

DEN OF LIARS

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CONTENT WARNING:

depictions of child abuse, trauma, kidnapping,
violence, loss of caretakers, and mild language

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1

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To anyone who has ever loved a lie



“THE DEVIOUS”

Devious Liar, devious Thief,
Devious pair of sin,
Who lied and stole a moonshard whole
And let corruption in.
Devious brothers, you cannot hide
The powers you have seized.
The skies, they watch your devious deeds;
They'll claim devious reprise.

—AETHERAN NURSERY RHYME

AUTHOR UNKNOWN

PROLOGUE



The Thief came for her heart in the night. He rippled through the wall of that windowless basement and found Magnolia St. James exactly where he expected. Huddled in the corner, lit only by a sliver of light from the bottom of a locked door. She blinked up at him through swollen, bruised eyes. Blood crusted her pale cheeks, caked in her gold-spun hair, dripped from her chin.

He expected her to be afraid, but she did not shrink back. Her gaze trailed along the glowing voratium hoops in his eyebrows, dropped to the matching studs in his nose and lips, traced the rings cuffing his ears, and finally settled on the glittering black octopus wrapped around his left wrist like a bracelet.

She did not ask who he was. Instead, she cocked her head toward the door. "They'll be back soon, so whatever you intend to steal, you'd better make it quick."

A murmur of gruff voices argued in the other room. Apparently, Magnus St. James, the girl's father, hadn't taken the bait and come to rescue her. The Thief couldn't entirely hide his satisfied smile.

Everything was going according to plan.

"I say we put a bullet through her brain," one man barked. "Send a message."

"And bring the wrath of the St. James empire down on our heads?" another shot back.

"Snatching her in the first place should have done that," the first retorted. "The other families are as finished with St. James as we are. This move would win Salazar every ally we'd need to finally take him down."

The Thief met her eyes. Blood accentuated their azure color, a blue as vivid as the heart of a flame. And how they blazed. A whipping icefire that burned past the fear that kept her cowering in the corner.

Perhaps she was just as lethal as he hoped.

"They're going to kill me." Her voice did not waver, but her hands quivered like the wings of a butterfly skewered to a wall.

"Not if you come with me," the Thief said softly.

"You're one of the Devious," she said. "You don't help people."

"I might. Many believe me starblessed, that my power was a gift from the gods."

She jutted out her chin. "I believe you want something."

"Clever girl."

"Last time I checked, thieves weren't in the business of making trades."

He almost laughed. "Quite true. But what I want is not something I can steal. It must be given willingly."

"And what do you want?"

"Your heart."

The corners of the girl's eyes tightened. "My heart?"

"Not your physical heart, of course; I'm not a monster." He cocked his head, smiled at his own joke. If this girl had truly been raised by the

DEN OF LIARS

most infamous street lord Aethera had ever known, then she had seen her fair share of monstrosity.

"I've heard you steal the starlight in people's souls," she whispered. "Is that what you mean?"

"Yes. I want the soullight of your heart. Its capacity to feel. To love. To care." He dropped his voice to a whisper. "To hurt."

There. Quick as lightning, he saw it. A flash of agony so acute it spat sparks in her gaze. He had her.

She opened her mouth, but before she could ask him how or why or what, the doorknob rattled.

"Do we have a deal?" the Thief asked, extending a hand.

The lock mechanism in the door clicked. The sound of the second bolt being thrown back resounded like a punch.

She stared at the Thief's outstretched fingers. "What do I get in return?"

"Rescue," he said. "And, as long as your heart is mine, protection."

"Take it." She grasped his hand so hard his knuckles cracked. "I don't want it anymore."

So as the door swung open, he lifted the only voratium pendant hanging from his neck that did not yet glow and pressed it to the bare skin above her collar. It vibrated as he called forth his power.

"Hey! How'd you get in here?" A burly man with a thick mustache raised his pistol.

The Thief grinned. "Magic."

By the time the gun fired, the Thief and the girl had already vanished.

