

Prologue

She doesn't know how close I came to killing her the night we first met. Not out of malice or ill intent; not even out of indifference, as so many of my kind might have. No, I almost killed her because as soon as I scented her, I was filled with an overpowering desire to consume her. She had the most tantalizing scent of any human I had ever met - she still does, in fact. I've just learned better control since that first night when I was so unexpectedly assaulted by her smell. But that night, God how I wanted to take her. Not because I was hungry, though to be fair, I had not yet had dinner. But that wasn't it. I'd felt desperate hunger before, and this was different. It wasn't that I wanted to feed on her; rather, I wanted part of her inside of me. I wanted her blood, specifically, warming my cold body from the inside out. And my predatory instincts told me there was only one way to make that happen. There was no one - no thing - standing in my way. I could have taken her so easily. I could have gorged myself on her sweet life's blood and no one would have known. But I would have seen the light fade from her crystal blue eyes, and somehow I knew I would have been haunted by that for the rest of my terribly unending life. So it was that when I saw her, some part of me that I thought had died long ago - something human -

*held the monster at bay. It's amazing, really. For a vampire,
I suppose that amounts to love at first sight.*

Chapter 1: Dreams

I decided to start jogging again because of the dreams. It had been a long, cold winter in Covington, Kentucky, and I had slid into another round of seasonal depression. This was a self-diagnosis, of course, but I was a doctoral student in psychology just across the Ohio River at the University of Cincinnati, and considered myself qualified to make it. I'd always had vivid, and often disturbing, dreams, but they had intensified as the dark, cold days stretched on, spring coming later than usual to the Midwest. Always prone to self-isolation when depressed, I had been more reclusive than usual the past few months. Though I taught two undergraduate courses per quarter at the university, and tried to maintain a semblance of normality with my family and friends, I'd also been working long hours on my dissertation, and that was a necessarily solitary endeavor. The depression and the stress had manifested themselves the night before in the most disturbing dreams yet. I'd awoken before 6:00am, frightened, confused, and oddly angry. The details of the dream slipped away with consciousness, but the feelings lingered. It was with great relief I noticed the late April morning was beginning to dawn clear and bright. I felt a sudden and overpowering urge to *do* something, to get out, to run.

I hadn't jogged through Devou Park since October of the year before. I rented just outside the park, a small apartment in a plain, ugly, square, brick building that looked completely out of place next to the older and larger houses that made up most of the neighborhood. It was almost embarrassing that my rent contributed to the existence of the single eyesore in an otherwise charming community, but I couldn't bring myself to move in protest. I knew it was the only place in the area I could afford, and I was fortunate to have found it at all. Its draw, of course, was its proximity to the park. Devou was an oasis of natural beauty in a solidly urban environment, 550 acres of woodland, grassy hills, and nature trails, mixed in with stately old mansions, a golf-course, a museum, a lake, and an outdoor amphitheater, all located on a high bluff overlooking the Ohio River and the cities of Cincinnati and Covington below. It was a peaceful and beautiful place, especially in warmer seasons. Best of all, a jog from my apartment to the summit overlooking the cities, and back, was a 3-mile circuit, just right for a sometime-runner like me.

The morning air was still cool, but no longer cold, and a month after the official start of spring, it was beginning to actually *feel* like spring to me. White and pink blooms were beginning to give way to light green leaves, and the falling petals dotted my path as if strewn there by a flower girl.

Early-blooming bulbs broke through the damp earth in small patches of yellows, pinks, and purples. Bright sunlight, unbroken by cloud cover, shone through the branches overhead and sparkled off the early morning dew that gave everything a pleasantly damp, sweet smell. I breathed deeply, feeling as if every breath allowed me to draw in fresh air and in turn expel the darkness that had taken up residence in my mind over the long winter months. I didn't even mind the fact that my breaths were almost becoming pants and my leg muscles were burning, unused to the effort. My body ached, but my heart was beginning to feel lighter, my head clearer. Gradually, the tension created by the dreams of the night before faded, replaced with a feeling of contentment I hadn't felt for a long time. When I'd left my apartment I had felt as if I were running away from something, but strangely, I began to feel as if I were running to something.

