side, contents everywhere. It was probably used

as a projectile at some point during their fight. Papers and pills are spread across the linoleum.

Suppressing the urge to wake her up and kick her *and* Ed out of the apartment, I pick up the papers from her purse, peer into the huge bag and pull out anything that looks like it might be important. Doing this at least once a week is the only way I find out about when she's lost a job or who she owes money to.

My heart sinks when I pull out the envelope I used to send the check to the electric company. It's been torn open, and only the stub from the bottom of the bill, the piece with our account number and address on it, is inside. They never got last month's check.

I can't even find the energy to be angry. This happens too often to waste the emotion on. The anger only comes when I find a slip of paper torn from a complimentary Caesars notepad.

J.E.T. 3.9k → H.D. 2wk

That's Harry's handwriting and his abbreviations. Jacquelyn Elizabeth Teagan owes \$3,900 to Harry Dougal within two weeks.

How old is this? There's no date so I can't be sure, but it's just dirty and creased enough to hint that it's not a debt she picked up tonight. Something (like a crapload of experience with Linnie) tells me that this is probably where the money that should have gone to our electric check disappeared to. At least she had a decent reason for swiping it this time. I know what would've happened to both of us if she hadn't made at least a good faith payment on the account. Harry Dougal does not subscribe to the "injured and dead people don't pay debts" school of criminal thought. He'd rather lose *some* money and knock the fear of Harry into the rest of his "clients."

Fantastic. Another few thousand dollars I have to scrounge up out of thin air. Guess I know what I'll be doing with my weekend. I probably should've kept a record of how much this woman owes me, but the number would be so high it'd be more depressing than helpful. Not like I'll ever get any of it back.

Swallowing a burst of somewhat hysterical laughter (seriously—*how* have I found myself in this situation *again*?) I drop everything to



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the floor and leave, locking the door behind me. At least I'll have eight hours of relative peace at school.

Walking across the parking lot and toward my bus stop, I look up at the Stratosphere.

Vegas is the city of dreams, lies, and possibilities. There are a thousand different ways for you to pretend your life is completely different, but none of them last.

Still, it's hard not to imagine what my life could be like. If I had different parents, if we lived in a place that didn't bleed temptations for someone as weak-minded as Linnie, if the Fates had been kinder when deciding what I would suffer in my life. Logically I know there are people who have it a lot worse than me, but somehow that doesn't really make me feel any better today.

# Two

## Nadette

**Friday, September 12 – 3:56 PM EDT**

Some people think the world runs on money or power or, for the particularly optimistic, faith. It doesn't. The world runs on lies.

Big ones, little ones, black ones, white ones, lies that fool an entire nation, and lies that don't fool anyone but make people feel a little better about themselves for a while. As though all they really need to be able to sleep soundly at night is tell themselves, "Well, at least I tried."

Some idiots talk big about being able to call anyone's bluff, about being able to read any lie no matter how seemingly insignificant. They can't. Even if they catch most of them, they still let themselves believe the ones they like. The ones that fit the way they want to see the world. Or the ones that comfort. Or the ones that are easy.

They don't understand what it's like to actually hear every. Single. Lie. *Every* one. To flinch when people tell you something they know isn't true or, worse, to hear the lies even the people telling them believe.

That was bad enough, but now I wish I could go back to that. It's better than losing my mind completely. It's better than getting struck with insomnia so hard that my creepy-ass dreams start stalking my waking hours.

Six months of seeing a psychiatrist. I thought I'd be used to these appointments by now. Especially since I asked for the first one. But, nope. Doesn't seem to matter. Doesn't even matter that I actually like Dr. Peter Branson. He's kind and relatively non-judgmental and his waiting room is nice, with wood floors and cream walls and beautifully soothing watercolors, but every time I walk into this office, my nerves

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start buzzing like live wires and I can't stop fidgeting. I can't stop wishing I could somehow give myself amnesia, wipe my brain clean, and start over. As long as it would take this stupid polygraph trick of mine with it.