Nothing but a pair of shadows, they prowled like wraiths through the city. The voratium fragment between their fingers pulsed violet blue, and the Thief sighed as it thrummed a steady *thump-thump, thump-thump* against his skin.

One heart, two souls, for as long as the girl would live.

He only prayed he wouldn't need it that long.

CHAPTER ONE



LOLA

Damn, if I don't love a good police chase.

"Halt!" the cop behind us barks.

Enzo snorts next to me. "'Halt'? Do they ever realize how ridiculous they sound?"

I laugh as our feet slap in tandem across the slippery roof tiles of Aethera's factory district. Our heart thunders in my chest, and adrenaline sparks in my pulse as sharp as the electricity rumbling in the clouds overhead. "Wholly unoriginal," I agree as we leap across an alleyway and land midstride on the next roof, never breaking our pace.

We haven't been chased in at least a year, and I can't help grinning as the constable falls farther and farther behind. With Enzo's magical ability to render us both incorporeal, we're always long gone by the time the police show up to the scene of our thefts. Which means our heists are usually uneventful.

But six minutes ago, when dancer Louelle Martine returned home early to get ready for her performance tonight at the Liar's Den Casino, she caught a glimpse of us vanishing through the wall with the four-thousand-plat tutu she was supposed to wear. Unluckily for us, a constable was just next door managing a domestic disturbance. Her cries of "It's the Thief! The *Thief*!" had him hot on our trail in seconds.

The tutu is valuable, sure, but the Thief? His capture would be worth far more.

Since he and his brother, the Liar, rose to infamy five years ago for their magical powers, Enzo has become something of a myth. Most believe him dead thanks to a slew of rumors he started soon after he met me, but those who have recognized him during one of his cons whisper stories of a bejeweled specter who haunts the streets, seeking revenge for his ruination.

Not entirely incorrect, if you ask me.

Rain mists above our heads, and my breath fogs up the lenses of my glasses as we dodge chimneys and radio antennas, dislodged shingles and electrical wires. Enzo and I have done a thousand heists together, and we move like a pair of dancers across a stage. When he turns, so do I. When I leap, he does, too. We may only share a heart, but after four years of heists and training, we may as well share a body, a mind, a soul.

We angle west toward where the iron-gray sea churns in the distance. We just have to get to the last apartment building four roofs away, and then he'll magic us through to the ground floor, where our getaway motorcar waits on the street.

Leap, roll, dash. Grasp arms, swing a pirouette around a smoke-stack, launch in an arc to the next roof. My poor depth perception, courtesy of the severe nearsightedness in my lazy eye, was a difficulty early on in my training, but now my body instinctively tracks Enzo in a way that ensures I always land on my feet. In turn, his typical rigidity

DEN OF LIARS

bleeds away when he works with me, his body mimicking the lethal grace mine learned from a childhood of ballet training.

Together, we are unstoppable.

"Halt!" The police officer's voice is a gasp, so far behind us it's almost lost in the intensifying roar of the sea.

We finally reach the last roof. The ocean slams against the cliff mere yards from the base of this sixteen-floor structure, which trembles in the angry wind. Enzo jams his hand into his pocket, pulling out a lump of raw voratium so dark it seems to suck in the light of the streetlamps below, and presses the metal between our palms.

I wait for the familiar sensation of my body rippling into nothing, the weightlessness like a balloon inflating in my chest, the bubbling tingle of my limbs turning to air.

But only Enzo vanishes. My body barely flickers.

With a growl, Enzo reappears, chucking the voratium off the roof. "Damn it, this better not all be bum voratium." He digs into his pocket again, retrieving a whole handful of the pitch-dark metal and gripping my palm.

Once more, when his body mists into nothing, mine stays firmly corporeal.

"Magnus St. James, you bastard!" He reappears, hurling the lot of metal as far as he can and letting out a string of curses I feel like bursts of rage in my own chest.

My father's name, a dirty word on his lips, makes shame simmer under my skin. It's becoming harder and harder to get our hands on good voratium these days with the way St. James has monopolized the entire industry. We steal what we can, and this lot came directly from one of his top lackeys, so we assumed it would be pure.