As I ran, I took in the beautiful homes that graced the park. They were mansions, really, stately, ornate, most built from stone and old enough that they seemed a natural part of the landscape, the trees towering over them and enshrouding them with a veil of privacy even though the walking trails wove closely around the private yards. I'd often dreamt of living in one of those homes myself, though I knew it was a foolish fantasy. Even after I finished the doctorate, I'd be paying

back student loans for at least 30 years. My education was my mortgage, and although I had accepted the trade, part of me still longed for the fairytale life that I imagined each time I saw those houses. There was one, in particular, that fueled my fantasies. It was one of the oldest in the park, a marvelous gray stone beauty that had sat inexplicably empty for years. Its grounds had never fallen into disrepair - someone clearly maintained them. But a for sale sign had never appeared and I'd never seen evidence that anyone lived there. It was a curious thing, and I had always wondered why anyone would own a place like that and not actually live in it. I couldn't think of a more magnificent place to call home.

Those thoughts ran through my mind again as I approached the southern-facing side of the old house. I was so caught up in my musings that it took me a moment to realize something was different about the property. The blinds on the downstairs end windows - blinds that had been closed for as long as I could remember - were open. And though I could not see any other visible sign of occupation, the house simply no longer felt empty. I was suddenly intensely curious about who had moved in to my fantasy home. Was it a young couple with children? Middle-aged professionals? Wealthy retirees? I continued to follow the path around to the eastern-facing side of the house, and at least some of my curiosity was satisfied. There, seated

on comfortable patio furniture in the house's small flagstone courtyard, with an open laptop on the table in front of him and a cup (of coffee, I supposed) at his elbow, was the most breathtakingly beautiful man I had ever laid eyes on.

"Beautiful" was not a word I had ever before used to describe a man, but even at a distance, in this case, I knew no other word would suffice. His dark brown hair, almost black even in the bright sunlight, was styled in that short, perfectly tousled way that male models probably spend hours to achieve. He wore grey slacks and a crisply-ironed white dress shirt, unbuttoned at the neck, the sleeves turned back in precise folds to mid-forearm. The skin of his face, neck, and arms shone like pale, smooth marble in the morning sun. His face was so perfectly chiseled that it seemed absurdly out of place outside of a museum.

My pace must have slowed, or perhaps I took all of this in within the space a few seconds. I was openly staring; I knew it. Yet before I could tear my gaze away, his magnificent head lifted and a pair of eyes, their hazel color so unusually light they were clear even at a distance, locked with mine. I almost stumbled from the intensity of that gaze, from the precision with which his eyes found mine. I wanted to look away, but couldn't; I had run so far now that I was almost looking over my left shoulder at him - clearly staring. And for a moment, he

seemed just as entranced as I, his expression registering not just curiosity or surprise, but shock, as if he'd looked at me and seen a ghost. But the expression was gone so quickly I almost thought I'd imagined it. And then he did something that startled me even more. He lifted his left hand in a friendly wave, his teeth flashing in a sudden, amused smile. My response was automatic - I waved back. And I think I smiled, though it was probably more of an embarrassed grimace. But that, at least, broke the spell that seemed to have come over me. Facing ahead, I continued on down the path, imagining I could feel those eyes following me all the way back to my crummy little apartment.

I thought about the man in the park as I went through my morning routine, the image of his pale skin and quick smile burned into the back of my eyes, like I'd stared directly into the sun too long. And for the first time in months, I felt awake, alive - happy.

"Wow, you look pretty today, Lils."

I smiled widely at the complimentary greeting from my best friend, Nathan. He was staring at me from the other side of the cramped office we shared with Steve and Rob, the Psychology Department's two other teaching assistants. His warm blue eyes raked over my body appreciatively, and I was glad I had taken a little extra care with my appearance. Inspired by the god-like

creature in the park, I had chosen a pale blue sweater set that complimented by eyes, a khaki skirt, and ballet flats. I'd also left my long blonde hair to fall in loose curls down my back. Not that Nate needed encouraging, but it was nice to feel attractive. I realized he probably hadn't seen me in anything but jeans and bulky sweaters, with my hair scraped back in a ponytail, for months.

"Thank you, but don't let anyone else hear you calling me that."

Nathan rolled his eyes and began shoving papers into his leather portfolio. "Excuse me, *Lily*," he corrected.

He paused for a moment, a sly grin spreading across his boyish face. "Or should I say, 'Professor Hardass'?"

