

Praise For National Bestselling Author Virna DePaul:

"DePaul is amazing!" –NYT Bestselling Author Lori Foster

"A gripping tale!...DePaul creates the perfect blend of danger, intrigue, and romance. You won't be able to put this book down!"

–NYT Bestseller Brenda Novak

"Sexy, suspenseful, and very, very smart. I couldn't put it down."

–Eileen Rendahl, national bestselling author

Overview of Shattered:

This novella is a prequel to *It Started That Night*, a Harlequin Romantic Suspense (Book 1706) launching in May 2012.

Lily Cantrell is an impulsive teenager with a crush on twenty-year-old John Tyler. When she finally decides to tell him how she feels, her well-meaning mother tries to stop her. What happens next breaks Lily's heart. But will Lily's tragic past with John be their only future?

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SHATTERED

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SHATTERED

**A Prequel Novella to
IT STARTED THAT NIGHT**

BY

VIRNA DePAUL

CHAPTER ONE

August 28
1:15 p.m.
Sacramento, California

At sixteen years old, Lily Cantrell was equal parts realist and dreamer. Both traits kept her walking despite her nerves and the triple-digit Sacramento heat. Ignoring her discomfort, she trudged up the long, aggregate driveway dividing Carmen's house from John's apartment. She stopped about two-thirds up and recalled with mixed emotion the first time she'd seen Tyler House.

She'd been ten years old and anxious to meet the new friend she'd heard so much about. When her mother had first pulled into the driveway, she'd known instantly that Carmen Tyler lived someplace special.

Wide-eyed and unblinking, she'd stared in awe at the dark green house with its huge wrap-around porch, stone accents, and stained glass windows.

She hadn't known the house was Mission style, that it was often spotlighted in the city's annual "Fabulous Forties" home tour, or that the five blocks separating their homes might as well have been five hundred miles considering the huge disparity in their socio-economic status.

She hadn't known her outspoken and vibrant mother was uncharacteristically quiet because she was nervous about seeing the mayor's wife again, and not because Lily had made them late when she'd spilled paint on their living room sofa.

And she hadn't known when Carmen ran out to meet her that her Calvin Klein jeans cost five times more than Lily's patched hand-me downs when they'd been new, or that she and Carmen would become the best of friends.

All she'd known was the sprawling home with its pretty potted flowers and towering shade trees felt comfortable, and that, besides missing her father, she could be happy staying there forever, playing with Carmen on the lush, green lawn and watching their mothers drink tea.

That had been before she'd seen John Tyler.

When John, Carmen's fourteen-year-old brother, had climbed out of an Olympic-sized pool, grinned with boyish charm, and tossed his wet hair like a dog getting out of a bath, she'd known with all the fervor of a ten-year-old dreamer that she was going to marry him someday. In her mind, she saw

herself all grown up, wearing her mother's simple white wedding dress with the lacy butterfly sleeves while her father walked her down the aisle looking handsome and proud in his uniform dress blues.

With the clarity and ignorance of a child, she'd been incapable of distinguishing what "was" from what "might be." It had taken her six long years to realize her dream of a future with John wasn't a foregone conclusion.

Sweating profusely, Lily finally reached the portico that stretched between Carmen's house and John's apartment. John's glossy black pick-up truck sat parked near his apartment door, with several moving boxes inside. For a moment, the past and the present, the knowing and wanting, the dreaming and wishing, converged.

So here I am, her inner realist announced. *Now what are we going to do?*

The dreamer inside her rallied back. *Back off, will you? I'm not an expert at love. I'm doing the best I can.*

Do better, the realist grumbled.

Barely controlling the urge to kick John's truck, Lily glanced at his apartment door. It was open. She heard the taunting words of Right Said Fred singing *I'm Too Sexy*. The knot of nerves in her chest swelled. Turning so fast she almost slipped, she speed-walked back the way she'd come.

At the bottom of the drive, Lily blinked her eyes to keep from crying. She hated her cowardice. Hated the way things had changed between them. Next to her mother and Carmen, John had always been her best friend. She didn't have to pretend when she was with him. She didn't have to be the cop's perfect daughter.

Lately, however, he'd started to avoid her. And when he couldn't do that he called her "small fry" or patted her head like she was closer to six than sixteen.

Think, she urged, pacing. What could she say? What could she do to make him stay when her own father had abandoned her?

Fury and pain rolled through her. She picked up a rock and threw it as hard as she could. It made a dissatisfying ping when it hit a tree and she stamped her foot. She still couldn't believe her father had betrayed them all. That he'd actually moved in with that witch Barb.

But what choice had her mom given him?

She bit her thumb then yanked it away when she realized what she was doing. *Don't think of Mom or Dad. Don't think of what you've lost. Think of what you can have.*

Think of John.

She closed her eyes and instantly pictured him in his neon green swim trunks. Wide grin. His fourteen-year-old body slick with moisture and so exposed that it had made her stutter and blush. Six years later, even the prospect of talking to him pushed composure and reason out of reach.

Dear God, what if she worked up the courage to tell him how she felt, but ended up stuttering again? She'd die.

No. Courage and action. That's what John said made dreams come true. She could act. And so what if she was scared out of her mind? She'd simply act brave, too.

Straightening her shoulders, she walked back to John's truck.

Heck, she wasn't a young kid anymore. Hadn't she taken that college art class with the nude models? She'd been embarrassed, but she'd wanted those three college credits. So she'd done what she'd needed to—

Lily's steps slowed when she saw John lifting several boxes into his truck. Barely able to breathe, she felt heat climb her cheeks.

John's muscles flexed and relaxed, rippling across his bare back and shoulders. Rivulets of sweat trailed down his torso, soaking the top of his jeans and drawing her eyes to his firm buttocks. He reached for a water bottle, downed most of it with several strong swallows, and then poured the remaining water down his back.

Feeling parched and dizzy, Lily licked her lips. The last thing on her mind was artistic technique. Instead of cataloging texture, shape, and color, she imagined it was *his* tongue that stroked hers lips. That it was his body, and not the sun, that warmed her hair. And that the boxes in his truck were *theirs*, not his, and she'd be going with him when he moved.

She must have made a noise because John suddenly tensed and turned around. For a moment, surprise and something else—something hot and life affirming—flashed in his eyes.

She'd seen that look before. Two months ago, when he'd come outside for a swim and seen her in her turquoise bikini.

His eyes had followed the line of her figure before coming to rest on her mouth. For one second, just before his eyes went blank, she'd seen a side of John she never had before. Something wild. Rough. Dangerous. It had made his eyes darken to a deep azure.

Breathing had become impossible. Her heart had thumped with fear, excitement, and triumph. She'd wanted to leap in the air and shout with glee.

He'd been attracted to her. He still was. But now, just like then, he tried to hide it.

"Hey, small fry." He moved to place another box into the truck.

Lily cleared her throat. *Courage and action.*

"I don't want you to leave," she blurted out.

John froze. At first, he refused to look at her. Then he sighed, put down the box, and turned to face her. Crossing his arms, he leaned back against the open gate of his truck. "It's time, Lily. I've put off my life for too long."

Confused, she frowned. "But you don't even know what you're going to do. What's in Seattle?"

He reached out and chucked her chin. "That's the whole point, small fry. I need to find out."

"But—"

"I want something that I'm not going to find here."

He let his words sink in, then turned away. She scrubbed at her face to wipe away the threat of tears.

I will not cry.

But it looked like her dream had been wishful thinking after all.

What a fool. She should have accepted a long time ago that John would never see her as girlfriend material. All his girlfriends had been blonde, with big breasts and long, long legs. Lily had none of those things.