But it seems my father doesn't do even his own staff favors.

Memories of him teaching me all about voratium ripple across my mind. The business of mining it, polishing it, driving up its price. All over again, I see the textbooks he had me study, their pages full of diagrams of

the precise angles lumenors use to direct starlight into the metal. I glimpse his cunning smile, hear his sawdust voice describing how I will one day inherit his illicit network of families and businesses, all loyal to our name because of the power we wield with our voratium and our corruption.

All my life, I was his little secret. A weapon, stored away for her own protection until the day she would take her father's place as the most infamous crime boss in history.

But that future died four years ago. To keep my father's enemies from hunting us after Enzo whisked me away from them, we went to great lengths to convince the world I'd been killed. A corpse wearing a face doctored to look like mine was dumped on the street outside the warehouse I'd been locked in, and my father never knew the difference.

Every time I think of him, my chest constricts. Dust like glass in my lungs, hurt like ice in my veins, sting like poison at the corners of my eyes.

Because when he thought Magnolia St. James had been kidnapped, he did not come for her. And when he thought she had died, he did not cry, did not care.

That was when I learned the difference between the lies told to protect the ones you love and the lies told to make a person think that's what you're doing. Lies that last a whole childhood, lies that tell you they love you and that you matter and that you have a place, lies that slice through bone and muscle and tendon when they surface and leave you with a pain that hurts everywhere.

So I let Magnolia St. James die, and now I'm nothing more than her ghost, rippling through shadows with Enzo in the night. In the four years since I was kidnapped, I haven't befriended anyone besides him, haven't shown my face in daylight, haven't even met Enzo's gang of thieves he lovingly calls his Tentacles. Because I am too valuable, my heritage too dangerous, my existence a live wire ready to catch flame.

But tonight, as long as we make it through this heist and the one that comes after it at the Liar's Den, I will finally prove to Enzo that I

DEN OF LIARS

don't need to stay in the shadows. That I'm enough of a con artist to manage the baggage of my history and my parentage. And when we finish this heist and break the curse that requires us to share a heart, my freedom will no longer be a liability.

Enzo stalks to the edge of the roof, his panic slicing like a knife through our shared heart. "How do we get you down, damn it?!"

The police officer's cries grow. He's only two roofs behind us now. We need to act fast.

I search our surroundings. None of the other buildings besides the one we just came from is close enough to reach by leaping. I lean over to survey the wall below. I'm an excellent climber, but the walls are lacquered in a glossy finish popular in this part of town that's impossible to climb without a rope, and I don't have one.

Whirling, I scan the area, cursing the smudges on my glasses that make it difficult to see. My gaze snags on an abandoned laundry line waving in the breeze, connecting this building to the one the police officer just leaped onto. Yanking out one of the two daggers strapped to my belt, I sprint toward the rope, hurling my blade toward the other end of the line. It slices through easily, bouncing off the opposing building and flipping to the street below as the rope drops, hanging only by the end connected to the window directly beneath my feet. Dropping to my stomach, I stretch my arms over the edge to detach the knot, then scramble back toward Enzo, dragging the rope behind me and shoving it at him, pointing at the massive smokestack at the apex of the roof.

"That rope isn't long enough to even go around the whole chimney, let alone reach the street," he protests.

"Good thing it doesn't need to go *around* the chimney." I raise my brow.

His eyes glint as he gathers the rope. "Knew I kept you around for something." He vanishes, and the rope does with him, reappearing with its end through the brick of the chimney as Enzo coalesces on the other side.

JESSICA S. OLSON

I grasp it with both fists. “I’ll meet you at the car,” I call, swinging over the side of the roof.

A massive thud tells me the police officer just leaped to our building. I keep my eyes on the cobbled street below, feeling the burn of friction through my leather gloves as I slide down, feet skidding along the slick wall.

“Hey!” the constable shouts, and I launch myself the final twelve feet to the ground, rolling through the landing as our getaway automobile comes screeching around the corner.