I plucked a rubbery yellow stress ball from the top of my desk and lobbed it at his blonde head. He batted it away with one hand without even raising his eyes from his task. I shot him a dirty look, annoyed by his innate athleticism, but he didn't even notice.

"So what are my students complaining about this time?" I asked, only marginally interested in the response.

"Oh, you know," he said, zipping up his portfolio, then stuffing the last two bites of an energy bar in his mouth.

"Mm...sheez too haard, givz *essay exsams*," he mumbled, hurrying past me and out the door.

"Stop talking with your mouth full," I hollered after him.

"Ah'm multi-taskin,'" came the garbled response.

Shaking my head and laughing, I sat down at my desk to check my email and record homework grades before my nine o'clock lecture. As I went through the familiar routine of booting up my computer and logging on to the university's network, my mind wandered back to the man in the park. In truth, I hadn't stopped thinking about him all morning. There was just something so appealing in the memory of his dark hair and pale skin in the bright morning sun. My mind replayed our brief exchange over and over, and I kept thinking about when he first looked at me. For a moment, his expression had registered both recognition and shock, as if he was seeing someone that he knew but had never expected to see again. But that couldn't be. I was sure we'd never met; I would have remembered a face like that. So, who did he think I was in that first instant? Who did I remind him of? An old lover, perhaps? Something low in my belly fluttered at the possibility. How would those unusual eyes look at a lover?

"Hell-ooooo, earth to Lily."

I was startled to realize someone was calling my name. I looked up to see Paige, our undergraduate teaching assistant, waving her hand in front of me, an amused expression on her pixie-like face. Immediately, my cheeks flushed with

embarrassment, as if she could somehow know what I had been daydreaming about. As if there was even a possibility of someone like *him* having had a lover who looked like *me*.

"Are you okay?" she asked, her amusement turning to puzzlement.

I shook my head, as if the action would clear my thoughts.

"Yeah, yeah, I'm fine," I assured, doggedly plugging grades into my electronic grade book.

One dark eyebrow quirked upward in disbelief. "'Cause you look a little flushed. Are you sick?"

"Yes," I said, obfuscating. "I'm sick of these awful homework grades!"

Paige immediately laughed, as I knew she would, and let my previous distraction go without further comment.

"Well they can't all be as smart as you and Nate," she joked, dropping her backpack to the floor.

"You were," I said, seriously.

Paige smiled, pleased, but a little uncomfortable by my direct praise. Her admiration for me and Nate bordered unhealthily on hero-worship. Although I suspected it was a lot more than hero-worship that she felt for Nate.

"You shouldn't be grading those, anyway," she said, changing the subject. "That's what I get paid the big bucks for."

"Oh yeah," I agreed, rolling my eyes. "Big bucks."

"Seriously," she said, her little chin firming in a way that said she was about to argue with me. "You're working on your dissertation. I'm supposed to be here to help with the busy work."

She was right. But I knew the other graduate students took advantage of her, asking her to do far more than was part of her job description, like doing research for them at the library and running errands, in addition to grading papers and conducting study sessions for their students. Nate and I had confronted them more than once on Paige's behalf, though she didn't know it. It had caused somewhat of a rift in the office. Nate had even considered complaining to the chair of the department, but I had convinced him that would be overstepping our bounds. At some point, Paige had to stand up for herself.

"Actually," I said, "as painful as grading homework can be, it's sometimes a welcome break from the dissertation."

Paige looked at me for a long moment in disbelief. Finally, she just shook her head. "God, Lily, you need a *life*."

I looked for my rubber ball, belatedly remembering it was still on the floor on the other side of the room. In lieu of something to throw at her, I settled for a beleaguered sigh. "So fresh."

She grinned without remorse and continued her commentary on my life. "At least you're dressing better."

Slowly, obviously, I let my gaze travel up and down her form, taking in her short, spiky, dyed black hair, the loop of metal that pierced her right eyebrow, the diamond stud on the left side of her nose, the lacy red corset that peeked out from under the carefully-ripped black T-shirt, the impossibly tight, low-riding jeans, and the scuffed black biker boots.

"You're commenting on *my* appearance?" I asked, though secretly I was pleased by her compliment.

Paige wasn't offended; she was used to the ribbing from me and Nate.

"Obviously, you don't look as good as *I* do," she conceded. "But it's an improvement."

I sighed in resignation. I never won these verbal sparring matches with either Paige or Nate. And, truth be told, I envied her bold fashion sense.