Forcing herself to sound casual, she said, "Well, get ready to eat Top Ramen for awhile. I'm planning on ordering an appetizer, meal, and dessert tonight. And since you're feeding me, Carmen has convinced me to wear a dress. You won't even recognize me when you see me."

He faced her with an easy smile and a wink. "I certainly hope that's not true."

Grateful he seemed to be looking forward to the dinner he'd promised her and Carmen, Lily said, "I guess I'll go—"

"Did you ever talk to your mom about dinner?"

Unable to lie to his face, Lily looked away. "She knows I'm going out with Carmen—"

He sighed. "Lily—"

Anger dragged her eyes to his like a tractor beam. "You're moving away. I don't care if my mom says no. She and my dad have always—"

She stopped, but John's mouth twisted into a mocking smile. "They've always hated my guts. Maybe you should listen to them, Lily." He moved to pick up another box.

"No." Lily rushed to his side and grabbed his arm, gasping at the jolt of heat his sun-kissed warmth shot through her body. "They're wrong about you. Someday they'll realize that." She shook her head and dropped her hand. "Besides, I believe in you. That's all that matters. All my mom cares about is finding a stud to flaunt in front of my dad and his new wife. I don't even know them anymore." Staring at the ground, she kicked at a rock with her sneaker.

"They're just looking out for you, Lily."

"Right." She meant to snort, but somehow it came out as a whimper. She was losing the two most important men in her life. She could blame her mother for her father's absence, but John? He was leaving her of his own free will. "My mom's so angry all the time. *I'm* so angry. How could he leave us, John?"

To her surprise, John pulled her in for a hug. "I don't know, Lily. But people make mistakes. It doesn't change the fact he loves you."

Being in his arms, where she'd wanted to be for so long, was too much to take. The dam inside her broke with loud, shuddering sobs. She cried for broken dreams, and a reality that meant her parent's marriage was over and that a future with John would never even start. She cried until John's face creased with worry and he sprinkled several soft kisses on her forehead.

Eventually, however, her body couldn't sustain such prolonged torment. His tenderness soothed her. Her sobs quieted into the occasional hiccup and her tears dried. She snuggled into his chest, squeezed him tight, and felt comforted.

She waited several minutes before lifting her head. "You were right when you said I shouldn't trust anyone, John."

John frowned and rubbed a stray tear from her face. "I wasn't talking about your family, Lily. I was talking about the boy you met on the Internet. The homeless guy at the park."

"You meant family, too. Why else would you have told me about Stacy's uncle?"

Taking her by the shoulders, John gently shook her. "That's completely different, Lily."

She pulled away. "How? Her uncle betrayed his family. So did my father."

"Jesus," John hissed. "I told you that in confidence, Lily. To explain why Stacy lied about the drugs—"

“It’s just the two of us,” she protested. She glanced around, confirming no one had come outside to join them.

Releasing her, John closed his eyes and folded his hands around the back of his head, clearly telegraphing his disgust.

Her mouth trembled, and she reached out and touched his arm. “I’m sorry. Don’t be mad at me, John. Please.”

His eyes popped open and he dropped his arms. “I’m not mad at you, small fry. I just—what your father did was wrong, but you’ll get over it. You’re going to be fine.”

Without thinking about it, she launched herself at him, hugging him with an intensity that had long passed desperation. “You promise?”

“I promise.”

He smoothed back her hair and this time she was the one to close her eyes, but he didn’t give her long to enjoy the sensation. Tilting her chin up, he asked, “So you said your mom’s still dating. Is it the gym rat?”

She scowled. “Yes. The loser’s half her age.”

John grinned, making her heart cartwheel. “Really? Last time you said he was around 35. Your mom looks pretty good for 70.”

She giggled and buried her face in his chest, inhaling his clean scent. He rubbed his chin against her scalp and she responded by smoothing her thumb over his bare chest.

He tensed, but she didn’t stop. She held her breath and, as if hypnotized, watched her thumb trace progressively larger circles on his skin. Her thumb brushed against his nipple. He sucked in his breath. His hand shot up to grab her wrist and simultaneously push her away.

They stared at each other. The blood in her veins pounded in rhythm to a strange, primitive beat, swelling her heart with so much love that it could no longer be contained. “John, I—”

“Well, well, isn’t this a surprise. Hi, Lily.”

Lily jerked around at the intrusive female voice and John dropped her wrist. Helplessly, she watched as Stacy Mitchell, John’s steady girlfriend, walked up beside them and linked her arm possessively through his.

John smiled and slid his arm around Stacy’s Barbie-doll-sized waist. “Hey, babe.”

“Hey yourself, lover. Where’s my hello kiss?”

John bent down and placed a quick, soft kiss on her lips. Lily’s heart shriveled and tore in two.

“Lily and I were just talking about—”

Pressing her finger against John’s lips, Stacy shushed him. “I’ve got a surprise for you.”

Without even looking at Lily, John turned them both so his back was to her. “Oh yeah?” he murmured. “Is it something I’ll like?”

“What do you think?” Stacy reached up and hugged John tightly.

Her blond hair fell across her face, the golden strands complementing John’s dark hair and burnished skin yet somehow reminding Lily of the venomous leaves of a Venus flytrap. With a graceful tilt of her head, the curtain of hair shifted. Even as she stroked John’s neck, Stacy’s light green eyes glared at Lily and her smiling face transformed into one of vicious warning.

Back off, little girl, she mouthed.

2:30 p.m.

“So, did it get you off? Hearing me say her name while you were doing me?”

Arms trembling, breath heaving, John looked into Stacy’s eyes and knew they were over. Releasing the wrists he’d pinned high above her head, he pulled himself out and off of her. He stared at the slow whirl of the bedroom ceiling fan and wondered why the hell he never learned his lesson.

He’d been fifteen when he’d first had sex in the cramped backseat of Christina Montague’s Ford Mustang. *He’d* thought he was in love. *She’d* thought it’d be cool to bang the mayor’s son and report his performance to the senior prom committee. He’d gotten gold stars all around, but five years later he still couldn’t have sex without a woman ambushing him afterwards. Whether it was Christina wanting to use him or Stacy wanting him to love her and blaming Lily because he didn’t, they drove him away even as they tried to pull him closer.

Still, he fantasized about being able to let down his guard. About being snug deep inside a woman’s heat, mind numb, lungs heaving, body utterly spent from pleasuring them both, and falling asleep in her soft, fragrant arms while she stroked his hair.

It had never happened before and it wasn't going to happen now. Despite the two times he'd made her come, Stacy seemed determined to pick a fight.

"Answer me, damn you."

He covered his eyes with his arm and sighed. He longed desperately for a cigarette, but had given them up two years ago. "I'm not the one who keeps dragging her into bed with us, Stacy. Let it go, will you?"

The mattress bounced as Stacy sat up. She reached across him for her purse, dragging her heavy breasts against his chest. Distantly, his mind noted the tactile pleasure, but his dick failed to stir.

"I'll let it go when you admit the truth."

John pushed himself out of bed, grabbed his jeans from the floor, and shoved them on. The last person he wanted to think about when he was having sex was Lily Cantrell, yet Stacy had waited until he was furiously pumping towards release to rehash the same old argument.

Jesus, he was sick of it. Hands on hips, he turned to face her.

She was beautiful. Long blond hair that cascaded like a golden waterfall down her shoulders and back. Classic features and big, pale green eyes. She reminded him a little of Heather Locklear, only she was taller and more voluptuous. Not caring that it would tempt him, she took a cigarette out of her purse, lit it, sucked on the tip with full, pouty lips, and glared at him challengingly.

