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Breaking All My Rules

a Novel

Trice Hickman

Chapter 1

“Nooooo!” Erica screamed over over, gasping for breath, drowning in fear. She was falling. Falling fast. Her slender arms and thick legs flailed through the air as if she were on a runaway roller coaster. Her mouth gaped open and her eyes bulged wide when she realized what was next to come.

She knew it would only be a matter of seconds before she hit the hard, rugged earth below. Death was near. She could feel it. Hear it calling her name. Smell it invading her nostrils. The bitter taste of it filling her mouth as she screamed. Then, suddenly, her panic

and fear vanished into the whisper-thin air around her. She couldn't explain her newfound sense of calm, or what had caused the shift, so she did the only thing that was left to do at such a terrifying moment—she obeyed it.

She stopped struggling.

She relaxed her tired limbs and welcomed the uncomfortable peace spreading through every inch of her flaccid body—the kind of peace that only death could bring. This is it, Erica thought as she swallowed hard. She closed her eyes, anticipated the rough gravel and dirt that lay mere inches away, and readied herself for the fatal impact.

Bonk! Beep! Bonk! Beep! Bonk!

Erica shot straight up in her bed and fumbled as she reached over to silence the alarm clock blaring loudly near her head. Her chest heaved up and down with rapid speed as her lungs fought for air. She took two deep breaths, closed her eyes tightly, and began to slowly count backward from ten until her body no longer trembled with fear.

She breathed in and out as her heart searched for its natural rhythm. After several minutes she was finally able to inhale and exhale at a normal pace. “Thank you, God,” she whispered, covering her parched mouth with her trembling hand. The exercise had worked again, just as it had so many other nights and mornings in the past.

Erica slumped her tense shoulders and shook her head, falling back onto her pillow. Waking up like this made her wish she could end her day before it began.

It was Friday morning, and despite the fact that the weatherman had forecast a bright, beautiful day to start what promised to be a picturesque weekend, Erica felt as if dark clouds were hovering directly above her head, ready to drench her at any moment.

“Agggghhhh,” she moaned.

Erica Stanford was normally an upbeat, optimistic go-getter who always looked on the cheery side of things, no matter how bleak. If she had a bad day at work, she didn't sweat it, because she knew the next day would be better. If she missed out on a business contract, she didn't get discouraged, because she was confident that a much better opportunity would be waiting around the corner. Whatever the situation, she always tried to change her way of thinking so that she felt empowered rather than trapped by the challenges that faced her. But lately her state of mind had been steering counter to her character, and she couldn't seem to shake the funk it brought in its wake.

She knew she should adopt a better outlook and operate from a more hopeful place. After all, she'd learned long ago that negative thoughts led only to negative outcomes. But

no matter how hard she tried to conjure up her usual glass-half-full, rainbow-laden optimism, she couldn't run from her haunting dreams or the seemingly bad luck that was bearing down on her.

This was the second nightmare she'd had this month, and she could feel the heavy weight of her past pressing into her here and now.

Erica turned over again and shifted her body against her dampened Egyptian cotton sheets as she adjusted her purple gown, which now clung to her skin. She wiped her perfectly arched brow, thinking about how her frightful dreams were always accompanied by unsparing panic and horrid night sweats.

Whenever she felt stressed, unsure, anxious, or confused, the nightmares would return. Some nights she was chased through winding, narrow streets that never seemed to end. At other times she was hiding from faceless assailants whose footsteps nipped at her heels. And in her darkest, most alarming dreams, she was completely helpless and without a way to protect herself. Those were the dreams she feared most, like the one she'd just had—falling powerlessly from the sky without a soul to help save her.

But no matter the particulars of her dreams, the results were always the same; she was fighting for her life, awaking just in the nick of time to save herself from a fatal ending. It had been that way for the last twenty-five years, and it had all started the night of her tenth birthday.

After a whirlwind day of fun, laughter, and gifts that had been capped off with chocolate cake and vanilla ice cream to celebrate her first double-digit birthday, Erica and her family had settled in for the evening. A peaceful quiet rested over their large brick and stucco home as her mother finished cleaning the kitchen and her father read in his study. Erica and Nelson, her twelve-year-old brother, were walking upstairs to their bedrooms when they heard frightening sounds that froze their feet into place.

From out of nowhere, a thunderous crash of glass, followed by the terrifying sound of gunshots, sliced through the still night. What happened next raced by so fast that neither young Erica nor Nelson had time to react as they stood motionless, watching the violent scene unfold before their helpless eyes.

In the span of the few seconds that it took her mother to dial 911, Erica's father was shot twice after racing from his study to defend his family. But despite his wounds he managed to break the would-be thief's arm, bust open his nose and lip, and leave him a bloody mess before the man hastily limped away through the broken glass of their patio door to a getaway

car that had been parked down the street.

The intruder, a drug-hazed career criminal, was apprehended the very next day. Thankfully, Erica's father survived the brutal attack. It took months for the wounds to his right shoulder and upper abdomen to heal, but the emotional scars lingered with the family for long after. It was especially hard for Erica, a sensitive child who wore her emotions on her sleeve.

The violent home invasion had traumatized her on a day that had been otherwise filled with nothing but goodness.

Erica learned many things on that fateful night. She learned how strong and fearless her father was. How calm and levelheaded her mother was. How resilient and determined her brother was. And how painfully fragile she was. But most of all, she learned that no matter how wonderful your day started out, everything could change after the sun went down.