"Come on," I said, picking up the huge stack of homework assignments that needed to be returned. "You can help me hand out papers as penance."

And this time I didn't feel too guilty about using her.

I was just starting to eat lunch with Nate when the first flash came to me. It popped into my mind unexpectedly, an image

that I immediately recognized from my dream the night before. It was two bare feet - my feet, I realized - standing in soft sand, stained red with blood.

The sudden and intense image took me by such surprise that I dropped my gyro, splattering cucumber sauce on the front of my sweater.

"Damn it!" I cursed.

Nate was too busy laughing at me to question what had made me drop my food in the first place.

"Shut up," I muttered, dabbing at my sweater with a thin paper napkin.

His chuckling slowed as I continued fussing over my clothes. I wasn't really seeing cucumber sauce; I was seeing blood-stained sand. I wasn't hearing the din of the crowded Greek restaurant; the roar of ocean waves filled my head. I could almost smell the salt water and the coppery tang of blood.

"Lily!"

Nate's sharp voice brought me back to reality as his large hand closed over mine, stilling my frantic movements.

I looked up at him, still somewhat dazed by the intensity of the memory. Whatever he saw in my face must have scared him because his hand squeezed mine probably more tightly than he intended.

"Ow!" I said, jerking my hand away.

"What's wrong?"

"You were crushing my hand."

Nate was too concerned to be frustrated. "What the hell happened to you just now, Lils?"

What had happened? I wasn't sure that I knew myself. One moment I had been listening to Nathan complain about being unable to get the university to fund his latest research proposal and the next I'd been back in the middle of my dream. And it had been so real. I realized my heart was pounding erratically.

"I don't know," I admitted, my voice shaking despite my efforts to control it.

A worried frown creased Nate's brow. "Paige said you were acting strange earlier. Are you feeling okay?"

I took a deep breath, determined to calm myself and allay Nate's concern. He had a tendency to be over-protective, and I did not want him to start obsessing about my wellbeing. He was far too busy for that.

"I'm okay, Nate. I just haven't been sleeping well, and I guess it's catching up with me."

I wasn't lying, but Nate didn't look convinced.

"And I started jogging again this morning," I continued, not giving him a chance to speak. "I probably just didn't eat enough for breakfast."

Okay, I knew I was rambling. But Nate seemed to be relaxing some.

"You've gotta be careful about that, Lils. You probably had a drop in your blood sugar."

I sighed, a little more calm now myself.

"You're right." I agreed. It did seem like a rational explanation. The mind could play funny tricks on you when your physiology was out of whack. Feeling better, I cautiously returned to eating my lunch.

"Here," Nate said, pushing his Coke across the table to me and taking my water for himself. "You drink this. You probably need the sugar."

I didn't like soda. He knew that. But I knew there was no need to protest.

He looked at me thoughtfully, still a little concerned.

"And maybe you should ease into the jogging."

"Maybe," I allowed. Of course, I knew there was no chance of that. I was already looking forward to the next run.

When I awoke at six o'clock the next morning, it was raining. Naturally. I briefly considered donning a hooded track suit and running anyway. But then I realized the chances of my handsome friend being out on his patio in the middle of a

rain shower were exactly zero, and I reluctantly gave up the idea.

I sighed in frustration, staring up at the white plaster crevices of my bedroom ceiling. I was still tired, and the desire to snuggle back into my pillow was strong, but the dreams had plagued me again the night before, and I was too chicken to give them another crack at me right away. Again, I felt a low-level throb of anger at the whole situation. What was my subconscious trying to tell me?

As a psychologist-in-training, I knew that dreams were often the result of random synapses firing as the resting mind processed the vast sensory input it was subjected to during the course of the day. However, they could also be a gateway to the unconscious mind. Repetitive dreams, in particular, usually pointed to some issue the psyche was trying - perhaps unsuccessfully - to resolve. While I could not clearly remember my dreams, I was sure I was dreaming much the same thing over and over. Certainly, the feelings of fear, confusion, and anger that lingered after the dreams were repetitive.

I didn't really expect to be successful after all the long months of trying, but I was suddenly determined to get to the bottom of my restless nights. Closing my eyes and trying to relax, I let thoughts and images come as they might. At first, there was nothing but the blackness of my closed eyelids and the

sound of my even breathing. This went on so long, I felt myself drifting back to sleep. And then, *BAM!*

I was not prepared for the rush of sensation that filled my mind.