Mom's latest interior design project must be overwhelming because she's staring at the red silk fabric with white dragons embroidered on it like it's a code she has to decipher. Eyebrows drawn close together, she looks at me and asks, "Are dragons too typical in an Asian-inspired décor?"

"Do the clients *like* dragons?"

"I assume so. They own a company called Dragon Fire Industries." She bites her lip and holds up the fabric, staring at it intently. "Maybe if I found something a little more modern. More abstract. Something with the hint of dragons instead of the shape. If anything like that even exists."

"So make it. Your designs are usually better anyway."

Mom gives me a quick but bright smile, her cheeks a little flushed at the compliment. It only takes her about thirty seconds to throw her lapful of fabric samples onto the coffee table in front of us and pull her sketchbook out of her huge purse. She's about to get lost in the project when the door opens and Peter smiles at me. He's tall with one of those "I used to be athletic when I was a kid" builds, and every time I see him standing in that doorway it strikes me again how similar his skin tone is to the walnut wood of his office door. Mom looks up from her sketchbook, giving the doctor a tired smile.

"How are you, Grace?" Peter asks my mom.

Her bright green eyes flick toward me before she answers. "Tired, but I'm all right."

As he nods his acknowledgement, he gestures for me to come into his office. "You let me know if you need to talk, okay, Grace? Don't wait until you're too overtaxed."

"Thanks, Peter. I'll keep that in mind."

He smiles again, his brown eyes crinkling at the corners, then closes the door behind us, locking us in for the next hour.

"Have you been sleeping, Nadette?" It's always the first question he asks.

"No. Not more than an hour a night."

He hums and makes a note on his legal pad as he settles into the dark brown leather armchair. I plop onto the matching overstuffed leather couch across from him and lift my fingers to play with my necklace. The gesture draws Peter's eye. He leans forward, squinting as though he's trying to get a better look.

"New?" he asks.

"Yeah. Mom gave it to me this morning." I look down. All I can see is the oblong black pendant wrapped in silver wire. I trace the etching on the front of the stone, Chinese characters that mean "protected." "She's working on a house for these clients from China, and I don't know. I guess she told one of them I've been having nightmares."

Peter's head tilts. "So she bought you a necklace to apologize for breaking your confidence?"

My lip quirks up, almost a smile. "No. The woman's mother was an herbalist and medicine woman. According to her, black jade is good for keeping away angry spirits and cleansing negative energy. The lady sells jewelry imported from China. She gave this to Mom to give to me."

"And? Do you feel cleansed?"

I stroke the beads, my fingers bumping from one sphere to the next. "Not really. But it can't hurt, right?"

"No. I definitely haven't heard of black jade having any adverse side effects." He smiles at the joke. I can't join in. I remember too well the side effects of the sleeping pills and antipsychotics he's tried on me. None of them worked. Some only made things worse.

Peter runs a hand over his dark hair. His fingers linger over his ears where the strands are starting to go gray. "So, Nadette, we've been dealing with the recent past since you came here—the insomnia and the waking dreams."

"Which still don't make sense. Not even after the CAT scans and sleep studies," I say.

Peter cocks his head to the side slightly. Almost a sideways nod like he's conceding the point. "Traditional methods obviously aren't going to work for a non-traditional problem. Concentrating on the dreams doesn't seem to be helping, so I want to go back further. Tell me about the progression of your other talent."

"Talent?" As if it's something I honed or wanted. Or have any control over. "You mean the invisible polygraph I seem to carry around in my head?"

"That's a good metaphor for it." Peter grins and nods. "I like that. And yes, the progression—or evolution, rather—of your invisible polygraph."

I bite my lip and tug at the black jade pendant. "I'm not sure what you mean exactly. I've always been able to tell when people are lying. My brain has been weird my whole life."

I was six years old when I finally understood that hearing bells ringing in your head when someone told a lie wasn't normal.