She was probably the most beautiful woman he'd ever seen outside of a magazine or the movies. A guy couldn't be blamed for wanting her, even if she could be petty and shallow. But her clingy possessiveness had gotten worse in the eight months they'd been together. She felt threatened by any female he talked to, particularly Lily.

She didn't like that John kept a scrapbook of Lily's artwork, one that tracked her progression from crude, child-like drawings to powerful, evocative paintings and sketches, or that he always carried the Cross pen, simply engraved with the words "For John. Love always, Lily," that she'd given him when he'd earned his two-year degree.

She didn't understand his affection for a girl who trusted him enough to let go of her self-contained, reticent mask to joke, and challenge, and yes, annoy him.

She didn't know that when he felt like shit, like no one in the world believed in him, not even himself, he could look at her art, or the pen she'd

given him, and remember the way she'd stared into eyes and said, "I believe you. I'll always believe you, John," and he'd feel better.

No, Stacy didn't get all that. Because he hadn't told her. And he never would. Bottom line, he didn't love her, he didn't trust her, and he'd known from day one that they wouldn't last.

Trying, really trying, John sat down beside her and smoothed his hand over her arm. "Listen, Stacy. How many times do I have to tell you? She's a kid. My sister's best friend. I've known her since she was ten. Hell, I was with Lily and Carmen when *we* met."

His mom had flaked on driving Carmen and Lily to the movies and they'd pestered him until he'd agreed to be their stand-in chauffeur. When he'd picked them up, he'd treated them to ice cream, not blinking an eye when sixteen-year-old Lily had ordered a banana split with extra hot fudge. Small and fine-boned, she never had to worry about dieting like most girls her age. Stacy, their waitress, had slipped him her number with the bill.

She knocked his hand away. "If she's just your sister's friend, why's she always hanging around you? Why don't you tell her to beat it?"

He shoved his fingers through his hair. "She's been going through a tough time with her parent's divorce. Hell, she adored her dad. Completely idolized him. His affair—"

"I don't care," she screamed. "I want the bitch to back off."

Fury tightened his muscles. He remembered how small and fragile Lily had felt in his arms earlier. The way her sadness and tears had made her shake so hard he'd feared she would break apart. He'd been so good about avoiding her, but he knew true emotional distance would come only once miles and miles separated them. Still, a familiar feeling of protectiveness rose within him. He gripped Stacy's arms, forcing himself to be gentle even though he wanted to shake her until her teeth rattled. "Watch it. She's sixteen years old and a sweet kid."

Ripping away from him, she rose and began struggling into her white jeans and purple top. "You can't even see it, can you? I don't care if you're four years older. She's in love with you. Even Aaron and Ivy know that."

John gritted his teeth, hating the idea that Stacy was airing their business to Lily's sister and her boyfriend. "If she is, it's a crush."

Dressed but for her shoes, Stacy whirled on him. With several strides of her long legs, she got close enough to jab him in the chest with a long, red nail. "You're not seeing her anymore. I mean it."

Narrowing his eyes, he grabbed her wrist and held it away from him. “Don’t. Don’t issue orders. I don’t take them from anyone and I’m not taking them from you.”

Her face crumpled as the fight drained from her body. With soft, jerky gasps, she cried. He knew it was manipulation. She cried whenever she didn’t get her way.

He couldn’t help comparing her soft cries to the jerky, uncontrollable sounds of pain that had racked Lily’s body. Sometimes he wanted to cry that way. Let out all his grief and anger and fear and desperation and then just move the fuck on.

He wanted it for himself. For the idealistic boy he’d been before grief and sheer stupidity had taken opportunities away from him. For Carmen, and Lily, and his mother. Especially his mother.

After his father had hung himself, Nora Tyler, not the most demonstrative person to begin with, had pulled even further inside herself. She now handled her life—her kids, her house, and, John imagined, her patients—with quiet, almost robotic, competence. She neither laughed nor cried. Yelled nor soothed. She smiled, but it was the same smile whether she was pissed or pleased with you.

For all her faults, at least Stacy cared enough to work up some emotion.

He stared down at her.

Even with Stacy, he’d failed to be the man he wanted to be. He should have ended their relationship a long time ago, but hadn’t wanted to give up the sex. Or the security. Having a girlfriend gave him just one more layer of protection when it came to staying away from Lily.

Once more, he felt the gentle stroke of Lily’s thumb against his nipple, so arousing and intense that she might as well have been caressing his dick instead of his chest. His face flushed as he felt himself harden. Mentally cursing, he shifted Stacy away from his erection.

For all his protests, Stacy was right. Lily had a crush on him. She had for a long time. But it was only recently, well after Stacy had first voiced her jealousy of Lily, that he’d realized the affection he’d always felt for his sister’s friend was morphing into something else. Attraction.

An intense, almost obsessive attraction that he hadn’t voiced to anyone. Hell, he’d barely even admitted it to himself. It had gotten so bad that just being around her gave him a raging hard on. Suddenly, the thing he’d cherished

most about being around Lily—the goodness she made him feel about himself—had given way to shame.

He knew she was too young. That there was no way in hell they could be together. Which is why he was leaving. Before he did something he'd regret forever.

No one. Not Stacy Mitchell. Not his mother. Not even Lily herself was going to make him change his mind.

John put his arm around Stacy's shoulders and murmured, "Let's not ruin our last few days together by fighting."

She peeked one eye out from his chest. "I can't believe you're leaving me. Why can't you just stay? Please stay."

He hugged her tighter. "I can't. I've stayed too long. I need to get out on my own. Find what I'm good at."

Prove I'm not like my old man. Even though I've already given people plenty of reason to think I am.

Stacy lifted her face and delicately wiped away the tears under her eyes. "Well, at least we'll have fun at the party tonight."

A grim sense of doom shot through him. "What are you talking about?"

She grinned. "That's the surprise I told you about. A going away party. I invited everyone. They'll be here at eight. If you're going to leave, you're leaving with a bang."

Shaking his head, John cupped her face and stared into her eyes. "Stacy, I'm supposed to take Carmen and Lily out tonight. I told you that."

She pressed her lips together. Quicker than should have been possible, tears once again flooded her eyes. "That's tonight? I thought you were taking them out tomorrow."

John gritted his teeth. "No. It was tonight."

"God, I'm sorry. What am I going to say to everyone? I already ordered the food. I'm such an idiot—"

Her obvious distress rattled him. "Shhh. Just calm down. We'll figure it out."

She jumped to her feet, hands on her hips. "How? You're going to be eating with those—those—"

"Stacy—" he said warningly.

"With those girls, and I'm going to be left with egg on my face."

Thinking quickly, he said, "We have reservations at seven. Maybe dinner will be fast."

“Slocum House is forty-five minutes away. What are you going to do, inhale dinner?”

John shoved his hands through his hair and rubbed his face. He’d promised them. Carmen would get over it, but Lily would be devastated. Hell, *he’d* be devastated. Staying away from her had been hard, but he’d told himself he’d have tonight’s dinner to soak her in. To make memories.

His own regret and longing made up his mind.

“I guess—I guess I’ll cancel dinner.”

Stacy looked thrilled. A little too thrilled. “Really?”

“Yeah.” He looked at the small clock beside his bed. The party started at eight. He had tons of time to finish packing. And maybe he wouldn’t wait two more nights to leave.

No, he decided. He’d leave in the morning.

The sooner the better. For everyone’s sakes.

CHAPTER TWO

5:25 p.m.

Lily stared at her reflection in the bathroom mirror and smiled tightly. The dark red lipstick gave her an erotically sinister air, which was just fine with her.