I salute the officer with a cocky grin, yanking the passenger door open as the motorcar passes, and leap inside. We peel onto the main road, cackling like crows.

Stars, I love this.

CHAPTER TWO



LOLA

Sirens wail ahead—likely the police officer’s backup—and Enzo jerks the steering wheel, sending us into an alleyway. Flashing lights reflect in the rearview mirror as he pulls onto the next street and angles north toward Waterside, the entertainment district that gives our city, Aethera, its worldwide nickname: the City of Indulgence.

“Want one?” Enzo digs under his seat for a paper bag and hands it to me.

I open it and let out a squeal. It’s full of raspberry tarts from Enzo’s favorite pastry shop downtown. “You brilliant devil, you stocked our getaway car,” I declare, handing one to him before shoving another in my mouth.

He grins, turning the wheel with one hand as he takes a bite. The sleeve on his left arm rides up, revealing Septavia, the seven-armed pet

octopus who spends most of her time wrapped around his wrist. She wriggles forward, climbing off his arm and onto the steering wheel, her glossy black skin reflecting stoplights in shards like diamonds.

My eyes stray to the marks on his wrist where she was, a series of circular bruises from her suckers, so crisp and dark they're black as ink on his skin. Because of his magical curse, he heals quickly, but she'll be back in place on his arm before they fade. He told me once about how his Tentacles all have an identical tattoo twirling around their hands and forearms, marking them as his team. I try not to glance down at my own wrist, where the skin is distinctly mark-free.

Soon, I reassure myself. If the Liar's Den job goes off without a hitch, Enzo will have no choice but to admit I'm good enough to manage a false identity so I can finally join his gang.

And if we succeed tonight, he won't need my heart anymore. He'll have his own.

I dust crumbs from my knees as Enzo turns on the radio. "Love Me Like a Lie," the most popular song of the summer, fills the cab.

The grin fades from Enzo's lips as we enter the Waterside District, where music blares from every direction and signs flash like candied lightning. Theaters, casinos, and resorts twinkle on both sides, and people spangled in diamonds and pearls crowd the sidewalks. Even the air in our motorcar thickens with the scent of expensive colognes.

Enzo's fingers rattle on the steering wheel. Septavia slicks a single tentacle against his thumb, as though to steady him, but her touch brings him little comfort tonight. Our heart rate thrums like an accelerating drum, and I know what he's going to say before he opens his mouth.

"I'm not so sure this is a good idea anymore, Lola."

"You never thought it was a good idea," I say, trying not to let my irritation flare enough for him to notice. The last thing I need is for him to feel defensive alongside his fear. "But it's our only lead left."

Five years ago, Enzo and his brother, the Liar, stole an extra-

DEN OF LIARS

ordinarily powerful hunk of magicked voratium called a moonshard from Aethera's holy zenithic temple. That same night, his brother turned on him, wielding the moonshard to curse Enzo. Since then, Enzo's been trying to get his hands on the moonshard, following lead after lead, searching for the secret location where his brother has stowed it.

And our only lead left has just checked into the Liar's casino.

Enzo grips the steering wheel so tightly his knuckles blanch white. "Maybe I could go in."

"We've been over this at least forty-two times." I sigh. "You can't go in there, and neither can any of your Tentacles. You said yourself he's magicked the place to keep you out."

He grits his teeth, glaring hard at the street in front of us. The traffic lights reflect reds and yellows against the deep green of his irises.

Enzo's curse, which the rest of the world believes to be as free and powerful as the Liar's sprawling magic, came at a steep cost. Though that curse gave Enzo the ability to walk through any wall and enter any safe, it also took away his capacity to feel, to speak, to be. In order to say words, he must first steal them from someone else's mouth. In order to have emotions, he must first take them from someone else's heart. In order to be corporeal, he must first pilfer physical form from someone else's existence.

Since the night the Liar cursed him, he's had to plunder people's homes and bodies, drawing out this soullight and capturing it in shards of voratium. Unfortunately, that power runs out quickly. To have some semblance of a life, Enzo must spend every waking moment searching, stealing, siphoning.