"I know you've always had the bells," Peter says. It took him a month to really believe me when I told him I heard lies. Once he adjusted to the fact that I wasn't bullshitting him or completely off my rocker, he's been quietly fascinated by the concept. "But you've said more than once that your sensitivity has increased dramatically."

Pulling my fire-orange hair over my shoulder, I nod slowly.

"I want you to examine the timeline of that evolution for me. Think back to the first time you remember it changing. Try to remember what you noticed was different and when that happened, okay?" He leans forward, scanning my face and gripping his pen in his left fist.

When *did* everything start to change? "It was just after my sister Sophia's birthday. About nineteen months ago." I bite my lip and try to remember the conversation we were having at the time. My breath hitches a bit. I remember it word for word. *Weird*. Shaking myself out of my thoughts, I refocus on Peter. "She was telling me about this guy she'd met and how excited she was for their date. She said, 'It's amazing a guy like that is still single. I can't believe someone else hasn't realized how perfect he is.'"

Peter nods. "And she was lying?"

"Well, no. She really thought she was telling the truth. She *believed* this guy was single. But I heard the bells anyway." I cringe. "Sophia was *pissed* when I told her she was being played. She went out with him anyway. A month later I found a CD of Schubert's compositions, a shirt of hers I'd been coveting for months, and a gift card to Amazon on my bed."

"So, that was what?" Peter tapped on the legal pad with his pen. "Six months after the dreams started? Seven?"

"Seven, yeah."

Peter's grip on his pen loosens and he makes a note. "That's a pretty significant difference—being able to spot a falsehood even when the person speaking believes it."

"It *sucks*." I slide down the couch a little until my butt is almost hanging off and cross my arms over my chest.

"Bet it helps on tests." A small smile curves his lips.

I snort. "Please. How many teachers are willing to admit they're wrong? Or accept 'Because the bells told me so' as proof?"

Peter's smile slides away. "Hmm. Okay, good point." He takes a slow breath and makes another note before he looks up and asks, "What did you notice next?"

"That's not enough?"

"Is that everything?"

I bite my lip and look away, pushing myself up on the couch again. "No."

"Then it's not enough."

Groaning, I rub my hands over my face. "Six months after that, I started *seeing* lies."

"How do you mean?"

"You know how sometimes you look at someone and you can just tell that they're faking a smile?"

I drop my hands as Peter's nose wrinkles, his grimace not stifled quite fast enough. "My ex-mother-in-law seemed to do that every time she saw me."

A little of the tension in my shoulders eases. I almost smile. That's one of the reasons I like Peter—he's willing to poke fun at himself sometimes too, to point out that not even the psychiatrist has everything figured out.

"Well, six months after I started being able to spot," I pause, searching for the word Peter used, "falsehoods, I was watching a friend of mine smile at her boyfriend. She ... look, this is weird even for me, okay?"

"Okay." Peter puts his pen down and settles against the back of the armchair. "Go on."



Taking a deep breath, I force the words out, even though it feels like I'm wearing an iron corset and someone keeps pulling the strings tighter. "There was this red haze over her face. Kind of like how a rainbow looks on a cloudy day? Color that's kind of there but not there? But the haze was only red. And only over her face. And only until she dropped that fake smile."

"That's ..." Peter's eyes are wide. He swallows hard and shakes his head. "That would be *incredibly* useful in my line of work."

I laugh, a startled, harsh laugh that dissolves into breathless chuckles. I look up at Peter, expecting to see him laughing with me.

He isn't moving. Though his lips are slightly parted like he's about to speak, no sound emerges. His shoulders aren't moving with the breaths he should be taking and his foot is stuck on the upstroke of the rhythm his toes have been tapping on the carpet.

*Oh, no. Please, no. Not again. Not now.*

I pull my legs tight against my chest. One arm locks around my knees and the other hand wraps tight around the black jade pendant. It's warm in my hand. Warmer than it should be from just my body heat. *Please*, I silently beg the necklace. *Please, please work*. Nothing else has stopped these moments where time seems to still.