Stacy was going to regret throwing down that challenge.

After applying another layer of lipstick, Lily stood back and tried to see herself through John's eyes. She'd done exactly what the make-up lady said. She'd accented her cheekbones, lined her eyes, and glossed her lips. With a light but steady hand, she'd plucked and teased and brushed and curled herself from top to bottom. She'd approached her transformation with the same careful attention she gave her canvases. And the result was. . . incredible.

She looked good. Good in an older-than-sixteen way.

Good in a sexy, womanly way.

Only she didn't look like herself.

Is this what it takes to make him love me?

Suddenly, she wanted to puke. Clenching the vanity, she closed her eyes. Luckily, Carmen arrived.

"Oh my God, Lily," she squealed. "You look amazing."

Lily turned and smiled weakly at her best friend. "You think?"

Shaking her head, eyes wide with disbelief, Carmen said, "John would freak if he saw you looking like this. You could be Ivy's age."

"That's the idea, silly."

Doubt flickered across Carmen's face and she bit her lip. "I was just thinking, maybe you should hold off telling John how you feel."

"Hold off? He's leaving in two days."

"Actually, I—I think he's leaving tomorrow morning. And I think you should let him."

Shell-shocked and more than a little weak in the knees, Lily slowly sat down on her bed. "Why are you saying this?"

Carmen shifted her weight from one foot to the other, calling attention to her jeans.

"We're still having dinner, aren't we?"

Slowly, Carmen shook her head.

Lily's heart spasmed and turned to lead, the burden of carrying it so massive that she instinctively clutched at her chest. She wondered if this was how a heart attack felt. "But—but why? And if something important came up, why didn't he call me himself?"

Her friend wouldn't look at her. She stared at the carpeted floor, her brown curly hair falling in wild corkscrews over her eyes. "He was going to. But I asked him to let me tell you. I knew you'd be upset."

"It's because of Stacy, isn't it?"

"She said she forgot the dinner was tonight. She planned a going away party for him at eight and John said he couldn't cancel the party without screwing up a bunch of people's plans."

Lily leaped to her feet. "But it's okay to screw up ours? That bitch. I can't believe John would let her—"

"Come on, Lily. What else could he do? He has sex with her. Remember what Luke told me? Men lose the power to think when they're turned on."

Lily squeezed her eyes shut and covered her ears with her hands. "Stop. Please."

Not fair. It's not fair. It was all I had left. A dark misery flowed through her and she instinctively tightened her abdomen, trying to push it away. She knew that if she let it, the darkness would eat her alive.

"Come on, Lily. I don't want you to get hurt. Even if he's attracted to you—"

"You know he is. And it's not just attraction. It's love. He even took on my father for me."

Carmen's eyes widened. "Standing up to your dad was the right thing to do. He'd have done that for anyone.

Denial clogged her pores, allowing the darkness to spread farther inside her. Flushing, she crossed her arms. "That's not true." Even her own mother had been afraid of her father that night. Her father had forbade her to see John. When he'd caught John walking her home and had grabbed her wrist to pull her inside, John hadn't liked it. He'd stood up to her father. And her father had actually backed down.

"He's leaving Stacy, too," Carmen reminded her. "And me. But he's still going to visit. You'll have plenty of time to—"

"No. That's not good enough. You know he doesn't love her. Not the way he loves me. Didn't he give me his last graduation ticket instead of Stacy?"

"Yes, but—"

“And didn’t he remember that *Rent* was my favorite musical and work overtime so he could take us to see it for Christmas last year?”

Her voice cracked, a glaring indication of her pain, and Carmen whispered, “Yes.”

“He’s always buying me art supplies. He hand-carved a frame for the painting I gave you last year. He held my head over the toilet on your eleventh birthday when I went on that crazy roller coaster and got sick. He—he even spent days reading to me in the hospital when you were away at camp and I had to have my appendix removed when I was fourteen, remember? He read me Jane Austen, for goodness sake—” Her voice rose higher and higher as she tried to convince Carmen, convince *herself*, that John loved her.

Carmen grabbed her shoulders and shook her. “I know, Lily. But the fact is, he’s still leaving, whether he loves you or not. Get. Over. It.”

The blunt words were the last straw. Lily raced into the bathroom and braced her arms on the counter. She took several deep breaths and struggled to understand why her world had once more turned upside down. “I’m beginning to wonder if John cancelled dinner tonight because of Stacy or because of you.”

Stunned silence followed, but Lily refused to look at her friend. “Maybe you just don’t want a girl with a working-class background to be with your brother,” she spat.

“How can you say that?” Carmen whispered.

Closing her eyes, Lily ignored Carmen’s pain. She struck out, wanting to make Carmen feel even worse. “No wonder your mom never wants to spend any time with you, Carmen, if this is the kind of friend you’ve turned out to be.”

Carmen swiftly inhaled, then responded, low and steady. “I’m going to forgive you for saying that because I know you’re hurting right now. When you’re ready to apologize, call me. Until then, I don’t want to talk to you.”

As Carmen left, Lily kept her eyes closed. Tears seeped out anyway and she fought the urge to run after her. She was losing everyone she cared about one by one.

A tortured sound, like the moan of an animal in pain, echoed around her. She opened her eyes, expecting to see a monster sneaking up behind her. Instead, *she* was the monster. Her face, covered in a mask of garishly streaked black mascara and blood-red lipstick, appeared oddly still, like the mannequins she and Ivy had seen at the Wax Museum in Fisherman’s Wharf.

Resolutely, she reached for a jar of cold cream, smoothed cream on her face, and wiped it away with a tissue. Then she began reapplying her make up.

7:50 p.m.

Lily glanced at her watch again, then at her bedroom phone. She'd dialed the first six digits of Carmen's phone number at least a dozen times, but had hung up before completing the call. What could she say to her friend? She'd been a bigger bitch than even Stacy. And that was saying a lot.

With a sigh, she picked up the receiver and dialed Carmen's number again. "Hi, Carmen," she breathed when the answering machine beeped. "It's me, Lily. Your former best friend? Well, uh, I just wanted to say I'm sorry. You know I love you. I just—I just got all crazy, thinking of John moving. Anyway, call me. I'm sorry, Carmen. I swear."

She hung up, then glanced at her watch again. She'd deliberately waited until close to eight, hoping that if other guests arrived, she'd have half a chance of talking to John without Stacy there. For a moment, she wondered if she should just stay home. Wait until Carmen called back. Or maybe she and her mom could—

Remembering her mother's date, she fell back on the bed and stared at the ceiling. Her mom had probably already left, so if she didn't go, she'd be stuck here with nothing to do but think of John with Stacy. That would be unbearable. Pulling herself up to a sitting position, she reached down and slipped on her high heels. She didn't want her mom dating—what teenage girl did—but at least she wouldn't have to deal with her.

Rushing downstairs, she refused to look at the bare wall that had once displayed photos of her parents' wedding. When she heard the clatter of dishes and music coming from the kitchen, she held her breath, quickened her steps, and moved silently toward the front door. Two more feet and she'd be home free. She'd almost made it, but then her mother stepped out of the kitchen.

"Hi, honey."

Lily froze.

"Wow, you look great." She gestured to Lily with a small, uncomfortable laugh.

Her mother looked better. A sexy woman, not a girl pretending to be one. Hurt and resentment shuddered through her. “Is that dress for him?” Lily asked.

Her mother’s eyes flickered with impatience. “His name is Mason, Lily. And how many times do I have to tell you, we’re just dating. Unlike your father,” she snapped, “I don’t plan on remarrying.”