Bare feet, again. The sand was wet and clinging to my toes, but it was not cold. It was sticky and warm, seeped in blood. Waves crashed against the beach, not quite close enough to wash away the dark stain at my feet. My eyes strained to see where the blood was coming from. But everything was so dark. It was night, the only light the soft glow of the moon reflecting off the black water of the ocean.

"Lily." My heart pounded at the sound of that voice, so close, so persuasive.

"Sweet Lily." The voice was warm, like velvet, but the breath on my neck was ice cold.

My eyes flew open, searching wildly for the owner of that voice.

I half-expected the moonlit beach and the blood-soaked sand. Of course, there was only my bedroom, cold and gray in the rainy dawn. Still, my heart pounded with fear and my breath came in hard, quick pants.

It was just a dream, I tried to tell myself. Just a stupid, weird dream. But it felt so real that I could almost smell the ocean breeze blowing through my bedroom.

"God," I groaned, my hand covering my clammy brow. "What is *wrong* with me?"

I should have known Nate would check up on me. He'd almost insisted on driving me home the day before. Luckily, I had talked him out of that by reminding him that the last time I'd left my car at the university overnight my radio had been stolen. He had acquiesced, but was now trying to tap out the William Tell Overture on my door buzzer.

"Enter at your own risk!" I growled into the intercom once I caught a break in the annoying buzzing.

I could hear him laughing as he bounded up the inner stairs to my second floor apartment. I met him at the door, hands on my hips, and a frown on my face.

"Aw, Lils," he crooned, looking at me with a puppy-dog expression. "How can you be mad at a face like this?!"

I laughed in spite of myself and stepped back, gesturing for him to come in.

"See! I knew you couldn't!" he crowed as made a beeline for the refrigerator in my tiny kitchenette.

I watched in puzzlement as he opened the door and began scanning its contents.

"Well, just help yourself," I said, sarcastically. Of course, I didn't really mind. Nate knew to make himself at home at my place.

"I'm not hungry," he said from behind the refrigerator door.

"What then?" I asked.

He straightened up and shut the door, apparently satisfied with his inspection.

"Just making sure you're eating right," he said with a grin. "Don't want any more episodes like yesterday."

I knew what he was trying to do - make light of the experience as a way to bring up the subject. He wasn't even being particularly subtle about it.

"Well, as you can see, *Dad*, I'm all stocked up with the healthy essentials. So, no worries."

I could feel his eyes on me as I moved over to the only piece of furniture in the living area that you could sit on - a tan futon - and plopped down. When I looked back up at him, I could see the concern on his handsome face.

"But see," he said, suddenly serious, "I *am* worried."

I sighed. "You worry too much."

He shook his head and made his way around my little wooden coffee table to sit down beside me. He regarded me in silence, long enough for me to start to feel uncomfortable. Just before I started squirming, he spoke.

"Look, Lils, I know you've been really down lately."

I started to deny it, but his stern gaze made me shrug instead. No denial, then, but no confirmation, either. Hell, he'd known me long enough to know better, anyway.

"And I know you hate talking about this stuff," he continued.

"So let's not," I interrupted, lightly, hoping for a laugh. Or a little chuckle, at least. The only thing I got was a stubborn expression that I recognized all too well.

"Don't, Lily," he said, firmly.

He was serious, then. Okay. We could do serious.

He waited until he saw the resignation in my expression.

"Thank you," he said.

I waited in silence. I didn't have to *like* serious.

"You know I've given up trying to get you to take medication for your seasonal affective disorder, at least. And I was hoping when I saw you all dressed up yesterday that you were finally starting to feel better."

"I was," I interjected. "I mean, I *am*."

"Maybe," he allowed. "But you've got circles under your eyes that make you look like you haven't slept in a month."

"Thanks," I murmured.

"And," he continued, ignoring my sarcasm, "you were acting weird yesterday."

"I thought we agreed that was probably just my blood sugar," I reminded him.

"Maybe," he said again. "But you said yourself that you haven't been sleeping well. And I think there's something more going on. Something you're not telling me."