The air in front of Peter's large, wood desk shimmers and sparkles. All I can do is hold on to the ridiculous hope that a string of black jade beads will work where medication and therapy have failed.

Where there was empty air a second ago, there's now an arch of white light shot through with orange. Through the door I see a strip of snow-white, powder-fine sand leading down to water the color of turquoise. The warm breeze that blows into the room, ruffling strands of my hair against my cheek, smells like saltwater and tropical flowers.

So often, the worlds that appear through that glowing arch are impossible. Fairylands out of fantasy movies, cities built on clouds, crowded Carnival-like festivals lit by floating lanterns. None of them call to me the way this simple, vibrant beach does. I wiggle my toes inside my sneakers, wishing I could run out onto the sand and let my feet sink into the soft-looking grains. Instead, I force my attention onto the man framed inside the arch.

Syver.

His artfully shaggy hair is an iridescent green-black that reminds me of a beetle's wings. His tawny skin gleams in the bright sunlight of his world and his full lips are almost always smiling. Syver smiles now and steps closer to the edge of the arch, leaning against the strip of light as though it's a solid thing. I relax a little, some of the tension easing out of my shoulders, but I don't let go of my knees. Looking at him is like playing a really complicated find-the-difference puzzle. There's something off, something that makes me itchy, but I've never been able to point to any one word or detail and say, "That."

"Hello, Nadette," he says, smiling like we're friends who just happened to run into each other. "How are you?"

Swallowing, I nod a greeting. "Tired."

Concern lines his forehead as his head tilts slightly. "I think you are wearing yourself too thin."

I shrug. Not being able to sleep and living in constant fear of another time-stopping visit from Syver's world is enough to wear anyone thin.

"Two years and you still don't trust me enough to let me show you an easier way." His sigh sounds so disappointed, but I can't tell if he's more upset with himself or me. I can't tell why it matters so much to him either. "Why do you spend so much of your energy fighting?"

*That* one is easy. "It's worth it if I can find a way to get rid of this ... whatever it is that's in my head." I want it gone. Whatever it is that created the invisible polygraph and makes me see doors to other worlds and impossibly beautiful people who, more often than not, lie.

Twenty-six different people have invaded my mind since these strange dreams started two years ago, but Syver shows up twice as often as anyone else. And he's the only one of them who has never lied to me.

"Why is it easier for most humans to believe themselves crazy than to see themselves as special? Unique." His voice reminds me of a cello, smooth and melodious. "I thought you would have accepted the truth by now, Nadette."

"What is the truth?" I ask, the words escaping my lips before I realize I'm going to speak.

"That what you can do is not an affliction, it is a gift."

My hand tightens around the jade pendant. A rush of nearly scalding heat floods my skin. I can't control the shudder that runs through me. These doorways always send shivers across my skin, but they're never this bad.

"A gift?" Gritting my teeth and tightening my arm around my knees, I shake my head and force myself to keep talking. "I have no friends because I freak people out. Even my family isn't comfortable around me. It's hard to see this as a *gift*."

Syver's head tilts and he studies me carefully. His eyes scan down from my bright orange hair to my black Converse tucked in close to my body. His gaze lingers longest on my throat, his expression tightening and his dark eyes narrowing when he spots my necklace.

"Has it come to this, Nadette? Hiding behind a wall of stone and light?"

What is he talking about? The only stones in the room are the ones around my neck. The only light is coming from Peter's lamps and Syver's white and orange archway.

My ears pop and my vision blurs. The feeling is somewhere between the pleasurable pain of a joint cracking and the rush of an epiphany. What I see when my vision settles sends my pulse beating harder and faster than a drumline.

The solid white border of the archway disintegrates into a tangle of tendrils, orange ropes that stretch out, trying to bind my wrists, my chest, my head. I scream and pull back. The coils of light brush like ice-cold drips of water on my overheated skin. Each one makes me shiver even though they never quite make contact.