Lily rolled her eyes. “Whatever,” she murmured. She opened the door, but her mother’s palm slapped against it, slamming it shut.

“Where are you going?”

“Nowhere. I’m going to see Carmen—”

Her mother grabbed her arm and whipped her around.

Lily gasped at the sharp bite of fingernails pinching her bare skin.

“I saw Carmen leave over an hour ago. You think I don’t know you’re going to see him? Dressed like a—a—?”

Lily glared at her. “Dressed like what? Like you?” Her gaze fastened on the delicate chain around her mother’s neck. “Why do you even wear the necklace Dad gave you? Doesn’t it bring up bad memories when you’re dressing to impress your date?”

“I’m an adult. You’re a child. If you go over there looking like this, he’ll think you want to have sex with him.”

Lily jerked her arm out of her mother’s grasp. “Maybe that’s what I want.”

Her mother’s eyes widened. “Are you crazy? You’re sixteen years—” Looking more tired than she ever had, she closed her eyes and rubbed her temple.

Lily blinked back the sting of tears. “You don’t understand. I love him, Mom,” she whispered. “Why can’t you just be happy for me?”

Her mother stiffened and opened her eyes. “Damn it, Lily. I don’t have time for this right now.”

The pain almost floored her. Her mother never had time anymore. No time to talk about her father. No time to ask Lily what *she* wanted before making life-altering decisions. “Then go, Mom. I’m not stopping you.”

Once again, her mother gripped her arms. “Listen to me. John Tyler is not who you think he is.”

“I don’t want to discuss this again. He’s not a bad guy. When are you and Dad going to accept that?”

“I loved him, too, you know. He was an adorable little boy. But he changed after his father died. They all did.” She finally let go of Lily’s arms and stepped back. “You’re not going and that’s final.”

Lily clenched her fists and her body trembled. “So that’s it? You say no, and we all have to live with it. Just like with Dad. . .”

“Your father made his own decision.”

“He didn’t want to leave. You made that decision for all of us. He wants to move back. He wants to be with us—”

“And what about his new wife?” She laughed, but it bordered on a cry. “You think she’ll let him? You think I should? For God’s sake, Lily, grow up.”

Lily flinched. “Then let me grow up.” She moved fast, opening the front door before her mother could stop her.

Her mother tried to grab her again.

Lily dodged.

“Lily! Get back here. You’re not—”

“Enjoy your date, Mom,” she spat over her shoulder. “Maybe you’ll actually be able to hang on to this one.”

Her mother lunged after her, yanked her back, and slapped her across the face.

The sting traveled straight to Lily’s heart, threatening to shatter it completely. She clutched her heaving chest, trying to suck in air but only managing to make herself dizzy.

Her mother recoiled, horrified. “Oh, Lily, I’m so sorry. I didn’t mean to—”

“It’s your fault,” Lily whispered. “You’re the reason he left us.”

Her mother shook her head. “No—”

“He couldn’t wait to get away from you.”

“You don’t know, Lily. You don’t understand—”

“He hates you.” She backed up into the cold night, moving farther down the walkway while her mother watched. “I hate you, too.”

She whirled around and ran towards the park, her high heels clanking against the cement sidewalk. Her ankle twisted under her, but she kept going. The night air made her lungs sting, but she ignored it. Her mind was focused on just one thing.

John.

She needed to get to John.

CHAPTER THREE

8:15 p.m.

Amid a flurry of backslapping and drink raising, John wound his way through the small crowd gathered in his living room. He wasn't fooled for a minute. He barely knew most of these people and they could care less where he was going or why. They were here for Stacy or beer or pot.

And that included Lily's sister, Ivy, and her boyfriend, Aaron, who'd just arrived. Tensing, he remembered Stacy saying they knew about Lily's crush. He looked at Stacy, who was across the room. Frowning, he saw her handing out more joints.

Damn it, he'd told her to cut that out, but she hadn't listened to a thing he'd asked her tonight, so why should that be any different? Aware that the potential for trouble loomed just beneath the surface, he cut over to Ivy and Aaron.

If Stacy saw Aaron, she might start mouthing off about Lily. Not only would John feel compelled to defend Lily, but Aaron might feel compelled as well. Or worse yet, Stacy would say something disparaging about Lily to Ivy. Whether Stacy realized it or not, Ivy wouldn't take kindly to any slights against her sister. He wouldn't wish Ivy Cantrell's wrath on his worst enemy.

He forced a smile when Aaron raised his palm in a high-five. John slapped it. "Thanks for coming."

"Of course. Wouldn't miss it."

Ivy assessed John with a cool stare, and he actually shuffled his feet. "I'm going to say hi to Stacy, but we won't be here long. You'll take care of things, Aaron?"

"You bet, babe."

When Ivy left, Aaron jerked his chin toward the front door. "Can I have a word?"

They went outside and John glanced at the darkened windows of the main house. Even though he'd told her he was leaving in the morning, his mother had decided to spend the night in Fairfield with Carmen. She'd said she wanted to see a client in San Francisco early the next morning, but John knew she just hadn't wanted to be around when his friends came by. She'd probably

suspected there'd be drinking, maybe even drugs, and hadn't wanted to deal with it.

"What's wrong with you? You look like someone just stole your favorite toy?"

John swallowed, then schooled his features into a cool expression. "I'm anxious to leave."

"Hmmm. We were surprised when Stacy called today. Ivy said Lily's been talking about tonight for weeks."

Aaron was average height, with brownish hair and brown eyes that should have been just as average. They weren't. He looked like a charmer, a preppy, young over-achiever who could be a shark of a lawyer during the day, and still be part boy-next-door, part bad-boy for his wife. Aaron was exactly the kind of guy Lily should marry when she grew up. The thought literally made him ill. So did Aaron's words. "What do you mean Stacy called today? Didn't she invite you awhile ago?"

"Nope. As far as I know, this party was a last minute thing. Ivy wasn't very happy you blew Lily off for this party."

"I'll make it up to her," John gritted, amazed he could still be surprised by Stacy's deception.

"How about giving me your two joints, then?" Grinning, Aaron clarified, "Ivy's gonna let me go all the way tonight. I wanna have a stash for before and after."

John reached into his pocket. "Help yourself. But tell Ivy I didn't mean to hurt Lily. I don't want her spreading stuff that's not true." He handed Aaron the joints.

"Wow," Aaron murmured. "You're actually in love with her, aren't you?"

John snorted. "You've been smoking too much weed. Look, I'm not stupid. I know Lily's too young. I'm still leaving tomorrow." Then, not sure why, not even realizing he was going to say it, John murmured, "Maybe someday, who knows? Maybe we'll each get our chance with a Cantrell girl."

Aaron looked as surprised as John felt.

I believe in you. That's all that matters.

If only Lily's words were true.

"Oh shit." Aaron stared over John's shoulder and John whirled around. From out of the darkness, Tina Cantrell, Lily's mother, marched up the walkway toward them. She was dressed to go out, her long dark hair long and loose, her beautiful figure highlighted in blue silk.

Aaron swallowed, “Mrs. Cantrell—”

“I want to talk to John, Aaron. Get Ivy. I’m taking her home.”

“But—”

“Now,” Tina gritted, steel in her eyes.

Aaron winced. “Yes, ma’am.” He scuttled inside.

Tina turned on John. “Where is she? Where are you hiding her?”

John frowned. “What are you talking about?”

“Lily. I know she’s here.”

This close, John could see the panic on Tina’s face. His breath left him so fast he felt disoriented. “I haven’t seen Lily since early this afternoon. What happened?”

For a moment, Tina looked terrified. “Check the party. Please check.”