A little bit of hurt that he couldn't disguise seeped into his voice by the last sentence. Nate was my best friend; we had no secrets. At least not of any importance, I told myself. But looking at his pained expression, I realized he was right. These crazy dreams had been taking a toll on me for months now, and I hadn't told him anything about them. The truth was, I was incredibly sensitive about my proclivity towards depression. I didn't want Nate, as my friend or my psychologist, to think I was really losing it over some stupid, recurring nightmares. Then again, maybe talking would help.

Nathan must have seen that I was having an internal debate. His sigh was longsuffering.

"Lily, you are the biggest hypocrite when it comes to this stuff!"

I had the good graces to flush with embarrassment. He was right. I would make an awful, uncooperative patient.

"At least it's good training for you," I said with a little smile.

He couldn't help but smile back, but he quickly turned serious again.

"You know I'm asking as your friend, Lils. Your *best* friend."

I nodded, my decision made by the still-lingering hurt in his voice.

"When I tell you, it's all going to seem so silly now. I mean, all this melodrama for nothing, really."

"I'll be the judge of that," he said, crossing his arms over his chest and propping his size twelve sneakers on my coffee table, clearly settling in for the long haul.

I figured I might as well do the same. Tucking my feet up under me, I turned toward him.

"Alright. I've been having these recurring dreams for a while now," I admitted.

He nodded, listening.

When I didn't immediately continue, he looked at me in disbelief. "And?" he prompted, as if dealing with a very slow child.

I made a face at him. "And they've been particularly disturbing."

He must have seen something in my face that told him how hard this was for me, because this time he patiently waited for me to continue.

"When I have them, I wake up in a panic - my heart beating so hard it feels like its coming out of my chest, my breathing like I've been running a marathon. I'm wet with a cold sweat, and I'm scared and confused and - and sort of angry."

I was getting worked up now, just remembering the long nights I was describing. Nate calmly reached over and took one of my hands in his, stilling my nervous movements.

"What are these dreams about?" he asked.

"That's just it," I moaned. "I can't remember. At least not much. Nothing at all until yesterday."

Nate's eyes narrowed slightly. "How long has this been going on?"

I swallowed, hard. "About four months."

He was a little pissed, I could tell. But Nathan had a lot of patience.

"And you remembered something yesterday at lunch, didn't you?"

"Yeah," I admitted.

"So, the bullshit about the blood sugar..."

"You came up with that!" I quickly reminded him. "And I wasn't lying about jogging and breakfast and stuff."

He was still pissed, but determined not to let it get the best of him. I could see him debating about where to go with the conversation, but he finally came back to the dreams.

"What did you see?"

I described what I'd remembered in as much detail as possible, including the voice that had spoken my name with such longing and persuasion. When I was done, I waited for Nate to tell me how ridiculous I was being.

And waited.

He was frowning, thinking, weighing his words carefully, I realized.

When he finally responded, his voice was gentle, his eyes cautious.

"Lily, I need to ask you something important."

"Oh-kaaay." Where was he going, I wondered?

"And I need you to tell me the truth, even if it is painful for you, or even if you think it might upset me."

"Okay," I said again, more confused than ever.

His blue eyes searched mine for another long moment before he spoke again.

"Did something bad happen to you during our graduation trip to Pensacola?"

Whatever question I'd been expecting, it wasn't that. I stared at him quizzically.

"No. That was almost four years ago. Why would you ask that?"

He swept his feet off the table and turned to face me in one swift movement.

"Are you sure, Lily?" he asked. He didn't look like he believed me, and I couldn't figure out why. I was becoming irritated.

"Of course I'm sure. And why would you ask that? What does that trip have to do with anything?"

But as soon as I asked the question, the moonlit beach from my dreams came back to me, and I realized with startling certainty that it was the beach from our graduation trip to Pensacola. Why hadn't I realized that before?

Nathan saw the realization hit me. "That is the place you've dreaming about, isn't it?"

"How did you know?" I asked. "We've been to lots of beaches together. We did spring break at the beach every year of undergrad!"

"Do you really not know?" he asked.

I wanted to scream. Could this conversation get any more convoluted?!

"Know *what*?!"

His expression was fierce, his voice almost angry. "You were different after that trip, Lily."

I didn't understand. But he clearly meant what he was saying. "Different how?"

"Your depression," he said. "That's when it got worse. Right after that trip."

I shook my head. I didn't remember it that way. But Nate didn't give me a chance to protest.