There's a layer of white, shimmering light coating my body, pulsing out from the black jade pendant.

The tendrils double, sliding over my skin but never sticking. Never taking hold. My body is trembling, shaking like high-voltage electricity is running through it. My eyes stay locked on Syver. His smile never falters—a polite, vaguely concerned smile. That concern is no longer reflected in those changeable eyes.

"W-what is th-this?" I force the words past my chattering teeth. I can't take a full breath. My chest burns. So do my eyes. I think I feel tears trail down my cheeks. "What is ha-ha-happening?"

"Can you see it now?" His dark eyes widen just a little. "Fascinating."

“Stop!” I beg. “Please, p-please, *stop*.”

Syver’s head tilts as he considers, a lock of his dark hair falling over his forehead. Then he smiles and shakes his head. “No.”

I curl tighter around myself, pressing my eyes against my knees. Sobs intensify the tremors running through me. I can barely remember how to breathe.

*Stop! Oh God, please. Stop*, I repeat in my head. I’m gripping my pendant so tight the wire wrapping might leave permanent indentations in my palm.

“I am afraid this is a turning point for you. As engrossing as it has been to watch you struggle against us and fight the development of your own strengths, now you have a choice, pet.”

That voice is so rich, so compelling. *Forcibly* compelling. I look up, feeling as though there’s a hand on the back of my head guiding the motion. When I meet Syver’s eyes, that smile is still there, but now his dark eyes glimmer with that same strange green-black iridescence as his beetle’s wing hair.

“You have a rather unique—and surprisingly powerful—skill. It deserves to be used and cherished, not feared and hidden. Or erased, as you seem intent on doing.”

The green glimmer in his eyes intensifies and it feels like all the oxygen has been sucked out of the room. The jade around my neck grows even hotter. But, it’s not enough to counteract the chill surrounding me.

“I will give you some time to decide, but not long. Two choices, pet. Take my hand and willingly relinquish the thing you so despise yourself for having.” He extends one slender hand as though beckoning me forward. “Or I will take it from you.”

His hand flips and his body tenses. The tendrils shift from slithering, grasping vines to spears of light with glittering, razor-sharp points. Instead of groping for a grip, they attack. They slam against my thin shield of white light and send piercing electric shocks through my body.

I dive out of the way. They follow. The attack intensifies until the black jade pendant in my hand heats past the point of burning. I can’t release the stone. A scream rips through my throat and my voice breaks. My vision blurs, fading into a field of white. Something shat-

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ters, the sound somewhere between the crack of stone and the tinkle of glass.

Then there's only silence and blissful, peaceful darkness.



Almost every day for the past two years, I've woken up in a sudden burst. I jump from unconsciousness to consciousness in one abrupt leap.

Not this time.

Awareness filters through the fog of sleep in pieces. Over-starched cloth against my skin. The smell of disinfectant and cough syrup and plastic. A handful of voices murmuring in hushed whispers. Something beeping that won't shut the hell up.

*Where am I?*

I force a deep breath, hissing at the throbbing pain behind my right eye.

"Nadette?"

The voice is familiar. *Who is that?*

Never mind. It doesn't matter right now. Not when my head feels like it's being beaten in with a crowbar and I can't seem to shake that last vestige of sleep.

*Wake up, wake up, wake up.*

My heart beats a little faster. The beeping keeps time, almost like it's ... like it's a heart monitor? I suck another breath. The jolt of pain through my head is enough to pop my eyes open and clear away the last of the fog.

Mom is leaning over me. Her red curls are pulled back in a rough bun, and her green eyes are bloodshot and red-rimmed. Normally her outfits are as carefully arranged as her interior designs. Now, her cream silk shirt is rumpled and there's a small stain on the collar.

"Oh, thank God," she breathes, pressing a kiss on my forehead as she smooths my hair back. "You scared us, sweetheart."