John didn’t hesitate. He lurched inside and searched the small apartment, including his bedroom, where a guy he didn’t know and two girls he did were busy amusing themselves. He rushed back to the living room only to find Tina Cantrell standing in the doorway. Ivy and Aaron were nowhere to be seen. When John shook his head, Tina rushed outside.

John followed. “What happened?” When she kept moving, his hand shot out and grabbed her wrist, pulling her to a stop. “Tell me, please.”

Jerking away, she turned on him. She was practically shaking. “I—we got in a fight. Because she wanted to see you.” She covered her mouth with both hands as if she were in imminent peril of losing part of herself. Lowering her hands, she smiled bitterly. “She’s always loved you, John. But Lily’s a good girl. Too good for you. If you care about her at all, if she comes here, send her home and stay the hell away from her.”

John could barely swallow past the lump in his throat. “I love her, too, you know. I’d never hurt her. I’d die to protect her.”

Her expression softened with sympathy but not acceptance. “Then you know how I feel.” She got into her car but didn’t close the door. “Let me put it this way. If you ever come near her again, I’ll tell Lily’s father what I saw here. Drinking. Drugs. I’ll even tell him I interrupted a drug sale between you and another kid. Do you understand me?”

Instead of answering, John took several slow steps backward. Her obvious disdain was nothing new, but somehow it got under his skin. With each step, he felt a rush of cold climb his body until the chill arrowed into his heart and spread.

John flinched. The cold shuddered through him in long, blanketing waves now. Nonetheless, he saluted her, certain she'd never see the way his hand shook. "Don't worry, Mrs. Cantrell. If Lily comes here, I'll be sure to send her home. I promise."

8:45 p.m.

John sat in front of his house as the sounds of the party inside drifted toward him. He closed his eyes, trying to find comfort in the darkness. Instead, he felt trapped, unable to forget Tina Cantrell's parting words.

Lily's a good girl. Too good for you. If you care about her at all, send her home and stay the hell away from her.

John opened his eyes and faced the truth.

Lily's mother was right.

Sixteen to his twenty, Lily had her whole life ahead of her and their friendship had already caused a rift between her and her parents, one that had only widened once her father had left. John didn't want to be the cause of further sorrow for her. Despite how he felt about her—despite the fact he wanted more and so did she—it couldn't happen. His leaving town tomorrow would be a fresh start for both of them. He didn't even know what he was going to do for money, but he had a friend in Seattle he could crash with for—

He heard footsteps. For a moment, he wondered if Lily's mom had returned, but then she came into view.

Lily.

Even though he'd been forewarned, the shock of seeing her here, now, almost brought him to his knees.

The house lights cast her in a dim, almost surreal glow. His eyes immediately took in her loose hair, and the simple black dress that cinched her unbelievably tiny waist and revealed her pale arms and legs. She'd rimmed her eyes in black makeup that made their faintly exotic tilt even more mysterious. Her mouth was tinted red.

Lord, she was beautiful. He'd known she had a crush on him, but neither one of them had ever acknowledged it. He'd wanted to. Sometimes he'd felt desperate to take her love and give her his in return. But thankfully he'd never done so. She was still innocent, unsullied by his choices and reputation.

He jerked his chin at her and clenched his fists. “A little late for you to be out, isn’t it? Carmen’s not—”

Lily ran toward him and threw her arms around his neck. Automatically, he wrapped his arms around her to steady them both.

“I’m not here for Carmen.”

10 p.m.

Tina Cantrell sighed with relief when she pulled up to the house and saw the light on in Lily’s room. She got out of her car, slammed the door, and ran up the walkway. Thank God, she thought, wiping the tears from her face. Thank God she’d come home.

The fight had been all her fault. She’d handled it wrong. She’d known Lily had been pulling away from her, but she’d been so focused on her own pain that she’d let her family suffer. “No more,” she whispered.

No more.

She opened the door and immediately heard music coming from the kitchen. Following it, she recognized the soulful wail of a saxophone. Kenny G. was one of Lily’s favorite artists. The kitchen, however, was empty and she realized she’d left the radio on. Bowls and pans cluttered the counters. The apples she’s been cutting for Lily’s dinner had browned. Rotted. She swallowed, remembering all the dinners she’d cooked for her family. For Doug. Her stomach turned.

Whirling, she ran up the stairs and turned the corner. Lily’s door was cracked open. “Lily,” she called as she approached the room, then pushed the door open. “Lily, I’m sorry. I want to talk to you—”

She saw him standing next to Lily’s open dresser. Saw the small scraps of fabric he rubbed against his face. She gasped.

He jerked around. Tried to disguise shock with innocence. “It’s not what you think.”

“How did you get in here? What are you doing?”

“Let me explain.”

Tina blinked back tears. She thought of John Tyler’s impassioned statement that he’d die to protect Lily. She had no doubt he’d kill to do it, too. Just like she wanted to kill the man in front of her.

She stepped forward, but the man blocked her, looking bigger than he ever had. Fear shivered through her. “Get out,” she whispered.

He didn’t budge.

“Get out. Get out!” she screamed. She didn’t want to see his face. What would she say to Lily? To—

“Let me explain.”

Tina shook her head and backed out of the room. She turned and raced down the stairs.

“Where are you going?”

“To call the police, you fucking pervert.” She headed for the kitchen and grabbed the phone. “God, what’s wrong with you?”

As she started dialing the number, she saw a flash of movement from the corner her eye just before he hit her. She stumbled back, then shook her head, trying to clear it. Trying to accept that he’d actually hit her.

She swayed on her feet. “Bastard, I’ll kill—”

He hit her again, then again until fear washed over her.

No. No. Not like this.

Her daughters. Her daughters needed her. She couldn’t leave them. She had to protect them.

Tasting blood, she tensed her muscles to run again. To fight again. But then she saw it. The glint of steel.

In slow motion, she saw the blade shift back, then shoot forward. She heard the crazed scream that accompanied the blur of movement. And then she felt the knife pierce her chest, sliding into her flesh so cleanly that it took a beat before pure agony ripped through her.

He jerked the knife out of her, only to slice at her again. Then again.

She tried to block the blows, but the knife simply stripped the skin on her arms. She tried to turn, but she smacked against the wall again, the force sending another round of fiery pain through her body. She tried to scream, but only gurgling, gasps of air came out.

Trapped between the wall and her assailant, she clawed at the wall as she crumpled to the floor. Again and again her body jerked, but she was barely aware of the knife now.

She heard a voice. Peered past her attacker with bloody, glazed eyes. And saw a second shadowy figure appear behind the first.

A figure she recognized.

CHAPTER FOUR

August 29

12:45 a.m.

John's little apartment was trashed. The smell of pizza and beer and other things made him dizzy, and all he wanted was for the last few stragglers to leave. Especially his ex-girlfriend, Stacy.

Tormented by the hurt look on Lily's face before she'd run away from him, John nudged Stacy toward her roommate. "But I don't wanna go, Johnny. I wanna shtay here with you."

Patting her arm, he passed her into her roommate's arms along with twenty bucks. "The cab's waiting. Here's enough for the fare and tip."

"Hey! Where's the party?"

Three men John vaguely recognized jogged up the walkway. Gritting his teeth, he blocked the doorway. "Sorry," he said, although his tone telegraphed the opposite sentiment. "Party's over."

One of the men punched another in the chest. "I told you we shouldn't have stopped."

His friend rubbed his arm. "Like you didn't want to know why there were cop cars swarming down the block!"

It was unsettling how fast John thought of Lily. He lunged and grabbed the guy's shirt. "What are you talking about?"