Thankfully, his ability to see soullight makes it possible for him to glean intimate details about the lives of the people he steals from. Details that tell us whether they're connected to the moonshard. Details we've been following in order to find and destroy it to free him of its curse.

We're closer than we've ever been, but our last remaining target is in his brother's casino, the one place he cannot go.

But because no one knows about me, I can.

"Spin me like a tale, one where I'm the one you need. Spare me the truth and just let me belieeeeeeeve . . ." The song fades into static, and the radio host cries, "That was Celestia's own Shirley LaCour, who is due to perform tonight at the Liar's Den Casino Resort in Aethera for the grand opening of the Liar's Dice Tournament!" Adrenaline flares hot in my stomach. "Your very own LERA hosts will be covering the event live, so make sure not to miss it! The tournament kicks off at midnight. Fifty contestants will gamble their most dangerous secrets over several rounds of challenges for the chance to win a single die with the power to sow one untraceable deception . . ."

I snap the radio off. My stomach churns, and I try to tell myself it's Enzo's worry making it feel like the world is closing in on me.

But I know that's a lie as surely as my heart does.

Four years ago, my father entered that Liar's Dice Tournament, and the dirty little secret he bargained was the fact that he had a daughter hidden away. When he lost, his biggest rival, Moratin Salazar, snatched me to use me as leverage to dismantle the St. James monopoly on voratium.

A monopoly that, it turns out, mattered more to Magnus St. James than I did.

The Liar's little tournament tore my childhood to shreds. Exposed that my father did not love me like I thought he did. Broke me and left me abandoned.

I have just as much reason to hate the Liar as Enzo does.

It's a satisfying irony that the tournament is going to be our way back to the moonshard. Once Enzo's curse is broken, I fully intend to use the shard to destroy the Liar and his precious casino. Destroy it like it destroyed me.

A muscle twitches in Enzo's clenched jaw, and I press my hand to his arm as his anxiety churns in my chest.

DEN OF LIARS

He's not only worried about my safety because he cares about me, though that is a concern. The fact that he's able to *share* my heart, rather than stealing pieces of soullight the way he does with everyone else, has loosened his leash immensely over the past four years. With me around, he only needs to siphon speech and corporeality from others, and that small reprieve has given him the time to track down the moonshard. If I'm hurt or killed, he'll go right back to grasping for soullight every moment of every day like he was before.

The Liar's Den Casino Resort blazes into view, and Enzo pulls to a stop just before a blockade guarded by several police officers. A massive crowd pushes toward the entrance.

"What an eyesore," Enzo mutters, and though I'm staring at the casino, I know exactly the expression he's wearing. It's his I-want-to-set-my-brother-on-fire-and-maybe-his-casino-too-while-I'm-at-it face, complete with a scrunched nose and a scowl.

"I don't know, I think it's kind of impressive," I tease.

He shoots me a glare. "You obviously have no taste."

The Liar's Den towers in front of the sea like a glittering dragon, a massive campus complete with high-end hotel accommodations, a luxury spa, and an array of theaters boasting cabarets and acrobat shows alike. The main casino scrapes the clouds with its twenty-six levels studded with multicolor lights that dance like tiny fairies. Marble arcs twist out into the air in decorative loops that seem to defy gravity—which, considering the stories about the Liar's magic, is probably exactly what they do. A massive lion emblazoned in a rainbow of neon at the center of it all spreads its jaw wide in a silent roar. Jagged flippers protrude from its ribs, and the lower half of its body scintillates with scales like a fish.

A symbol of the Zenithic Church's goddess of truth, Ivara the Lionness, taken over by Ivian, the god of lies, and his underwater wickedness. If I wasn't so disgusted with the Liar for what he did to my father, to my life, and to my best friend, I might actually be impressed

by his bravery in being this openly sacrilegious in a city so steeped in zenithic belief.

"Remember," Enzo whispers, voice urgent. "Get to the roof by eleven-thirty. I'm only going to be able to have that skylight open for you for ten minutes."