Squinting, I look over her shoulder. There's enough evidence in the room to make an educated guess. My throat is raw and my voice is hoarse, but I manage to ask, "Hospital? Why?"

Mom opens her mouth to answer, but then Peter comes in with a tall, strawberry-blond man in a white coat. His sharp nose and the angle of his chin are instantly familiar, but it takes me a second to place the new guy. He just moved back to town a few weeks ago and I haven't seen him decked out for work yet.

My second-oldest brother meets my eyes and grins, relief turning his crooked smile almost goofy. "Always have to be the center of attention, don't you, Nadie?"

"Hey, Jake," I rasp at the same time Mom lightly slaps his arm and scolds, "Don't you start."

Footsteps thud in the hall, quick like someone is running, and shoes squeak just before a hand catches the frame of the open door. My slightly-out-of-breath father pulls himself into the room, his blue eyes wide. My father was in Washington, D.C. last time I checked.

"Dad?"

"Jesus, honey. You scared the hell out of us." He huffs and tries to smile, running his fingers through his already disarranged blond hair as he steps closer to the bed and leans in to kiss my forehead.

I lift my arm to pull him into a hug. Something white is wrapped around my hand. Bandages? For what? Raising my eyes, I flick my gaze between the bandages and everyone else, silently questioning. It doesn't hurt. What happened? Why am I here?

My parents frown. Jake starts to fidget under my stare. Peter clears his throat and steps forward. "Nadette, what's the last thing you remember?"

His words trigger memories. My pulse ratchets up. I gasp and try to sit. Before I get more than a few inches off the bed, three different hands are on my shoulders, easing me back down. I try to breathe. It's like cotton is filling my lungs. There's no room for air. The short gasps I manage only make me dizzier. Memories of everything that happened in Peter's office rush to fill my head.

Frozen time. The door of light. That tempting beach. Syver. The moment when his claws came out, when everything changed. Orange spears and pain. And then nothing. Darkness and silence. Waking up in a hospital with a bandage around my hand for no apparent reason.

Mom, Dad, Jake, and Peter are all there, watching me and waiting for me to say something. To answer Peter's question.



"I was in your office." I swallow again and this time, my voice comes a little closer to normal. "We were talking about you being able to use my polygraph thing in your practice and then ..."

I trail off, my eyes darting between the four concerned faces. For a second, I consider skipping the episode with Syver and asking Peter what he *thinks* happened. I don't. Peter and my parents know all about my crazy. Jake knows more than almost anyone else. Sighing, I close my eyes and let my head drop to the pillow. I slowly pour out the rest of the story.

Fear ripples through me when I picture the orange light wrapping around me. I push it down. I try to tell the story the way I'd explain a movie. Like the memories don't send shivers of ice down my spine. Like I don't hear the stupid heart monitor giving away how fast my pulse is racing.

When I get to the part where darkness takes over and I wake up here, I open my eyes. I need to see light. I need the reminder that I'm not still lost in that blackness.

Mom is biting her lip, but she tries to smile when I look at her. "Never thought I'd say this, but right now I really wish you could lie to me and tell me everything is just fine."

I laugh. It sounds more like a sob. "Yeah. Me too." But I can't. And we both know it. I turn to Peter and finally ask, "What happened after I blacked out?"

"I was about to ask you something when—I don't know. It was like watching a DVD that skipped. You were sitting on the couch, and then you were a foot to the left, curled tight in a ball with your eyes shut." Peter swallows and runs his hand over his short hair. His body is tense, drawn so tight that I know he's more terrified than he's letting on and trying not to show it. "Your necklace was in pieces like it had exploded. You slumped over and I saw the scratches on your neck and the cuts on your palm and I ..."

His voice is shaking by the end and he turns away. Jake finishes the sentence for him. "He freaked the fuck out and called 911."

"Jake, language," Dad scolds absently, obviously on autopilot.

Everyone settles into a slightly uncomfortable silence. I shift, trying to resist the urge to shove away these horribly scratchy sheets. When I clear my throat, all eyes lock on me. "When can we go home?"