Eyes wide, the guy jerked his thumb in the direction of Lily's street. "We—we saw some cop cars in front of a house. A murder, it sounded like. The neighbors said the Cantrells lived there."

John released him with a shove and started running. He ran as if his life was in danger. He ran faster than he'd ever run in his life.

Heart pumping, John's legs wobbled every time his feet hit concrete. He pushed himself to go faster, ignoring the terror stiffening his muscles and hitching his breath.

She's fine. He doesn't know what he's talking about. She's fine.

But when he turned the corner to her street, he knew Lily wasn't fine. Three police cars were parked haphazardly in front of the house. An ambulance. A white van imprinted with the word Coroner in large, block

letters. Yellow tape bordered the front walk, keeping out the crowd that had gathered there.

Guilt flooded through him. If he hadn't messed with her feelings, she wouldn't have run off. Had he put her in danger? Had she been hurt because of him? John stumbled, moving forward, pushing through the crowd and shouting Lily's name.

A uniformed cop grabbed at his arm, but he jerked away and dodged around him.

Relief washed over him when he saw her. She was sitting on the front stoop, her eyes dull and vacant, her body painfully frail under an oversized long-sleeved shirt and sweats. "Lily!"

She didn't look up at his call, but the cop standing next to her did. He rushed forward and planted himself on the sidewalk, blocking John's view of Lily.

"I'm sorry," he said, not sounding sorry at all, "but you need to leave."

John craned his neck and caught sight of Lily's father standing just inside the doorway. Their eyes locked and John instinctively flinched. Fear. Grief. Anguish. There were no words to describe the other man's torment. Blood stained the foyer's white walls.

"Lily!" He tried to push past the cop standing in his way only to be shoved back.

"Knock it off, or I'm going to have to take you in."

Mindless with worry, John tried to dodge to the left, grunting when the cop got him in a choke hold. "Lily," he gasped, needing to know. "Is she hurt?"

The cop shook John's head like a maraca. "She's not hurt. But she's in shock. Now ease up, man. You are going to back off. Do we understand each other?"

John's panic subsided just a hair. "Yeah," he breathed. "Okay."

Slowly, the cop loosened his grip. "What's your name?"

"My name is John Tyler. We're—we're friends."

Before the cop could respond, an EMT jostled by them and guided Lily to her feet. He led her down the walkway toward the ambulance, passing within two feet of John.

Lily walked slowly, almost robotically. She stared straight ahead. Didn't acknowledge him in any way.

All John could think about was her declaration of love and the way he'd thrown it back at her earlier that evening. "Lily," he murmured. She stopped.

John held his breath, waiting for her to speak. Scream. Cry. Anything.

Tentatively, he reached out and touched her face, surprised when the cop didn't stop him. "Lily. It's John. Are you okay?"

He saw a flare of recognition in her eyes just before she reached out and slapped him.

Staggering back, John felt someone grab his arm to steady him.

Grief flashed in Lily's eyes. And then there was nothing.

The EMT walked her to the ambulance and helped her in. Her father quickly followed. John watched the ambulance drive away, then collapsed to his knees. In his peripheral vision, he once more saw blood. Then he threw up.

About an hour later, John found himself sitting in a police interrogation room for the third time in three years. Technically, this was the first time he was here voluntarily since they hadn't arrested him, but no one was acting like it.

"Listen, punk. You've got a record, and you expect me to believe that girl just slapped you because she saw you kissing your girlfriend?" Detective Isaac Cornerstone glanced at Officer Pendelton and burst out laughing, his white teeth flashing beneath his skimpy blonde mustache.

"I have an arrest record," John began, "but—"

His face turning grim, Cornerstone slammed his palms on the table, making John jump. "Her mother had just been brutally murdered. Stabbed over twenty times. I think it's more likely she thinks you did it. What, did you and the mom have a thing going?"

"No," John shouted, trying to block the picture of all that blood. Tina Cantrell's blood. "I told you, I'm a friend. She was in shock. She probably didn't even know it was me."

"Oh, she knew it was you all right. Didn't she, Max?"

Pendelton averted his eyes. "Uh, like I said, she was pretty out of it. I can't really say—"

The door to the interrogation room burst open. A flushed, overweight man in a nauseating green suit lumbered in. "We've got something. A transient the

neighbors have seen hanging around the house. A squad car just picked him up. They're bringing him in."

Cornerstone jerked a thumb at John. "What about lover boy, here?"

The guy in the green suit shook his head. "His mom's here. She brought an attorney with her. And his girlfriend. She says she can vouch for his whereabouts. That he was with her all night at some kind of going-away party. She said the vic showed up looking for her daughter, but left after a few minutes. He stayed."

Tweaking his mustache, Cornerstone glared at John. Then he dismissed him as easily as a squashed fly. Grabbing his jacket, he jerked his chin toward the door. "Come on, Pendelton. Let's get ready for the transient."

Feeling disoriented by the speed at which things were moving, John scrambled to his feet. "Wait! How is she? How's Lily?"

Cornerstone rushed out the door without a backward glance. Pendelton hesitated and looked at John. "She's okay. I called the hospital and checked. Her father and sister are with her."

"The transient. I might know—"

"Pendelton, get your ass over here," Cornerstone shouted. Pendelton jumped to obey him.

Turning to the guy in the green suit, John tried again. "If it's the same homeless man I've seen around the park, Lily knows him. She felt sorry—"

The detective dragged him outside. John pulled away. "Wait, I'm—"

Starting to look pissed, the man thrust his face in John's. "Listen. I know she's your friend. I'm sorry. We had to check out your story. It checked out. Now you can go home. We've got your information if we need to talk to you."

"But—"

"Thank your lucky stars we found that transient. He's said enough to support an arrest. We'll get him to confess to the whole thing, don't you worry about that."

"John."

John's head jerked up at the quiet whisper.

His mother stood next to a sobbing Stacy and a bald man he'd never seen before. Absently, he noted it must be the attorney. For a moment, relief swept through him. This was the woman who'd coddled him when he was a child. He gravitated toward her, but the closer he got, the slower his steps became. He stopped several feet away and stared in her eyes.

He sucked in a breath, not wanting to accept what he saw there.

Disgust. Disappointment.

And doubt.

John didn't say a word to her. He let her talk to the police and the attorney. He let her drive him to Tyler House. And then when he got there, he kissed Carmen goodbye while she slept, got in his car, and drove away, vowing never to come back.

CHAPTER FIVE

October 16

4 p.m.

Napa, California

John drove his truck up the winding Napa road, trying to concentrate on the sound of Kenny G's sax even as he gripped the steering wheel with almost desperate pressure. Taking one hand off the wheel, he patted at his jacket pocket until he located the Cross pen Lily had given him. He traced it with his finger for only a second, but it was enough to make him breathe easier.

He glanced over at the passenger seat where a pale Carmen sat tugging at her wild hair. She tried smiling when she caught him looking at her, but she barely tilted the corners of her mouth before they turned down again. His once light-hearted sister rarely smiled anymore. She struggled to overcome the effects of that horrible August night just as much as he did.

He took her hand. "It's okay, Carmen. She'll be glad to see you." Him, he wasn't so sure. The grief and horror of that night wrapped around him like the stalks of kudzu he'd read about in Tennessee Williams's novels, weighing him down until he thought he'd go mad.

He almost had.

After a long, sleepless drive, he'd pulled into Seattle and moved into his room—if he could call still living out of his boxes moving—and gotten a job as a Fed Ex delivery guy. Every night, he'd drank himself into a stupor until he could fall asleep. It was only after he'd heard Chris Hardesty had been formally charged with Tina Cantrell's murder and Carmen confirmed that Lily was making progress that he'd forced himself to clean up his act.