"I know I'm right," he insisted. "You never stopped functioning, but you isolated yourself after that. You pulled away from a lot of our friends."

I frowned. Had I? I didn't think so.

"I was busy. We started the graduate program that fall. It was intense."

This time Nathan was shaking his head. "That's not it. We were all busy. You didn't pull away because you were busy; you pulled away because you were depressed."

A little voice in my head began to whisper that he was right.

"I was worried out of my mind," Nate continued. "I tried to get you to tell me what was going on and you kept insisting there was nothing. And the more I pushed, the more angry you got."

I did remember that. We'd had a big fight that fall - the biggest of our long friendship. I'd accused him of being an egoist - thinking he could psychoanalyze everyone. I'd told him to either stop playing therapist or stop being my friend. It

had been ugly. We'd made up, but I'd regretted my harsh words so many times since then.

"But there really wasn't anything wrong," I whispered.

Nate sighed. "Not that you realized, anyway. After a while, I figured that out. And eventually, I stopped asking."

I nodded slowly. He had stopped asking. And life had moved on.

"But I'm asking again now. What happened?"

I didn't brush him off this time. I thought about it. But for the life of me, I could think of nothing bad that had happened on that trip.

"I swear, Nate," I finally said. "I can't remember anything."

Nathan stared at me with a puzzled expression. "That's an odd choice of words."

"What?"

His eyes searched my face, his mind working quickly. "You said, 'I can't remember anything.' What do you remember about that trip?"

"Well, lots of things," I immediately responded. "We got there late in the day and we ate at that awesome fondue place after we checked into the hotel. And the next day we rented jet skis - and you got really sunburned because you didn't listen to

me about re-applying your sun block. And so for the rest of the week, we slept during the day and went out at night."

Nathan was nodding in agreement, but he also seemed impatient. "Yeah, I know. I was there for all of that. But what about when I was out at the clubs? You kept leaving early, but you were never back at the hotel by the time I got back. Actually, I thought..."

His voice trailed off and he looked upset.

"Thought what?" I asked.

He cleared his throat, clearly uncomfortable. "I thought you were hooking up," he admitted.

"What?!" I shrieked. "Nate, you know I've never done anything like that!"

Nathan seemed almost relieved by my outburst. He shrugged, embarrassed now.

"I figured if you met someone you wouldn't want me to know."

I knew what he meant. Nathan had confessed romantic feelings for me not long before the trip. I'd kindly, but firmly told him not to ruin the best friendship I'd ever had by getting all weird on me. If I'd been interested in someone after that, I would have wanted to spare his feelings.

"It wasn't like that," I assured him.

"So, what was it?" he asked. "What were you doing every damn night that I was getting drunk and groping strange girls trying to get over you?"

I chuckled at his description of his own behavior, knowing it had been long enough now that it was okay.

"Well, I went for long walks on the beach," I said.

That look of disbelief was back on Nathan's face. "All night?"

"Yeah, I guess."

Nathan was shaking his head. "There's no way. Do you actually remember walking on the beach all night?"

I hesitated, suddenly unsure.

"It was a long time ago," I said lamely.

Nate was worried now. His handsome brow was furrowed in a deep frown. "You honestly don't remember."

It was a statement, not a question.

And I realized he was right. I couldn't deny it. There were long hours of my life that I could not remember.

"What do you think happened to me?" I asked, clearly agitated.

Nathan looked like he might be afraid to know the answer to that question.

"I don't know," he said. "But about four months ago, your subconscious mind started trying to get your conscious mind to remember."

I was shaking now. I knew repressed memories were never of anything good. They were always the result of traumatic experiences. Whatever had happened to me, my conscious mind had blocked for nearly four years. And it was still fighting to repress those memories.

Suddenly, the voice from my dreams sounded in my head. *Sweet Lily*. Who had spoken my name, his breath as close as a lover's?

"Nathan," I whispered, the shaking nearly out of control now. What had that man done to me? "Do you think I was...?"

My voice trailed off. I couldn't look at him.

"...abducted by aliens?" he asked in a strangled voice.

"Don't be an idiot!" I said, my eyes flying to his. "This is serious."

His pained expression told me what I should have known. Nate always resorted to humor as a defense mechanism. His eyes locked with mine.

"I know," he whispered. "But I didn't want to hear what you were about to ask."

Because he was thinking it, too. Had I been raped?