Another beat of silence. The tension in the room ramps higher.

Jake's jaw clenches and he looks away. "They want to keep you overnight for observation."

"What? No! Just sign me out!"

"I'm not your doctor, Nadette. I *can't*."

"You're *a* doctor."

"I'm also your brother. And you were unconscious for over two hours for no apparent reason." He shakes his head, his blue eyes begging me to understand. "The other doctors aren't the only ones who want to keep you here overnight just to be safe, okay?"

I grind my teeth. Dammit. I can't really fault them for wanting to keep me safe, to make sure I'm okay. If any one of them were in this bed instead of me, I'd be doing the same thing. But that doesn't mean I'm any safer here than I was at Peter's office. Or would be at home. I run my finger along one of the shallow cuts the necklace left behind and shudder even as I force myself to ask, "Can you get me a new one?"

Mom's eyes narrow. "A new what?" But then her gaze tracks the movement of my finger and she pales. "Another necklace? But Nadie, it—honey, it *exploded*!"

"It kept me safe. I don't know how, but it did."

For a second, Mom just stares at me. "*Exploded*!" she insists again before looking at Dad and Jake. "*Ex-plo-ded*!"

"Bombs explode too, but that doesn't mean they aren't used to keep people safe," Jake says.

"Thank you, Jacob. That analogy makes me feel so much better."

The bells ring in my head, but softer than when someone lies outright. Sarcasm never sets them off too loudly. My brother winces slightly, still not immune to Mom's displeasure.

Dad sighs. "This is Nadette we're talking about, remember? The girl who quite literally chokes on lies?" He waits until Mom and Jake look at him before he continues. "Grace, if she says she needs another one, don't you think it would be safer to believe her? Hell, I vote we go buy her fifteen of them. Fill her whole bedroom with black jade statues and weigh her down with the stuff if she really thinks it'll make this shit stop."

Mom glances at me. Her expression is silently asking if that's true, if I really think the jade will make the visits go away. I clear my throat.

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"I don't know if they'll stop or not. He didn't like me wearing it, though. At all."

It only takes her another second to make up her mind. "All right, fine. I'll call Zan and see what else she has in stock."

My parents lean over the bed and kiss my forehead, promising to be back soon. Jake squeezes my hand and follows them out. As they leave, I hear Jake say, "Isn't there that New Age store near the house? Maybe they have some."

Peter smiles gently. "I should get back to the office. I have some appointments I need to reschedule."

"Sorry." I try not to cringe as I say it. I don't think it works.

"Not your fault. I'm just glad you're all right. Scared the hell out of me, Nadette. Thought you weren't going to wake up like—" He cuts himself off and shakes his head. "Try to get some rest. We'll get you out of here in the morning if everything checks out."

He pats my unbandaged hand and then he's gone. I'm alone with uncomfortable sheets, an annoyingly loud heart monitor, and the fear that if Syver shows up before my mom comes back with an armful of black jade, I might finally see what it's like on the other side of that glowing arch.

# About the Author



Photo by Lani Woodland

After a lifelong obsession with books, Erica Cameron spent her college years getting credit for reading and learning how to make stories of her own. Erica graduated with a double major in psychology and creative writing from Florida State University and began pursuing a career as an author.

Erica is many things but most notably the following: writer, reader, editor, dance fan, choreographer, singer, lover of musical theater, movie obsessed, sucker for romance, ex-Florida resident, and quasi-recluse. She loves the beach but hates the heat, has equal passion for the art of Salvador Dali and Venetian Carnival masks, has a penchant for unique jewelry and sun/moon décor pieces, and a desire to travel the entire world on a cruise ship. Or a private yacht. You know, whatever works.

In addition to the *Dream War Saga*, Erica is also the co-author of the *Laguna Tides* novels with Lani Woodland. You can find out more at [ByEricaCameron.com](http://ByEricaCameron.com).