He hadn't asked anyone's permission to see Lily. Well, no one but Carmen, who regularly visited her on Wednesday afternoons.

"This is it."

John slowed and pulled into a long driveway that led to a large gold building with white pillars. Ravenswood Rehabilitation Clinic looked more like a country club than a private psychiatric hospital. At least that's what he thought until he stepped inside. Even the fancy furniture and unobtrusive staff

couldn't mask the smell of antiseptic and sickness. He hesitated when his stomach rolled.

Carmen spoke with someone behind a desk, then walked back to him. She reached out and grabbed his hand. "Come on. Let's see if she'll say anything this time." Letting her lead the way, he followed her past several doorways until she came to a large sunny room toward the back of the building.

Lily was sitting in a large stuffed chair with hardwood legs by the window, the sun shining on her pale, drawn face. John stumbled when he saw her cheekbones and collar bone jutting against her tight skin. So small to begin with, she looked emaciated, too weak to move let alone lift a fork of food to her mouth. But she wasn't trying to eat at the moment. She just sat, staring out at the green hills and carpet of heather visible through the glass.

Nearby, people played board games. One read. None of them paid attention to Lily or her visitors.

"She looks good today," Carmen said.

John stared at her blankly. "Good," he repeated.

Carmen squeezed his hand. "Sometimes she stays in bed all day. It's good that she's sitting up." Dropping his hand, she walked swiftly toward Lily. "Lily," she called softly.

Sucking in his breath when Lily turned her head in Carmen's direction, John stumbled forward. Hope swelled within him. He just wanted to talk to her. To touch her.

Even he couldn't have guessed how much he'd missed her. Looking into her beautiful brown eyes now, however, John frowned. She didn't seem to recognize Carmen. She simply stared at her, a slight furrow between her brows.

With feminine ease, Carmen chatted about her week. Several minutes and stories later, with still no visible response from Lily, Carmen waved to John.

John stiffened. He was shaking, he realized. A hot sting burned behind his eyes and he raised his hand to his face, vaguely surprised when it came back wet.

"—drove up all the way from Seattle to see you, Lily. Isn't that great? He'd have been here a lot sooner, but—well, I asked him to wait." Leaning dramatically closer to Lily, she half-whispered, "I knew you'd want to look your best before he saw you."

John walked up to her chair. Lily didn't take her eyes from Carmen. He knelt down next to her, touched her yellow sweater, and said, "Hey, small fry. I've missed you."

She made that funny little frown again and slowly turned her head. Then she stared at him. And stared. And stared.

He talked. He told her how sorry he was for what had happened that night. Since he'd never told Carmen about her kiss or his promise, he spoke in generalities, but the emotion was in his voice. If only she could hear it. He grasped her hand and bowed his head in her lap, rubbing her soft skin against his cheek.

"I miss you, Lily. I'll visit more. You'll get better. I promise I'll be here for you. I promise."

His head jerked up when her fingers twitched, then curled around his. Staring into eyes devoid of warmth or expression, he barely noticed when Carmen touched his shoulder. "John, she's shaking—"

John glanced down at their joined hands. She was shaking, so hard that their hands bounced in her lap. Her tennis shoes knocked against the legs of her chair. Even her teeth rattled.

"Lily, no—" he whispered in horror, feeling transported back to that terrible night on her front walk way. They'd taken her away from him then, and he knew they'd do it again. But she needed him. Would want him here.

I love you.

I'll always believe you.

Promise?

She released his hand and grabbed for her throat. Mouth gaping open, she tried to suck in air, but rough wheezing noises indicated she wasn't getting any. Jesus, was she having a seizure?

"Get someone," he snapped at Carmen.

John grabbed Lily shoulders, shuddering when he saw the way her pupils dilated, swallowing all traces of softness from her eyes until the irises were big black holes, making her look demonic. "Baby, please—" he choked out.

She groaned. A low tortured moan.

He winced. "Lily—"

Several hands shoved him back. A large African-American woman in a white uniform took his place in front of her. "Hey, Lily bug, what's going on?"

Another moan escaped her, long and tormented. He shifted several steps to the side, and her eyes tracked him. She was staring at him. No one else. Not the nurse in front of her.

Him.

She shrieked, a sudden piercing wail of pain that made him stagger back.

She did it again.

Then again.

A hand fell on his shoulder. “John, you need to leave.”

Unable to believe his ears, John slowly turned his head.

His mother. What the hell was his mother doing here?

“What—?”

The nurse yelled at him. “Get out. Leave. She’s reacting to you.”

Still staring at his mother, John wanted to refuse. He didn’t want to go. Shaking his head, he choked out, “Mom, I need to—”

His mother cupped his face in her hands, startling him.

“John, listen to me. If you care about her at all, you’ll leave now. Do you understand?”

“What are you doing here?” he managed.

Her eyes flickered, shifted to Lily when she screamed again, and then returned to John’s. “I’ve been treating her. Now go.”

John turned on his heel. He ran down the hall, turned a corner, then pressed his back against the wall. Grasping his head, he listened to Lily shriek again. Then again. And then she stopped.

Just like that.

The minutes stretched by.

No more screaming. Not one sound.

She’d calmed down. Because *he’d* left.

His knees gave way and he slid to the floor.

When Carmen came and got him, her face was stained with tears and she struggled to speak. “I’m sorry, John. I can’t believe Mom’s been seeing her and never told us. Lily’s still in shock—”

John rose and dusted off his pants. His movements precise, his voice deliberately soft, he said, “Lily’s lucky to have you, Carmen. She’s going to be fine. Take care of her for me, okay?”

He didn’t know how he found the strength to walk out of the hospital or drive Carmen back home. But he did. Just before they left the hospital

grounds, he took one final glance in his rearview mirror and made another promise to Lily.

“I won’t be back, small fry. I won’t hurt you that way again. Take care of yourself.”

THE END

Dear Reader,

Thank you for reading this prequel novella. If you enjoyed it, I hope you’ll pick up *It Started That Night*, which continues John and Lily’s story.

Blurb from *It Started That Night*:

Her mother's killer is on death row...or so Lily thought. Now the case is being reopened—by Detective John Tyler, the man who broke her teenage heart the night of the murder. Only she can help him find the truth.

For Lily Cantrell, suffering amnesia and hiding a secret, John's investigation unleashes tormenting dreams, grave doubts and conflicting emotions about the crush she never got over. As much as she wants John, how can she forgive the man who treated her so cruelly? Or trust a man who might betray her?

What Lily does know is their reawakening passion is bound to be dangerous...but not nearly as dangerous as the madman bent on killing her.

.....

Whether you're looking for paranormal or contemporary romance, I provide lots of action, emotion, and thrills!

**If you enjoy sexy, thrilling paranormals, try the Para-Ops series (Chosen By Blood, Chosen By Fate, Chosen By Sin) and the paranormal novella, *A Vampire's Salvation*. "I only have one request--when is the next installment due?"

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ADDITIONAL TITLES

If you would like to read additional books by Virna DePaul, you can learn more about the following Kindle titles:

Paranormal Romantic Suspense:

Wraith's Awakening (A Prequel Novella)

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Contemporary Romantic Suspense:

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It Started That Night (HRS – May 2012)

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Shades Of Temptation (HQN: Special Investigations Group, Book 2 – September 2012)

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Copping Attitude (Red-Hot Cops Series Novella 3)

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Virna DePaul is a former criminal prosecutor and now National Bestselling Author for Berkley (paranormal romantic suspense), HQN (single title romantic suspense) and HRS (category romantic suspense).

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