"I know."

"Don't draw any attention to yourself."

"I know, Enz."

"And—"

"Funny enough, I *have* done a heist before." I push my glasses up my nose to scowl at him.

"Not like this one."

"This is not a complicated job. I won't even have to interact with anyone, which means the odds of me being recognized, especially with the way we've dyed my hair, are next to zero. I'm going to waltz in there, snatch Legrand's watch, and get out through the skylight, just like we planned. I'm not going to be seen, and I'm not going to get caught. Take a breath."

The pocket watch, according to our research, is an extraordinary treasure. Usually, Enzo needs to press raw voratium against a person's skin to access their soullight. However, in rare cases, if a person wears raw voratium long enough—typically in the form of a trinket the owner never takes off—the metal begins to siphon some of the person's soul-light on its own. The pocket watch is one such item, which means that we won't need to interact with Legrand at all if we can get our hands on it.

Enzo winds his thumb around the pendant that houses our heart. "Don't let him discover you."

I don't need to ask who he's talking about. The loathing in our heart is a specific sort of hatred he feels only for his brother.

"I am more than capable of handling *you*; how much worse can the Liar be?" I try to tease.

DEN OF LIARS

"A lot worse." He blows a slow stream of air through clenched teeth.

"You always said his power was nothing more than magic tricks and misdirection."

"I oversimplified."

I raise a brow. "Care to under-simplify, then? I'm about to go in there."

"My brother can sense lies, which means you cannot deceive him. And his illusions are so powerful you will lose all sense of reality if he wants you to." Enzo's mouth twists. "While you're in there, you cannot believe anything you see, hear, taste . . . and especially not anything you feel."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean," he says, "that if he discovers you work with me, there is nothing he won't make you see or hear or feel in order to get what he wants out of you. The Liar is more treacherous than any god, Above or Below. Your life and mine depend on you never losing sight of that."

"I won't."

"If you get caught and by some grace of the stars you're not dead by the end of it," he says, jabbing a finger at me, traces of mirth flickering through the unease in his voice, "I'll filet you myself. I've worked too hard to keep you a secret."

"Fair enough." I hold out my hand. "And *when* I succeed, you owe me a bag of those fizzy candies they sell at the pier when this is all over. What are they called again?"

"Snazzatazzles." A ghost of a smile flits across his mouth as he shakes my hand. "Get me that watch, and you have yourself a deal."

"You'd think I'd have learned by now not to make bargains with you."

"You'd think I'd have learned by now that you're more trouble than you're worth."

"Tough love, my boy." I wink and yank off my leathers, revealing

a dancer's leotard and stockings. I pull on Louelle Martine's tutu, and the prickle of the tulle against my legs sends my mind back to golden afternoons spent leaping across the private dance studio in the isolated home where I grew up. Grunting, I push the memories away. That was the life of a naive dancer. I'm a thief now, and I need to focus.

"Here," Enzo says softly, handing over a coil of rope from beneath his seat, which I wind around my waist several times and tuck under the tulle before adding lockpicks, a dagger, a pair of gloves, a vial of putty, and a screwdriver. "And this, too." He holds out a voratium bracelet glowing faintly green. "Filled this with strength just for you, Lollipop."

I raise a brow. "Lollipop?"

"It's a nickname. A charming one."

"Charming according to who, exactly?"

He scowls. "I could have called you Locust. Or maybe Lobster. Would you have preferred that?"

"I suppose Lollipop is just fine, Enema."

"Enema?" he deadpans. "Really?"

I give him my most innocent smile. "It's a nickname. A charming one."

"Just take the damn bracelet." He chucks it at my face.

Smirking, I catch it and run my fingers over the glowing shards of metal. With the way my father has ratcheted up the price of voratium in the city—particularly when it's infused with starlight—this trinket's worth several thousand plats at least. Tucking it into my cleavage where it won't be seen, I say, "See you in an hour."

Then I jump out of the motorcar and dart across the street before he can change his mind.